

VERBATIM

## Joe Lane Stories

Paul Pax Andrews

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In 1982 Bernie McGann became my favourite alto player and for a couple of years we were religious, not missing a gig. I couldn't get enough of that smoky honest tone and his bevy of sounds. Ray Martin on bass was solid; the drummer was Phil Treloar with the long hair and the sweetest brushes, and sometimes Bobby Gebert was on piano. Bernie's choice of tunes—'Spirit Song'—grabbed us with his seductive sound. He is the Billie Holiday of the alto; singing 'You've Changed', 'Barbados' and 'Jitterbug Waltz'.

He also played with Joe Lane sometimes. For three years I did a gig every Sunday at the Criterion Hotel with Joe and his Jazz Cats and also sometimes, Wednesday nights downstairs where Joe played drums in his own trio, Killer Joe. Every gig with Joe was an escapade into the unknown.

*I heard a story once that Joe turned up to a wedding gig and no-one else in the band arrived. He set up his kit and did the whole gig alone, just drums and voice. And got paid!*

The Criterion was in the centre of Sydney on the corner of Park and Castlereagh streets. Within its smoke-yellowed walls the greatest players in town would gather. Mike Bukovsky, Dave Levy, John Pochee, Alan Turnbull, Bobby Gebert, Steve Elphick, Keith Stirling, Bob Bertles, Dave Addes, Mark Simmonds, Ken James, Paul McNamara, Dennis Sutherland, Trevor Griffin, Craig Scott, Andrew Gander, James Greening, Dave Clayton, Tom Baker, Warwick Alder, James and John Morrison, Dave Colton, John Connelly and many others.

The tired old tiled pub was packed with people expecting the unexpected, laughing and talking aloud. Always loud; yet the room at times had an air of excitement about it, especially when Joe took the stand. Smokey dark and smelly, real magic—Joe's magic. Jazz magic. The term 'jazz' seems somehow mostly limited to me now, but Joe was a living example of the best the genre has to offer. He was alive with ideas but above all, courageous. Oh, and he could swing and create fresh solos time and time again.

I would catch Edwin Duff singing standards at the Silver Spade Room with Col Nolan. Stewie Speer was around then, a beautiful drummer; Barry Duggan, Keith Stirling, Paul Furniss, [Peter] Boothman, Serge [Ermoll] (the grand-father). Sydney was alive with working musicians. All would sit in from time to time at the Criterion, Sunday afternoon two till six. The gig paid thirty bucks. In the middle of a set, Joe would sing 'Poor Butterfly' to a suddenly silent room, stealing and transporting us sometimes, projecting the listener to the most wonderful places,



Joe Lane, Criterion Hotel Sydney 1982. PHOTO: JANE MARCH

far from their mundane ordinary lives onto the stage of some imaginary oriental theatre, 'Poor-or-or buuutter...flyeeee...neeeath the blossoms, waitiiiiing.' The audience stopped in the moment, open-mouthed and anticipating each line.

*'Father Joe': teeth missing and Henna in your hair wearing your bad orange suit; our singing Buddhist monk. Joe made sure I knew the lyric to the songs I played on the horn. I was always listening to singers, Billie and Sarah, Chet, but my favourite was Carmen McRae and I also started to listen to 'Bird' and 'Cannonball' again; seriously focusing again on alto.*

We all spent many hours in Joe's pad (actually it was three rooms, all in different parts of the building) in Paddington above the shops on Oxford Street—

listening. We were always listening. He'd be cooking up some terrible stew from a ham hock and a potato or something. The stove was its own greasy artwork, a relic covered in aluminium pots and frying pans, some with remnants of a prior repast. Joe had three of each out at the same time. Pans everywhere! A bunch of celery in a vase centred the all-purpose kitchen table which was totally hidden beneath myriad displaced items including socks, food, drum hardware, plates, music, cutlery, cymbals and a huge pumpkin on top of a pile of records. Somehow he knew where everything was; especially amongst his records.

A string bass in one corner and the three 10-dollar sound systems were always a hoot, with bad connections on his leads or a wire missing; some shit was always broken or dodgy. He recorded every gig at one point, on a bad tape recorder—insisting we go back to his joint and listen to the crackling mono-tapes. We couldn't hear much but Joe would be laughing and shouting and suddenly he would have us all silent for a moment just to hear him. 'Shut up you guys and listen; that's me!' windmilling his arms and always with the outrageous infectious grin.

