

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

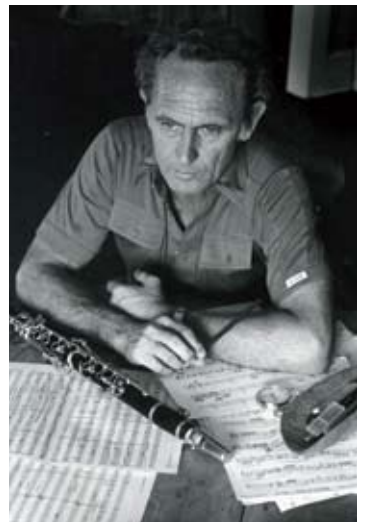
SERIES 11

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



DON BURROWS

JAZZ MUSICIAN



DON BURROWS (1928-)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of Australian Biography (Series 11) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories – of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Born in 1928, jazz and swing musician Don Burrows is a household name in Australia. A composer and arranger, he's one of the world's finest interpreters of the jazz tradition and highly respected internationally, where he's toured to great acclaim since 1960.

He was the first Australian musician to be invited to perform at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1972 and later the Newport Jazz Festival, playing at Carnegie Hall.

A multi-instrumentalist, Don has played the clarinet, saxophone and flute with world-renowned musicians.

The first Head of Jazz Studies at the Sydney Conservatorium, he has travelled all over Australia, bringing his enthusiasm for music to students in the bush. A lifelong fisherman, Don is also an accomplished photographer.

Now in his late seventies, Don Burrows has not even begun to think about slowing down.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Music, English, Drama, Media, Personal Development, History and SOSE/HSIE.

Childhood, growing up

In many respects jazz musician Don Burrows' experiences during his early years, growing up in Sydney during the Great Depression (1929-1930s) and World War Two (1939-1945), were unlike anything experienced by most young Australians today.

- Research, then discuss in class whether you think there are any differences in the ways in which Australians listened to radio (or 'wireless') during the 1930s when Don was a child, compared to the ways we relate to radio today.
- Create a poster depicting a typical radio receiver of the 1930s and the setting or environment in which it was likely to be found, in comparison to the choices of radios and listening environments we have today.
- Discuss in class what Don means by being a 'rock hopper', the circumstances that led to this, and whether you think such activities by school-aged children are still common or not today. (For comparison you may wish, for example, to look at contemporary legislation concerning such issues as the employment of children to carry out newspaper home deliveries. As well, have times changed in relation to health regulations concerning the preparation and licensed selling of food?)
- Discuss the possibilities for plot, characters, themes and settings in class then write a short fiction story about the adventures of a 'rock hopper' such as young Don.
- Note Don's comments about the 'guys jamming on the sand' on Bondi Beach during the 1930s, in an era where you could not listen to music on portable, battery-operated radios. Imagine, though, you are a radio reporter, presenting a story on local beach culture of the era. Prepare a three-minute broadcast item of your impressions, conversations, interviews and observations after a summer afternoon spent on the beach. Record the item or deliver it directly to your class as an oral presentation. (You may first wish to carry out some research on the ways Australians spent their leisure time in the era before World War Two.)
- In pairs, research then prepare an illustrated two-page magazine spread for a young teenage audience about the Japanese submarine attack in Sydney Harbour during World War Two, and its effect on the Sydney populace. What was the damage? Were civilians killed or injured? How did the military respond to the incident? What was the mass media's response to the attack? Were security measures (such as blackouts and curfews) increased? Using desktop publishing software, ensure your presentation is formatted with appropriate headlines, columns and captions.

Creative expression, career in jazz

From the program we can see that Don's future career as a jazz musician seemed to have been mapped out for him at an early age.

- Don refers to learning 'counterpoint' and 'improvisation' while listening to music on the radio when young. Discuss in class what these terms mean in application to music. Can you apply them to other areas? The class may wish to select and listen carefully to one or two examples of jazz tunes from the 1930s in order to comment on where these elements may be taking place in the music. Using paper and comb, perhaps with other 'non-musical' instruments, you may even want to experiment and practise in conjunction with the tunes being played, either individually or in small group band formation. One member might take the lead with a tune, while the others join in, taking it in turns to lead.

