

Mr Donald Vernon Burrows AO MBE

The honorary degree of Doctor of Music was conferred upon Donald Vernon Burrows by the Chancellor Dame Leonie Kramer AC DBE at the graduation ceremony held on 25 May 2000.



Mr Burrows, photo, courtesy University Publications

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Donald Vernon Burrows for admission to the degree of Doctor of Music honoris causa.

Don Burrows says he does not like to be called a 'legend'. Nevertheless, legend he is, as the major proponent of Australian jazz, and a leading figure in the international world of music. Throughout more than half a century, he has lifted the profile of jazz in Australia, and become one of our most generous cultural teachers and ambassadors. He is a household name, renowned for his professional musicianship, his enthusiastic support for the jazz arts, and his ability to lift the spirits of an audience.

Don Burrows said in a recent interview that music has been his teacher; that having left school at fourteen he did not have a "normal, full education". With characteristic modesty he added: "I've never had a piece of paper in a frame to prove I'm any good at anything." Yet, he has the rare tribute of having twice been named a Living National Treasure. Today, he is honoured for the quality and integrity of a life devoted to music and to sharing joyfully his knowledge with generations of young Australians.

Don Burrows was born in Sydney in 1928. He grew up at Bondi where, as a child, he loved to stand on the hot sand, wrapped in a towel, and listen wonderstruck to jazz musicians casually jamming on the beach. He has often given credit for his lifetime in music to a school visit by the classical flautist, Victor McMahan, when he was in Grade 3 at Bondi Beach Primary School. It gave him the first opportunity to play notes on a tin whistle and a clarinet, a moment he deeply appreciates and has never forgotten. It was, he has said, "an auspicious beginning into true musicianship."

From that time, Don Burrows trained himself to learn hundreds of tunes and harmonies by ear while listening to jazz on the radio. In 1942, he left school to become a professional clarinet and saxophone player, honing his talent in the lively dance halls and night clubs of post-war Sydney. Later, he branched into composing and performing for television, film and theatre, displaying the versatility for which he is well known. Through his group, the Don Burrows Quartet, he has expanded the boundaries of jazz from 1920's traditional, to swing, 1960's bossa nova and exciting modern jazz. His exceptional breadth of musical styles couples well with his sophisticated expertise on a number of musical instruments - the flute, clarinet and all the saxophones from alto to baritone. He has recorded numerous popular albums, many of which have won Gold awards.

Don Burrows quickly became an international figure in jazz, playing solo or accompanying artists, including Frank Sinatra, Stephane Grappelli, Nat King Cole, and Dizzy Gillespie. During four decades of touring, he has been an outstanding ambassador for Australia, known everywhere for his professionalism, energy and warmth. Highlights of his touring career include being, in 1972, the first Australian to perform at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, and at the equally prestigious Newport Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall.

During the latter tour, he achieved the Quote of the Day in the New York Times when he said, "Jazz is not a What - it's a How. If it were a What, you'd teach them a What. But you can't teach them a How." This playfully stated his belief that jazz may be about technique and theory, but mostly it is about simply playing and experimenting with music. He has toured extensively in Europe, the United States and South East Asia, and his was the first Australian jazz group to appear in concert in China, to which he made his first visit in 1983. The following year, he was elected to the Board of the International Jazz Federation. The many 'firsts' in Don Burrows' long career are all evidence of the new territory he has continued to forge in his chosen art form.

Don Burrows has also been acclaimed at home, including by his illustrious colleagues, amongst them James Morrison, Julie Anthony, Vince Jones, and Bernie McGann. He was awarded the Order of Australia for services to music in 1987 and an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 1972 (the first jazz musician to be so honoured).

Don Burrows is deeply committed to providing opportunities for young musicians. In 1973, he initiated Australia's first Jazz Studies program at the New South Wales Conservatorium, now, of course, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and part of this university. The innovative program, with an emphasis on formal and informal performance experience, continued for ten years. When awarded a Creative Arts Fellowship in 1995, he used it, with typical dedication, to sponsor concerts and student workshops, particularly in regional and outback areas, often in conjunction with Musica Viva. Teachers, and students of all ages, have paid tribute to his friendly, unassuming presence, and to his inspirational teaching methods.

Today we recognize Don Burrows for his outstanding Australian and international contributions to music and musical education.

Chancellor, I present Donald Vernon Burrows for admission to the degree of Doctor of Music honoris causa and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.