

Early Life

I joined the Elizabethan Trust Sydney Orchestra when I was 23 years of age but my musical experience started at least 13 years before. The second of three children, I was born in Randwick, Sydney, in 1944. Both my parents, Walter and Ethelwyn, were musicians. My mother studied the violin with my father before her marriage, but did not continue as a professional musician. My father did, but he ceased performing soon after Australia came under the effects of the worldwide Depression in the early 1930s. He became a baker and pastry cook in Sydney's eastern suburbs, making bread and pastries, and providing personalized delivery service to private homes throughout Coogee and Randwick. Before this, he was a successful violinist with his own string quartet. He derived income from performances in silent movie theatres, quartet and solo concerts and an established teaching studio. Unfortunately, my father was affected by the adverse circumstances of the Depression, especially by observing many of his musical colleagues and friends playing their instruments on street corners with their hat on the ground trying to earn enough money to eat.

When I was ten, we moved from Coogee to my mother's family home in Flemington, Sydney, which had been bought by my father after the sale of his bakery. Unfortunately, although the house was a fine, large colonial property, it was in a bad state of repair. I guess my family's wealth was measured in the assets it contained rather than any liquid cash (the house was situated on seven blocks of land). Accordingly, without the sale of some of the assets, which was not recommended due to potentially unknown medical expenses in the future, there was virtually no money to undertake massive repairs needed on the property. It was in this environment that I spent my teenage years. For about a year my father obtained employment by selling insurance policies door-to-door. However, sometime during that year he developed an illness arising from a stroke from which he had suffered and which had severely damaged his nervous system. He was slowly losing his capacity to function normally and was unable to work. We did not know it at the time but have subsequently realized that he was suffering from multiple sclerosis; a disease which in 1954 did not have the recognition and understanding it has today.

First Musical Education

When I was ten or eleven my father offered to teach me the violin and piano. At first I was enthusiastic about this proposal until I experienced, at first hand, my father's frustration at his diminishing technique on both instruments, and his distress with music in general which I assumed had come from his transfer from professional musician to baker and pastry cook. His

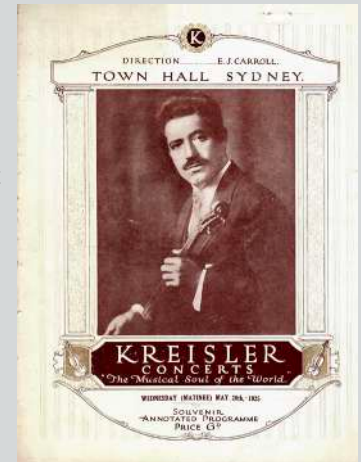
teaching style could only be described as strict Victorian with a strong focus on self-discipline and uncompromising insistence that only the highest standard was acceptable. I have no recollection that during my lessons my father allowed for the fact that I was a young child with, as yet, no formal understanding of music. Consequently, my lessons became very stressful and it was not long before I lost interest and lessons ceased.

My parents were passionate about music performances given by violinists such as Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz and Yehudi Menuhin and they had many recordings (in 78 rpm format), with which I grew up. However, this did not inspire me to continue piano and violin studies with my father. I think in retrospect his disease must have been the main reason for his failure to inspire in me a commitment to dedicated practice and study of music.

The purchase of the family home came with the condition that my mother's father remained in residence for the rest of his life. He lived well into his 90s and had the good fortune not to suffer serious bad health aside from the slow deterioration of his capacity to walk. My mother had never worked in paid employment since her marriage and with three teenage children, an elderly father and a husband with deteriorating health, she was faced with little relaxation time and inadequate funds to feed her family and maintain the home. To achieve this she took on a job each morning and afternoon as a cleaner in a local school. Considering my father's health was deteriorating rapidly and he needed constant care and attention, and my grandfather required assistance with his basic daily needs, it must have been extremely difficult for my mother to cope psychologically and financially.

