

OBITUARY: RICKY MAY 1944-1988

by Bruce Johnson*

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Ricky May died shortly after midnight on June 1st, 1988, immediately following a performance at the Don Burrows Supper Club in Sydney. He was 44 years old. Next time you hear someone start a joke that puts down New Zealanders living in Australia, ask the person telling it if he or she can match the achievements of people like Rick Laird, Ned Sutherland, Laurie Lewis, Dave MacRae, Charlie Munro, Judy Bailey, Mike Nock, Julian Lee...



Ricky May: from the Auckland suburb of Onehunga, across the Tasman...

And when we think about how much Australian music has to be thankful for from across the Tasman, the name Ricky May has to be at or near the top of the list. From the Auckland suburb of Onehunga, Ricky was born into a musical family. His parents, Keith and Rachel ran their own dance band, Kotchy May and the Rhythm Rascals, in which the young man gained his first musical experience deputising on drums.

**When this was written in 1988 Bruce Johnson was the author of the recently-published "Oxford Companion To Australian Jazz", and an active jazz musician.*

He began singing, literally for his supper, after seeing an advertisement in the window of the Picasso Coffee House offering free meals to anyone who was able to entertain the clientele. Although still only in his teens (15 or 17, depending on which version of the story you are listening to), he so impressed the resident musicians that the pianist persuaded the management to hire the boy on a paid regular basis.

It was at the Picasso that he was heard by budding entrepreneur Harry M Miller, who organised a recording session (*The Hucklebuck* was the A-side) and booked the singer for a seven-month season in a variety show. Emboldened further by winning a local talent quest, Ricky May headed for Australia, arriving in Sydney in 1962.



A young Ricky May: he arrived in Sydney in 1962...

By his own account he was something of an innocent abroad until he encountered Norman Erskine and the Latin Quarter, both of which in their own way initiated the new arrival into the ambience of a Sydney that was still enjoying the glitter and excitement of the nightclub era. Working at the Latin Quarter in Pitt Street took Ricky May straight into the deep end of the entertainment business at that time, a form of apprenticeship, now virtually extinct, which lays the groundwork for the broadest and most versatile professionalism.

This last phase invokes two of the most valued criteria in entertainment. Ricky May never received the kind of artificial boost from the Top 40 that turns someone into a one-song performer endlessly recycling that single hit on the club circuit. He was,

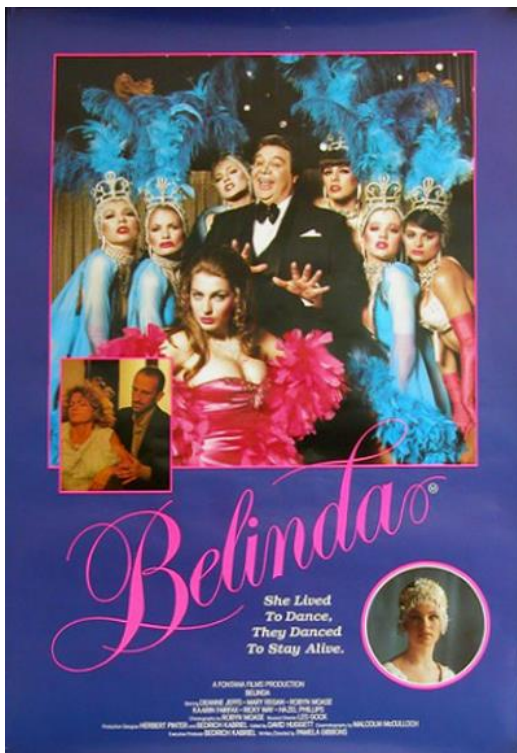
instead, the fully adaptable professional who could bring any material to life, and in any performance situation.



Norm Erskine (left) & Ricky May, performing together on New Zealand television...

He worked in cabaret and television, including *Bandstand* and *Six O'clock Rock*. He also hosted his own TV show, *Ten on the Town*. He toured locally and internationally, appearing at London's Talk of the Town and at the Silver Slipper room in Las Vegas.

As I write, you can still hear Ricky May perform: he plays the part of a nightclub singer in the film *Belinda*, currently showing in Sydney.



In Australia his biggest success was playing a part that could have been written and even named for him: Mr Nicely Nicely in *Guys and Dolls*. From its opening in May 1986, he stole the show, with numbers like *Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat* being the subject of repeated encores.