- In pairs, find out the most popular jazz tunes and bands of the late 1920s and into the mid-1930s, likely to have been heard on the radio when Don was a small child. Devise a display poster about one or more of these popular bands, or about the importance of radio in bringing this music to the wider public.
- Following from the previous activity, the class as a whole or in smaller groups is to organise, rehearse, produce and record a 1930s-style radio program of jazz music. You may include historical information, mock interviews and perhaps even radio advertisements as required. The program may be uploaded as a sound file or podcast for your school intranet.
- Discuss in class how World War Two served to enhance Don's career as a jazz musician in Sydney, and whether you would classify this as a 'lucky break' or not. Do you think that in Australia it is possible today to pursue a similar kind of career from such an early age (in music or any of the other arts)? Do 'lucky breaks' happen, or do you make them happen?
- Discuss in class the possibilities for plot events and situations, characters, settings and general narrative approaches and styles, then plan and write a fiction short story, drawing in any way you think appropriate from Don's anecdote about being an under-age member of a band during World War Two. (Note that references to the Booker T. Washington Club, mentioned during the program, may be found in Joan Clarke's autobiography – see References.)
- During the program Don refers to such renowned bandleaders from the 1930s and 1940s as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Benny Goodman. Research the history and biography of one of these musicians, and create a poster display about the influence and popularity of his music, and its impact on the history and development of popular music.
- Following from the above activity, select one piece of recorded music by Ellington, Basie or Goodman, find out what you can about it, and play it to the class (or if available, screen archival film on video/DVD to the class), accompanied by a short, informative talk about it (when and where it was recorded, who the musicians and vocalists are, its popularity in terms of sales etc).
- Research and write a short biography of George Golla, principally looking at his musical collaboration with Don Burrows. Include information such as the extent of his recorded albums, other artists he has worked with, and whether his music appears on the soundtracks of any films and TV programs.
- Carry out research on the history and importance of the Newport Jazz Festival, and the famous artists who have played there, then imagine you have attended the festival either as a participant or as a member of the audience. Write an email home to a friend in Australia about the experience.
- Listen again to Don's comments about the Sydney Conservatorium Jazz Department, then discuss in class what he regards as valid about jazz music as a subject of university study. In what ways may this differ from learning to play jazz, in his words, 'on the road, on the stand'? Is one form of education preferable to the other? Why do you think it was necessary that Don eventually learn how to read music rather than 'relying on the ear'? Should the playing of jazz be instinctive and improvised or is there a place for it to be taught and learnt in an academic environment? Do you think instituting an academic course of study in jazz also holds true for rock music, hip-hop or other forms of contemporary popular music?
After discussion, write a commentary of your own opinions about these issues.

Behind the scenes

Despite Don's public success as a jazz musician, there was a toll on his private life: a long-lasting but difficult first marriage, and a second marriage that ended in disaster.

- Before the two marriages there was an earlier girlfriend. Plan and write a short story in romantic comedy mode drawing in any way you see fit on Don's anecdote about attempting to impress a potential girlfriend by presenting her with a fish he had caught.
- Plan and write two sets of personal diary entries based on the situation where Don had to return from the USA to Australia with his first wife. One should be written by Don (or a fictional character in a similar situation), showing his viewpoint and feelings; the other should be written from his wife's viewpoint, showing her feelings.
- Don says of his first marriage that he was 'green' and 'inexperienced'. Is this generally only an attitude that you may have when looking back years later? Discuss in class whether there is genuinely a right time and a right age to embark upon a happy, long-lasting marriage. In a marriage that has stresses, strains and tensions in it, should you 'stick it out for the children', as Don says, or is divorce an acceptable option? Why do you think divorce was less common in previous decades than it is today?
- In pairs or small groups, devise a drama scene or a connected sequence of short scenes, arising in any way from Don's comments about the failure of his second marriage, his emotional collapse and the way he was eventually able to use this to compose 'the most meaningful songs' he'd ever written. Workshop the drama, making changes to the script and the characterisations of the central roles as necessary; remember that viewing one character as 'good' and another as 'bad' may be too simplistic. Then, with other members of the class as required, present a reading to the class. (Alternatives may be to rehearse and act the play sequence to the class, or prepare it as a play for radio, and to record it as a sound file. You may wish to use some of Don's own recorded music in relevant scenes.)
- During the program Don refers to his 'close-to-my-heart options'. Discuss in class Don's coping mechanisms, i.e. the activities he carries out that help him to work through and resolve various problems of a personal or professional nature. (Recall that he is thankful 'grog' is not one of the dependencies he relies on to escape from problems.) Consider these mechanisms in relation to yourself and to others in your own social circles. Write a personal piece of 400-500 words about both the positive and negative, constructive and destructive coping mechanisms surrounding the pressures teenagers at school, at home and elsewhere may experience in their daily lives. Draw on your own situation where applicable.

