

## Dick Hughes 1931- 2018



Jazzman Dick Hughes with his daughter Christa Hughes, a cabaret performer. Picture: John Appleyard

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Dick Hughes had a rasping voice that suggested Fats Waller, and he played a hot stride piano in the traditional style that pre-dated bebop. But this largely self-taught pianist was modest about his abilities: “I don’t read music,” he said. “I spell it out laboriously.”

Hughes — jazz pianist, singer, raconteur and journalist of note — died on Friday after a bout with cancer. He was 86.

He was the only son of distinguished Australian foreign correspondent Richard Hughes and his wife May. He became interested in jazz during a lonely childhood, and was president of the Melbourne University Rhythm Club in 1950. He played piano casually with several Melbourne traditional jazz players before going to London in 1952, where he also played gigs. As a pianist Hughes was basically self-taught but he took lessons in London from one of his heroes, American pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams.

He also became prominent as a correspondent for the ABC, exploiting his interest in jazz and sending back interviews with prominent musicians Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and others.

Clement Semmler, a jazz enthusiast then in charge of radio at the ABC, described them as “some of the best jazz interviews I’d ever heard”.

Hughes began working as a professional journalist for Frank Packer in 1954 and returned to Australia in 1955, settling in Sydney. He joined News Limited in February 1966 and worked there until 1991. He worked with Fairfax community newspapers from 1994 until his retirement in 2014.

He made no secret of the fact, for him, the straight life of the journalist paled in comparison with that of the jazzman. He described his work at *The Daily Telegraph* as being “in the C major of this life”.

He married his Fay in 1962 and they had three daughters: Vashti (a writer, performer and cabaret artist), Christa (a blues singer and cabaret artist) and Stephanie (an early childhood teacher).

It was his activity as a jazz pianist and singer that brought Hughes fame, if not fortune. He worked with various groups led by guitarist and banjoist Ray Price, including the Port Jackson Jazz Band. In the 1960s he benefited from the traditional jazz revival and was a member of the Ray Price Quartet, which issued a popular hit version of the Bechet composition *A Moi de Payer*.

Semmler, by this time deputy general manager at the ABC and a solid fan, described Hughes as “one of the best-natured and most genial jazzmen I’ve ever met ... When he gets to that piano it’s an involvement of Hughes, piano, audience and, if he’s in a group, his fellow musicians, all in one — an empathy that’s quite remarkable.”

In the 70s and 80s Hughes was prominent in many of Sydney’s jazz pubs, such as the Macquarie Hotel, Windsor Castle, Adams Hotel, French’s Tavern and the Shakespeare Hotel.

He was the first solo jazz pianist to perform at the Sydney Opera House in 1973. It was at one of these performances that his little daughter Christa crept on to the stage and, sitting under the piano, loudly announced: “Daddy’s practising again.” Hughes used this as the title for his celebrated autobiography, *Daddy’s Practising Again: An Australian Jazzman Looks Back and Around*, published in 1977.

The same year, Hughes and his group the Famous Five launched the album *Dick Hughes Looks Back & Around* at Soup Plus. This led to a 13-year residency for the group at that prominent restaurant in Sydney’s George Street. At one time the group included another legendary figure in Australian jazz, saxophonist and clarinetist Merv Acheson.

Jazz historian Bill Haesler said: “Few Australian jazz musicians have contributed so much to Australian jazz music as Dick Hughes.” Hughes maintained that, despite the dissolute lifestyles of some musicians, for him jazz was puritanical: “Never get the idea that jazz is sexy,” he wrote. “I often used to think it should be played in monasteries — in moderation naturally — as a distraction from the temptations of St Anthony which may from time to time plague some monks.”

In his later years he broadcast a much-loved radio show, *Speak Easy Swing Hard*, in Sydney. He was noted for his extraordinary attention to detail, particularly in relation to the dates of key recordings and personnel involved. During his illness Fine Music 102.5 has been repeating past programs in his usual timeslot at noon.

Hughes was diagnosed with bowel cancer almost a year ago. He died peacefully in his home at Vacluse, surrounded by his family. A devout Catholic who attended mass every day whenever possible, he was thrilled not only to have been given the last rites, but also that three priests were able to visit him during his last week with prayers and blessings.

He is survived by his wife and daughters.

*Dick Hughes. Musician. Born Melbourne, July 8, 1931. Died Sydney, April 20, aged 86.*