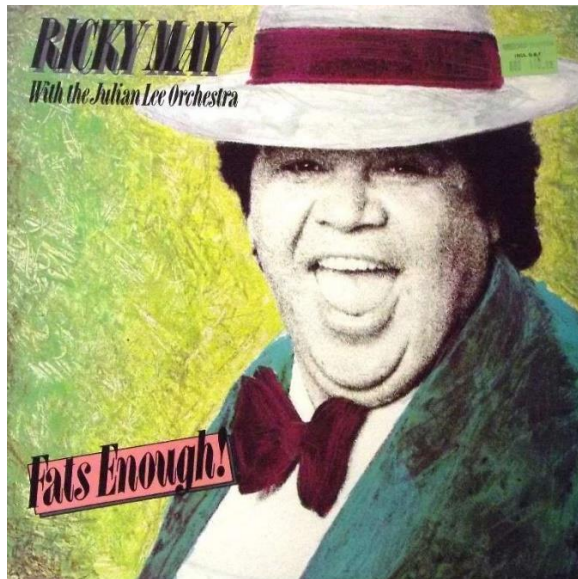
It was noted at the time that, after 25 years in show business, he had become an overnight success. This intentionally wry comment acknowledges the difference between public fame and the respect of your peers — six years earlier his colleagues had recognised his talents at the 5th Annual Mo Awards by voting him Entertainer of the Year.



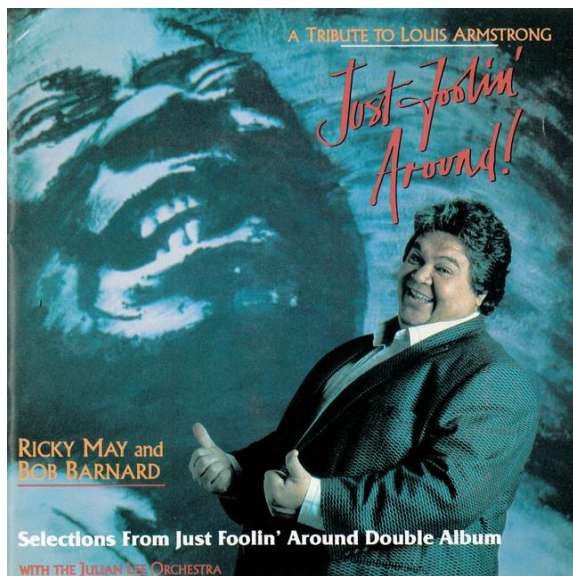
Ricky May, as he appeared in the March 1980 edition of Encore Magazine, after winning the Mo Award for Entertainer Of The Year, 1979...

It is extraordinary that he had so little opportunity to record, particularly as he had a voice that projected such warmth and humour. *Fats Enough*, dedicated to Fats Waller, and *Just Foolin' Around*, recorded with Bob Barnard in memory of Louis Armstrong, are two of the most polished jazz albums ever recorded in Australia, in

that high-spirited comic tradition which is as important to the music as is tight-lipped experimentation.



“Fats Enough” (above), dedicated to Fats Waller, and “Just Foolin’ Around” (below), recorded with Bob Barnard in memory of Louis Armstrong, are two of the most polished jazz albums ever recorded in Australia...



Some who regard themselves as jazz followers take a supercilious view of the light-hearted element in jazz, wanting every note not only to be 'significant', but sounding cosmically so. Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller would have been puzzled. Making music look hard is easy; making it look easy is the epitome of a kind of professionalism that establishes continuity between Armstrong, Waller, and Ricky May, whose recorded tributes to the masters proclaim him as one of the best jazz singers we have had. Dave Brubeck went further, calling May, without qualification, "The best jazz singer in the world".

One of the keys to this assessment is the matter of temperament. Beyond a certain level of technical accomplishment, pure musicianship is not enough. The music scene is awash with performers with great technique but who just sound as though they're plodding through exercises. No character. Ricky May, as I have said in a review of one of his albums, could swing while he talked. He had the temperament that made the difficult seem so easy that you didn't think about the nuts and bolts of performance —the co-ordination of movement, of intonation, timing, contact.

Perhaps the sense of personal contact was one of the strongest impressions left from a Ricky May performance. Some performers play histrionically to the spotlight as though, so deeply moved, they are unaware of the audience. One way or another, the results are mawkishly sentimental, and the audience is left feeling like eavesdroppers at someone's session with a psychoanalyst. Ricky May always performed to the audience, drew them into the conspiracies of the lyric, shared what he had to say. One of the hidden benefits of this is that the common sense of the audience acts as a check on excesses — to communicate you have to remain with the boundaries of emotional comprehensibility.



May: he drew his audience into the conspiracies of the lyric, shared what he had to say... PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN

And I never saw Ricky May give a performance that was maudlin or self-indulgent. The physical structure of the usual concert situation often obstructs this basically folk aspect of performance, the raised stage and the static seating implying that there should be a chasm in front of the audience, on the other side of which the performer is free to indulge her- or himself without checks.

