

OBITUARY: HARRY RIVERS 1943-2021

A personal memory of a good friend

by Garry Lee*

Harry Bernard Rivers was a jazz drummer, vocalist & percussionist, born in Samoa on May 27, 1943 into a family of 13 children. He was educated in Auckland, New Zealand and moved to Sydney in the 1960s. Harry's older sister, Mavis Rivers (born May 19, 1929, died May 29, 1992), enjoyed a successful career as a jazz vocalist in the US, recording eight albums from 1959 to 1984 including collaborations with Shorty Rogers and Red Norvo.



Harry Rivers: a mainstay of the Sydney jazz scene from the early 1970s...PHOTO COURTESY RAY MARTIN

From the early 1970s Harry became a mainstay of the Sydney jazz scene frequently working with vocalist/guitarist Johnny Nicol and pianist Col Nolan. Evan Lohning has uploaded to YouTube a significant jazz concert from 1980: "Col Nolan @ Sydney Town Hall", at this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvapQhRvowc>. The two-hour concert commences with Harry [congas] and Laurie Bennett [drums] who are then joined by Peter Cross [trumpet], Bob McIvor [trombone], Errol Buddle [alto sax], Col Nolan [piano] and Chris Qua [double bass]. The concert also includes Johnny Nicol and Sandie White [vocals]. The concert features both the vocals of Harry and his drumming and, in many ways, is a compendium of some of Sydney's most outstanding modern/mainstream jazz artists of the 1970s/80s.

**Garry Lee is a leading Perth jazz musician (vibraphone, guitar) and educator. He was a member of the WAAPA jazz staff when the program commenced in 1984 and now teaches part-time at Hale School, Perth. Garry was administrator of the WA Youth Jazz Orchestra, early 1985, and then Jazz Coordinator of WA from late 1985 to 1992. He won an Australian Jazz Award in 1993 for his vibraphone playing and was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1998.*



Harry Rivers (centre) is pictured here on drums with his frequent colleague Col Nolan (electric piano) and the New Zealand bassist Andy Brown, at a time when they were doing the late shift at The Basement in Sydney...

I first met Harry in the mid-1970s when he was playing with Johnny Nicol at Arthurs Court. In 1974 I had guitar lessons with John. He invited me to sit-in at Arthurs Court on my Deagan Electra Vibes. I bought these second-hand from John Leslie. Harry was very encouraging of my playing and in 1976 he invited me to sit-in at The Shalimar in York St, Sydney. The Deagan Electra Vibes require an amplifier so I would also take my guitar. I recall in 1976 we were probably one of the first bands in Sydney to cover George Benson's version of *This Masquerade*. Harry would take the vocals and I would scat and play guitar in the style of Benson [and also Johnny Nicol].

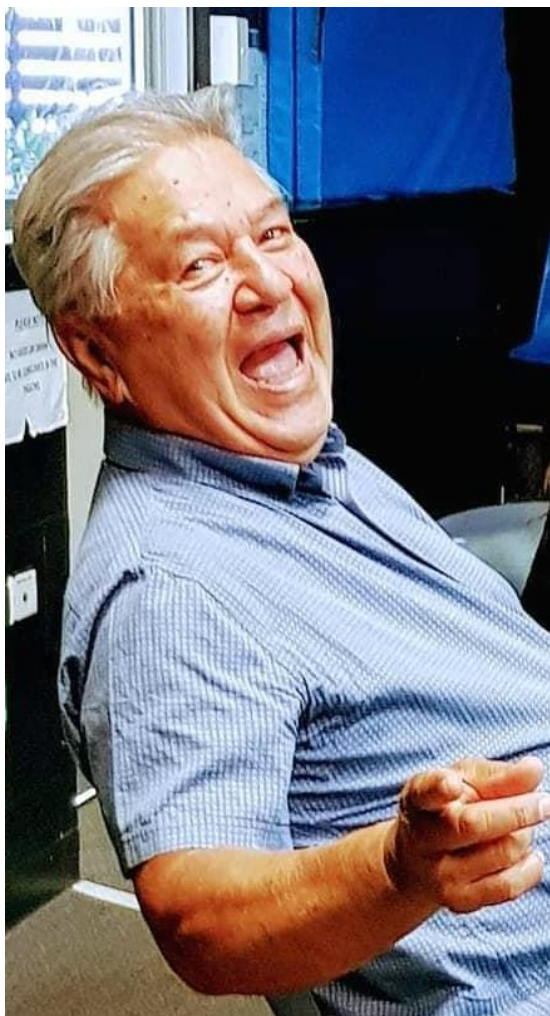


Owner of the Shalimar Tony Brent, who had a successful career as a pop singer in the UK...

