

## Tom Finlay – jazz pianist – an appreciation

Born Fife 7<sup>th</sup> May 1939 Died Edinburgh 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021



Photograph by John Need, from the collection of Kim Finlay

The world of Edinburgh jazz has over the years produced a number of pianists of the highest class amongst whom Thomas “Tom” Matthew Finlay, who has died at the age of 82, held a very high position.

Tom was born in Cowdenbeath, Fife, in 1939 and educated at Beath High School when he first showed interest in music. Initially he studied wind instruments before settling on the piano. Tom had his first band gig at Woods Hall, Kelty, which gave him the appetite for what turned out to be a long, distinguished career in entertainment.

In 1959 Tom moved to Edinburgh for a Chartered Accountant apprenticeship and in 1961, embarked on a course at Johnny Keating’s School of Music and quickly established himself on the Edinburgh jazz scene.

At Keating’s School of Music, he met tenor saxophonist Alex Gentleman and formed a band, which included Ken Ramage (trombonist), Ronnie Dunn (bassist) and Kenny Duff (drummer), all of whom enjoyed long careers in jazz. When Ramage went abroad, Tom and Alex formed the Finlay-Gentleman Quintet with Ian MacDonald replacing Duff.

It became clear that Tom's interest lay principally in the contemporary and more modern forms of jazz of the time. Always a highly versatile musician, Tom also played with the Royal Mile Jazzmen, a band playing in the Chicago tradition, as well as Jim Baikie Band. Although the early 1960s was a time when the so-called 'Trad Boom' was popular, the Finlay-Gentleman Quintet, a hard-bop band in the style of Horace Silver and Art Blakey, had a solid following amongst the modern jazz fans in Edinburgh.

1964 saw Tom 'go on the boats', where he, together with fellow Edinburgh musicians, Graeme Robertson and Ronnie Dunn (bassists) and Bobby Stewart and Billy Allison (drummers), provided jazz for the passengers of worldwide cruises. These trips enabled the young musicians to hear many American jazz legends that they would never have otherwise heard except on recordings.

The 1960's was when Tom, with business partner Duncan Lonie, began to venture into property investment and get a taste for owning venues across Edinburgh. Throughout this time Tom was gigging regularly, including residencies at the Pentland Suite in Stockbridge, the Showboat in Fountainbridge, and the Baron Suite in Chesser.

Some years later Tom followed up his friendship with Mike Hart by joining Mike's band the Society Syncopators, a partnership that would endure for many successful years. Tom was with the Society Syncopators and Old Bailey's Jazz Advocates when they were each awarded the European Amateur Jazz Championship at the Dunkirk Jazz Festival respectively, until they amalgamated to form the Scottish Jazz Advocates, with Mike Hart and reeds man Hamish McGregor at the helm.

It was in 1979 when Mike Hart established what was to become the Edinburgh International Jazz Festival. Tom was to be a major figure in this Festival over the years when he had the opportunity to work with visiting musicians, many of them legendary names in jazz. Among them were top names such as Peanuts Hucko, Bob Wilber, Scott Hamilton, Doc Cheatham, Harry 'Sweets' Edison and Red Rodney. More than one of these distinguished visitors said that they wished they could have taken Tom with them on their tours.

By 1985 Hamish McGregor had formed the Fat Sam's Band, of which Tom was to be a key player. Domestically Fat Sam's became extremely popular and were a sought-after fixture at The Edinburgh Jazz Festival for 30 years. During 1987-2012 Fat's Sam's toured extensively internationally including North

America, Canada, Europe and Middle East and it was in Muscat where Tom first heard Barbara Morrison which would spark a creative relationship that would blossom over the future years.

Other high spots in Tom's musical journey include; being a founding member of The Mellotones, a 20-year stint as Musical Director for Craig McMurdo's orchestra and playing an integral part of Ken Mathieson's Classic Jazz Orchestra from its inception. At the turn of the millennium, Tom was inspired to record three albums in Cuba with Ricky Steele (bassist) and the late Murray Smith (drummer), acquiring local musicians to complete recordings. Tom enjoyed promoting and playing with international guests in both Scotland and Barbados including Barbara Morrison, Lillian Boutté and Arturo Tappin while also finding time to join the resident jazz band at the Portman Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Shanghai during 2008.

In his later years, Tom regularly met with Mike Hart and Duncan Lonie for coffee meetings, originally at The Laigh and latterly at Café Rouge. The present writer attended once and can confirm that the coffee drinking was very much secondary to the main business of the meeting which was winding each other up!

Tom Finlay was a consummate jazz musician whose piano playing graced the Edinburgh jazz scene over seven decades and he remained a much admired and in demand player until declining health brought his playing career to an end in the mid-2010s.

Tom is survived by his wife Birte, son Jack, twin daughters Kim and Lisa and his two grandchildren. He leaves a rich legacy of musical memories, a legion of admirers and a number of wonderful recordings, to remind us of his talent and musicianship.

**Graham Blamire with input from the Finlay family**