I once watched Ricky May deconstruct those barriers to communication by simply drawing upon instinct as well as his nightclub experience: it was in the old Musicians Club in Chalmers Street, and towards the end of the concert he walked down off the stage and wandered through the audience, singing, talking, fielding comments with

beautifully timed repartee. We were recording that night, and naturally he disappeared from the recorded sound, but what he gained in terms of impact was worth far more than what we lost.

2MBS-FM were recording a lot of concerts at that time — I've forgotten nearly all of them, but I'll never forget that one. Perhaps what lies behind all this is a quality that no-one could miss — generosity of spirit. Ricky May communicated because he liked to give. He not only gave in performance, but through it, using his own talents as a way of directly helping others.



Perhaps what lies behind all this is a quality that no-one could miss — generosity of spirit... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Mr Yes, he was called, because he couldn't say no to any request. Telethons, benefits, or simply bringing cheer to the company he was in: Ricky May was a giver. In the days immediately preceding his death he had made an appearance with and in aid of one of his favourite causes, handicapped children. He was planning a charity golf function the day before his death. This year he was named Heart of the Year by the Variety Club for his charity work. I think this is a far more palpable kind of magnanimity than the hastily written, tax deductible cheque. It is a visible giving of the self, in actions, in words, in a physical presence.

The impact of a life distributed so generously was dramatised in the wake of his death. Tributes came in from every quarter — Bob Hawke, Don Burrows, John Farnham, Glenn Wheatley, Daryl Somers, Ray Martin. The funeral attendance was massive, and wholly unblemished by any sense of hypocrisy. Again, the mourners came from an extraordinary range of public and private life: Dawn Fraser, Bob Barnard, John Meillon, Col Joye . . . ABC TV altered its scheduled programmes to screen a tribute to the man.

Two entertainment venues announced that they will be named after Ricky May. Memorial concerts were immediately scheduled by the Variety Club, the Mo Awards Organisation, ALVA, and the comedians' association, The Echidnas. Every newspaper carried the news on its front pages, and even *Time* magazine presented a two-column tribute. How many people turn out for the funeral of a millionaire property developer?



Ricky May: unambiguous goodness & honesty...

There is some consolation in that, some kind of final justice, a feeling that, well, after all, that kind of unambiguous goodness and honesty do get noticed and appreciated. There can be no adequate compensation for the death of a loving father and a husband, but the realization that so many people feel that they have lost someone valuable is perhaps some comfort to Ricky May's wife and daughter, Colleen and Shani. I don't think it is any exaggeration to say to them that throughout the whole of Australia, their sense of bereavement is shared.

RICKY MAY: LIST OF COMPOSITIONS 1969-1988

Ain't It Christmas Day
Australia Bound
Brisbane Song
California Rain
Champions Come — Champions Go
Christmas Man
Christmas Song

Darwin Town
Friendly Wind
Gonna Marry Me
Got To Get Ready For Love
Hi Ya Kids
I Want To Make It With You
I'd Give It All [To Be On Television]
I'm Gonna Love You On A Monday
In A Place Down Under [aka Shrimp Song]
Is The Man Okay? It Is Me [aka Life Is Everything I Am]*
It Doesn't Mean A Thing
L.A. Song
Just Too Late
Little Gal Daughter
Love Me For What I Am*
New South Wales [Love That State Of Mine]
Norman And Me
Ran-Can-Man
Saturday Night [& I'm Feelin' Alright]
Snow For Another Year
Song For Wollongong
Sposin'
Step By Step [I'm Falling For Your Love]
Summer In Sydney
Sydney [That's The Place]
Take A Little Time
Tricky City People
Troubles I Have
World Without Music**

*co-written with Sheila Astill

**co-written with Peter Sullivan & Jim Burnett

Editor's note: to view a film produced for New Zealand television "Ricky May Special" on the internet, click on this link <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/ricky-may-special-1983?fbclid=IwAR2r4SpjBfcbg1MEKL-9Zww8GXXBU-cDXVOd2bvFgqAf7PqIfnvk7SWhkgw>

A Ricky May 1988 Tribute on the Ray Martin Midday Show is at this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAg0WeQjimg>

Other clips featuring Ricky May on YouTube are at the following links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3Xpn3d4sMw&fbclid=IwAR2eqj6czZc81Enjh7yV2n9qXubk32STSGy1dV9sEWWMMCoH66z6UeUJ5vw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3Xpn3d4sMw&fbclid=IwAR2eqj6czZc81Enjh7yV2n9qXubk32STSGy1dV9sEWWMMCoH66z6UeUJ5vw>