In the first instance Harry would pay me to sit-in out of his own money – an act of kindness I will never forget. Later Shalimar’s owner, Tony Brent, would pay me as a regular band member. [Tony had a worldwide hit in 1957 with the tune *Chanson D’Amour* recorded in London.] At one stage the band included Barry Sutton on percussion and a vocalist called Larry so the band was Harry, Larry, Barry, Garry and Tony’s son, Kevin, on keyboards.

Later in the 1970s I would lead bands at the Limerick Castle in Surry Hills. The bands would mainly include my friends who were not aiming to pursue a jazz/music career with the exception of Harry, bass guitarist Phil Scorgie, drummer Trevor Neal and guitarist Graham Cox.

After I moved to Perth in 1983 it was hard to keep in touch but we did catch up, playing together at the Thredbo Jazz Festival on several occasions. In 1993 Harry and I with Col Nolan, Willie Qua and Barry Sutton did a great indoor gig at the Manly Jazz Festival.



Harry Rivers, pictured in Cairns... PHOTO COURTESY CAIRNS TROPIC JAZZ CLUB

In 2012 while holidaying at Palm Cove, my wife and I caught up with Harry who was playing at a beachfront restaurant. Typically Harry’s first question: “Have you got your guitar?” to which I replied in the positive and then sat-in with his band with Tommy See Poy on keyboards.

In more recent times Harry arranged for me to play vibes with him for Cairns Jazz Society and I in turn organized a master class when he was in Perth to visit his daughter, with students from Hale School. The vibes I played in Cairns belonged to Lesley Priestley who had inherited them from her late brother, Chris Ellis, who died in Melbourne in 2008. Late in life and encouraged by Harry, Lesley has taken up jazz vibraphone. In the last few years of his life Harry was an almost daily visitor to the Cairns apartment of Lesley and her husband, Maurie. Harry and Lesley would work together on Lesley's vibes playing and on several occasions I would receive a phone call here in Perth with some question relating to the vibraphone.

In the early 1980s I remember that Harry toured to Indonesia as drummer/vocalist with Indra and Jack Lesmana along with newly emerging young lions, Dale Barlow and Steve Brien. Eric Myers accompanied the band and has covered this in his article "Children of Fantasy in Indonesia" at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-92>



The Children Of Fantasy group which toured Indonesia in 1982. Harry Rivers is at bottom right, then clockwise Tony Thijssen, Steve Brien, Dale Barlow, Indra Lesmana & Jack Lesmana... PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE

If there were two words to describe Harry Rivers they would surely be “laid back”. He was laid back in his approach to life and was sometimes so laid back in his vocal delivery you would think he’d forgotten the words but his timing and sense of swing were impeccable. Harry lived for gigs and even though he worked with many of Australia’s finest jazz musicians he is not well represented on recordings. In performance he was just a musician you wanted to be with on the bandstand. Every gig I ever did with him was always fun and the music would always groove.

I am sure the members of Cairns Tropic Jazz Club, jazz musicians in the North Queensland area and jazz musicians and fans around Australia will miss Harry and his passion and love for life and music. Cairns Tropic Jazz Club will no doubt miss Harry’s knowledge of jazz and contacts within the jazz world.



Members of the Cairns Tropic Jazz Club, jazz musicians in the North Queensland area, and jazz musicians and fans around Australia will miss Harry (pictured above) and his passion and love for life and music... PHOTO COURTESY CAIRNS TROPIC JAZZ CLUB

Harry Rivers was diagnosed with pancreatic and liver cancer two months before he died, on July 26, 2021. He is survived by his daughter Kylie, sons Tal, Damien, Dan and their respective families, and also four sisters Rubina, Yvonne, Bettina and his younger sister Leoma, [known within the family as Auntie Lee] who lives in Bicheno, Tasmania.