He used to smoke Camel cigarettes and lots of leaf, with constant listening to 'Bird 'n Dizzy', 'Cannonball and Miles', 'Trane 'n Ellington'—non-stop. Joe was the greatest scat singer I ever heard and could improvise and construct beautiful solos, original solos, time and again. Articulate inventive and exciting, sensuous or hilarious or tragic, always swinging and giving his all. Sometimes red faced and spitting.

*At a workshop at the Con [Sydney Conservatorium of Music] one time, he casually stood up and told Barry Harris, 'I got Bird down in two years man!' He definitely had Charlie Parker down, and some.*

In 1982 during a radio interview, he recalled that on one occasion Charlie Parker actually visited him in his apartment as a spirit and he and Joe had raved and listened to 'Bird's' albums for hours! The first track Joe played on that Sunday afternoon jazz show was at the wrong speed and he changed the speed after about ten seconds; from 45 down to 33rpm, and then took the needle off, scraping right across the record. To apologise! *scr-a-a-ape...* 'Actually the track I meant to play includes Tiny Grimes and...'

Then Joe, who was high, told us that the track he wanted to play was recorded Saturday afternoon on 4th April 1945 at Dial Studios somewhere, with Dizzy on piano. Apparently Dodo Marmarosa hadn't turned up. He named all the musos, the producer—on and on. Alive with information and passion, his voice tripping and going real fast, he was enthralled at being on radio. His P's and T's were loud and as he got more excited he fucked up the next track too, but it didn't matter.

*Joe loved Ellington and would sing the shit out of 'Sophisticated Lady', every time. He loved to sing 'Prelude to a Kiss'.*

On the road; and he had us (Nick Aggs was driving) scattin' over 'Cherokee' (Willow Nielsen was on that gig too) for hours—all the way to Bellingen Jazz Club.

*'Wheehhhh Doo Dwah Doo Daayyyyyy, blow man blow, Sweeeet indjuun laady.' Singin' our bloomin' heads off. Three hundred kilometres of 'Cherokee'!*

He came up to northern New South Wales for a jazz camp that I was running for young musicians and didn't stop singing for a minute. The kids must have been blown away. At his jazz history class he told the kids about the '50s, bebop, 'Bird and Diz' and then casually, how he was taking certain hallucinogens; he told them what bands in New Zealand he played with and how he carried a pint of liquid LSD through customs, explaining that it was Holy Water! Some of the parents had also turned up to his class too. Wonder what they thought? He was too honest. When he sang, all was forgiven.

Joe told me that he and Pochée had hitch-hiked to Melbourne in the sixties, with a string bass and a drum kit. They would hide the kit behind a tree and when a car stopped he would casually say 'We have a few parcels.' They were finally picked up by a truckie whose load was LPG and oxygen gas cylinders. Unfortunately Joe and Pochée had to ride in the back with all their gear. On-board and underway finally, Joe casually sat amongst the cylinders and lit a cigarette announcing, 'Well that was a bit of luck, Father'. John pounced on him and put out the cigarette.

*Sean Wayland had an idea for a singing Joe-Lane doll, complete with waving arms and its own bus) Maybe it could have a track options button, like 'Rhythm Changes, Blues or Ballad'.*

By April 1981 I had finished studying full-time at the Con and was living in Cremorne with the pianist Walter Lampe, when Joe booked us for a gig in Bathurst. We rehearsed an Ellington tribute and started mellow; I think the opener was 'In a Mellow Tone' or 'In My Solitude'. Wazza played on that band, the wonderful Warwick Alder on trumpet; Craig Scott, or was it Jimmy Nana on bass? I remember Peter Trotta on 'bone, [Alan] Turnbull on drums.

There I was on cloud nine; very happy to be playing with such musicians. Almost nothing could possibly go wrong—almost. Joe loved a smoke; he was religious about it. Going to the gig, we picked him up with all his gear, including a change of suit for every song and gold-sparkly jackets. Oh the shoes; man they were something... From the sixties: two-tone, platforms. God knows where he thought he was going to wear them (in fact as I remember he only changed his jacket once on the gig). His luggage included a very large green garbage bag half full of the worst looking pot—about a kilo. What was he thinking? Enough leaf for a week. Except you'd have to smoke the whole lot to get high. I think Joe did! We were laughing; cracking up all the way to Bathurst, smoking and coughing, hearing his endless stories. Warwick had also brought a bottle of scotch. All the way we were listening to Joe's hilarious recollections and looking with amazement through his glamorous wardrobe. The Bathurst Jazz Society could not have hired a better band. We were raging, ready for anything and keen to play.