Full circle – the life journey

During the program certain objects and incidents relevant to an appreciation of Don's life story assume a reoccurring, metaphorical purpose usually found within various art forms such as literature and film narrative, music and painting. These reoccurring images are referred to as *motifs*. (See website references)

- In class, after viewing the program, discuss and make notes on the relevance of the B-flat school flute, and of rock-hopping, as distinctive motifs in Don's life story. Could the image of water, here, also be interpreted as a motif?
- Carry out some biographical research on music teacher Victor McMahan, then write a short commentary about his influence on later generations of musicians in Australia. Follow this with a commentary on how Don's activities in teaching young children bring his own life full circle, back to McMahan. From watching the program, include a discussion as to the qualities and attitude you think Don brings to his teaching. Conclude with a short discussion on what, generally, constitutes a 'good' teacher of children.
- You may first wish to discuss as a class or in small groups the wide possibilities for this next activity. Plan and write a short story about any aspect of a musician's life journey (or the life journey of a writer, an artist, an actor etc). Ensure the story contains one or more motifs, reoccurring images that build on each other to produce an underlying, metaphorical meaning.
- What is jazz? Discuss in class what you think Don means when he says, looking back over his career, that, 'it's not a what, it's a how'. Do you think that this definition, or response to the question, would be adequate for someone who has not been exposed to a variety of different forms and styles of jazz music? In writing, attempt to define jazz music to children of primary school age.
- At the beginning of the program Don says that 'when the fun goes out of this business I'll give it away'. In small groups, plan and draft a short play script where this possibility could, or does, happen, during someone's career, whether in music or another field of endeavour. Workshop and rehearse the script and present a reading to the class. (As preparation for this activity you may wish to examine Don's comments about becoming an executive, attending meetings with a briefcase.)

Media studies

Carry out the following media-related activities:

- Prepare a poster, designed for teenagers, on the historical beginnings of jazz music.
- Listen to one or more of Don Burrows' albums, and if necessary, to gain an increased insight into the music, carry out further research into his particular brand and style of jazz. Follow this by writing a short review of one of his albums for a youth-oriented magazine. (Note that some of Don's album covers are shown during the program.)
- Imagine you are a feature film producer. You aim to make a fictionalised 'biopic' movie loosely based on Don Burrows' life in jazz. This will involve deciding the most interesting, dramatic and emotional aspects of his story to highlight, develop and extend. Plan and carry out two activities, designed to attract an audience, that would help to capture a sense of what is in the script:
 - create an illustrated full-page display magazine advertisement, with text, to promote the film.
 - write a 200-word 'sales pitch' promotional media release about the new film for newspaper and magazine film reviewers; you may wish to rehearse and video-record it to camera for playback.
 - prepare a poster, designed for teenagers, on the historical beginnings of jazz music.
- View a feature film that is either about a jazz musician, or which contains jazz music throughout on the soundtrack. Write a review of the film in which you discuss the importance of the music to understanding and appreciating the film. (See website references for 'Jazz and the movies'.)

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International Association for Jazz Education (Australasia):

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Jazz and the movies:

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Motifs in literature, film, art, music:

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Newport Jazz Festival:

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AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY: DON BURROWS

A Film Australia National Interest Program

Director/Producer: Rod Freedman

Writer/Interviewer: Robin Hughes

Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn

Duration: 26 minutes

Year: 2007

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For information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

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