

# THE AUSTRALIAN

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*Willie McIntyre at Adelaide Town Hall, May-June 1949... PHOTO  
COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

## **The Lion Roars: The Musical Life of Willie ‘The Lion’ McIntyre**

By Phil Sandford

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### **Eric Myers**

Phil Sandford’s *The Lion Roars* is a reminder of how vibrant the Melbourne jazz scene was in the late 30s and early 40s, as an unprecedented generation of talented young musicians emerged. Strong personalities, they created a sub-culture with such capital that,

in the immediate post-World War II years, jazz was first cab off the rank in taking Australian music, indeed Australiana, to the rest of the world. Here we are primarily talking about the overseas exploits of Graeme Bell and his Australian Jazz Band. To some extent that's another story.

Pianist and singer Willie “The Lion” McIntyre, a mere footnote in many previous accounts, has now been fleshed out in commendable detail. He was not an innovator, says Sandford, but “a consolidator of stride and boogie woogie piano styles who generated enormous rhythmic drive and joy, but also expressed the pain and suffering of the blues.”



*McIntyre, captured on piano at Dick Hughes's Uncle Walter's place... PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN*

McIntyre was born in 1919 in Benalla, 200 kms from Melbourne. Brought up in a large Methodist family, he was influenced by church music. Willie was 10 when the family bought a piano, and he was obsessed with music from then on. By the time his family moved to Melbourne in 1936 - when his father Stewart McIntyre, a train driver, became eligible to drive the newfangled Spirit of Progress - Willie had seven years of classical music training, and was already exploring styles of jazz piano. By 1942, after four years of playing in small groups for dances and in coffee lounges, Willie had established himself on the Melbourne traditional scene.

Well aware of the social history of these times, Sandford scrutinises the legacy of the Depression in the 1930s; the significance of radio from the mid-30s, which acquainted fledgling musicians with jazz records that were trickling in from overseas; and, of course, the radical effect of World War II on the Australian community.

Sandford relates how, in January 1942, the federal government was concerned that African American servicemen were to be sent to Australia. The then minister for external affairs, H V Evatt, declared, “We are not prepared to agree to the proposal that US troops to be despatched to Australia should be coloured.”



*Minister for external affairs, H V Evatt: not in favour of coloured US troops...*

Unfortunately the troops were already in transit, so the government had to accept reality. Still, efforts were made to segregate the unwelcome intruders. In Brisbane, the Doctor Carver Service Club was established for black American soldiers, which denied them access to the greater part of the city, and restricted them to the poorer parts of the city south of the Brisbane River.

Aboriginal women were encouraged to attend the club as dance partners but the sobering reality was that most of the 200 women who attended the club were white.

McIntyre served in a medical unit in Papua New Guinea from May, 1942. In 1944 his unit was relocated to Strathpine just north of Brisbane. A clever opportunist, McIntyre wangled special permission to attend the Carver club. In a situation where white servicemen were barred, McIntyre regarded this as an honour and a privilege, and he performed there from time to time with African American musicians.



*The US Fifth Air Corps Orchestra playing at the Doctor Carver Service Club at South Brisbane on 19 August 1943. Galvin Johnson, Missouri is holding the microphone. Miss Lila Draper is dancing with Private Bob Walker, New York City.*

It's interesting that during these years Melbourne jazz musicians usually stuck to their day jobs, unlike their counterparts in Sydney, who tended to embark on careers as professional musicians.

Trumpeter Tony Newstead, in whose band McIntyre played for most of his life, had a distinguished career as an electronics engineer; McIntyre's close colleague clarinettist George Tack studied agricultural science at Melbourne university and worked for the CSIRO; McIntyre himself began in the Victorian Public Service as a teenager, but from 1939 worked all his life for a company called Nonporite which manufactured "waterproofing products used to prevent leaks in buildings".



*Willie McIntyre (left) with trumpeter Tony Newstead, at the Uptown Club in Melbourne, 1946... PHOTO COURTESY PHIL SANDFORD*

"By day Willie McIntyre was a mild-mannered accountant, always impeccably dressed in a suit with his hand-made shirt and cufflinks," writes Sandford. "By night he was 'The Lion', a hard-drinking boogie and stride pianist who sang in a Fats Waller style or shouted the blues."

The pianist Dick Hughes emulated other Melburnians in that, even after moving to Sydney where music gigs were plentiful, he never

gave up his day job as a professional journalist. Hughes died in April. A protégé of McIntyre's, he wrote the Foreword for this book, describing McIntyre as "one of Australia's greatest jazz entertainers... He played the most solid piano one can hear".



*Dick Hughes on piano at the Australian Jazz Convention, Railway Institute, Sydney, 1958: Bill, this is Will, and you taught him, and Will taught me...*  
PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN

In a typical anecdote, Hughes introduced McIntyre to Count (Bill) Basie in Melbourne in 1971, saying: "Bill, this is Will, and you taught him, and Will taught me."

The CD which accompanies the book is available from [www.williemcintyre.com](http://www.williemcintyre.com), and has 21 tracks covering the years 1946–1985. Any jazz buff who has never heard the extraordinary George Tack will find the music an unmitigated pleasure.

As for McIntyre it's fascinating to hear that what he plays is often closely related to the conventional piano sounds of 1950s rock 'n' roll, which also came out of the early African American blues styles which influenced McIntyre.

It's not far from Willie 'The Lion' to a pianist such as Jerry Lee Lewis. But once again, that's another story.

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*Eric Myers writes on jazz for The Australian.*