As I remember, there were only thirty or so people there. For the opener, Joe got excited and, true to form, forgot everything we had rehearsed and called

Coltrane's 'Impressions'—modal and modern jazz, straight up. We were wired and going off! With solo after solo we were warming up and enjoying ourselves immensely. At the end of the opener—which took about ten minutes, with Joe yelling, 'Blow man Blow!'—and after a thundering drum solo to end, the room was silent. Absolutely silent. Not a sound except a poker machine chinking somewhere in the back of the room. Joe had heard it before; total silence on the gig. We all had. Some people had already left.

Then Joe remembered the Ellington set and as if nothing had happened he was talking to the people, 'Welcome to a night of musical genius, even if I do say so myself, and our tribute to Duke Ellington. Please embrace this fantastic orchestra. Put your hands together and join me in welcoming Australia's best. On drums, the master, Alan Turnbull!'

The band replying in unison, 'Get on with it Joe!' Actually, I think it was maybe James Greening on 'bone?'

He went on: 'Our next number was written by Duke Ellington in 1929 and featured Otto Hardwick who was later replaced by Johnny Hodges...'

*He got hit by a car and dropped his milk on the road, then walked into a bus trying to retrieve it. Twice in the same night at Concord—and survived.*

It was winter, the 'Criterion Hotel' Park Street Sydney. The opening lyric of 'Polka Dots and Moonbeams' is 'A country dance was being held in a garden'. Joe improvised on the first three words as an intro, yelling loudly across the room, 'A Cunt... a Cunt... Cccunt- Tttreeee, a Cuuuntryyyyy... a country daadance was...' Dave Levy was hiding under the piano stool, mouth wide open, not believing his ears. I was looking for somewhere else to look. Turnbull sipped his beer at the drums, smiling to himself while Mike Bukovsky shuffled nervously and held his breath, trying not to laugh out loud. The room waited—hands over mouths.

### The Halloween Gig, 1984

Sydney Town Hall—it was one of the maddest shows we ever did, three thousand people and twenty musicians. I was Master of Ceremonies and opened proceedings from inside a coffin, centre staged complete with dry ice, make-up and dressed like Dracula; Joe Lane, covered in a white sheet, was wheeled on stage lying on a hospital gurney. Dr. John [Morrison] did an incision, pouring in a quart of Bessie Smith, a pint of Louis Armstrong and a gallon of Charlie Parker! The audience was smiling. Big grins. I announced his arrival. 'Ladies and gentlemen the City of Sydney presents JOE LANE!'

Joe sat up and announced, 'Things are getting better. A one a two, a you know what to do!' counting the big band into the opener. Suddenly James [Morrison] appeared, abseiling from the ceiling high above the audience, playing a screaming trumpet solo over Peter Gunn while the big band was laying it down. Dundun – Dundun – Dundun - Dundun. As he hit the stage there was a series of explosions; fireworks and smoke bombs—James had a mate who was into pyrotechnics.

Unfortunately no one had informed the Fire Department, Commonwealth Police or the National Trust about our little party, so by interval the heavies had all turned up to close the joint down and send home early a couple of thousand happy people. Apparently it's not cool to light fires in the Sydney Town Hall. Somehow they let us do the second set – closely supervised.

We had a ball and Joe was beautiful. Warwick Alder played, and Jason Morphett, Glenn Henrick, Greg Thorne, Peter Cross. Peter Trotta, Steve Brien and Bob Johnson who led the trombone section. Bob and I had been in the army together years before, but that's another story. Sue Cruickshank was on that gig and maybe Bob Barnard, with Kevin Hunt. This was the best I ever heard Joe.

*The tenor saxophone player Tim Hopkins had the foresight to record Joe on Upon My Camel (ABC Records); Joe sings 'Summertime' imitantly and when I need a life hit now, I play that track. Check out his infectious laugh at the end.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: According to Bruce Johnson's *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*, published in 1987, Joe Lane had 'the status of a minor legend in Sydney, a cult figure in the jazz underground.' Anecdotes abound about his eccentricities, but the legacy he left is greater than those funny stories. His music and his warmth touched many peoples' lives and he is sorely missed by his friends since he passed away in 2007. When Paul Pax Andrews sent me his unpublished manuscript *I Hear a Rhapsody* I was fascinated by many of the stories it contained. I decided to pick a couple out and use them in *extempore*, to see how they went. The Joe Lane section was an immediate choice. Jane March helped us out with a photo of Joe and we were set. My only regret is that we don't have enough space in this issue to say more about this not-so-minor legend!

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