School Days

My older brother, George, was an exceptional academic who won scholarship assistance to attend Sydney Boys' High School where he excelled in English, physics and mathematics. I was still in primary school when we moved from Coogee and my sister, Gail, was two years younger than me. I started primary school education at Randwick and concluded at Burwood after which my secondary education took place at Cleveland Street High School. I have mixed feelings about Cleveland Street. This was a time in my life when I had little incentive or interest in academic study and my home environment did not rectify this problem. For me, the time spent at Cleveland Street School was one of conflict with both students and teachers and the general education principles of the day. Aside from Ancient History, English and Geography, I showed little interest in the school academic curriculum. The consequence was that I failed the Leaving Certificate exam at the end of my secondary studies. At the same time, one of the unexpected and most satisfying experiences of my young days was involvement with the Air Force Cadet Unit 24 Flight, based at Cleveland Street. I joined the unit in second year and remained until



Kreisler Concert program



Air training Corps cadet Under Officer Course, Canberra 1961. Warwick back row, third from the left (under nose of DC3)—Photo: RAAF

my last day of school, after which I joined the air force reserve for about a year. During my school time I succeeded in holding every possible rank, awarded upon successful completion of an air force assessment camp, conducted at a Royal Australian Air Force base. The cadet unit taught me the value of independence, self-discipline and team leadership, including delegation of authority.

By the time I reached my last year of school I had successfully and completely disassociated myself from academic study, taught myself guitar, been elected a Prefect and fully engrossed myself in the air force cadet unit. I spent most of the time at school in the prefect's room practising rock 'n' roll on my guitar. Although still not interested in classical music I began to become enraptured by the popular

music of the day. Rock 'n' roll was a lot tamer then but was developing rapidly in many ways, especially technically. I was able to afford six months of guitar lessons which gave me the basic understanding of chords and rhythmic structure. I was more than happy as I had acquired the habit of listening to performers I admired and then copying, to the best of my ability, their music. My musical influences included popular singers and bands such as Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and Chet Atkins in America, *The Shadows*, Cliff Richards and *The Beatles* in the UK and Col Joy, *The Delltones* and Johnny O'Keefe in Australia.

When I think back on my school days, I realize I did not develop many opportunities to help me in later life, but I learnt self-discipline from the air force cadets and the realization that if you want to achieve anything worthwhile you have to do it yourself and not rely on any person or institution to achieve your personal goals. I concluded my schooling in 1961 with no possibility of undertaking tertiary study, no academic qualification and no interest in the trades as a source of income. Not much had changed in my home life aside from the fact my father's health had deteriorated substantially and my grandfather required vehicular assistance to move around. My mother was still working every day and both my brother and I worked part-time at a local garage, where I guess I obtained my interest in motor cars. My brother had succeeded in obtaining a position in a Teacher's Degree course at Sydney University and my sister was still undertaking

secondary education. With no prospect of a university degree and no interest in the trades or apprenticeships, I was positioned to face my working life with very few immediately attractive prospects. Fortunately, in the 1960s in Australia a young person could gain employment reasonably easily as a labourer, office worker or retail employee. I think in my first year after school I found employment in all of these areas.

Music, however, was my constant commitment and I put together my own rock 'n' roll band (for want of a better name) called *The Versatiles* and contributed musically by playing guitar and singing. As a band we were very raw and certainly not comparable to the best of Australian rock 'n' roll groups. However we found work, mostly Saturday night dances which we ran ourselves, with me as the entrepreneur. I do not think we ever made any money and I certainly barely returned the small investment I put into the dances. What I did achieve was the experience of learning how the general public responded to musical entrepreneurial endeavours, especially the factors which attracted them to attend rock 'n' roll events, vastly different from today.



The Versatiles, 1962. John Martin (rhythm guitar), Wayne Davidson (drums), Warwick Ross (lead guitar).

David Foster

During this time I came under the influence of a drummer, David Foster¹, with whom I had been playing, who introduced me to jazz music. I accompanied him to Orange in central NSW and played with him in a small group at the *Royal Hotel* and the local golf club. I was still playing electric guitar and David encouraged me to play the bass part using the bottom four strings of the guitar. David's influence was to lead me away from rock 'n' roll to jazz and ultimately to classical music. He introduced me to an album by jazz saxophonist, Art Pepper, *Art Pepper meets the Rhythm Section* which had an immense influence on my musical tastes. Subsequently, I went with David to hear a live performance by *The Dave Brubeck Quartet* when they toured Australia in the early 1960s. This was the first time I fully understood how musicians work together to achieve an artistic outcome by virtue of their musicianship, instrumental technique and improvisational

¹ David Foster (b.1944 -), novels include *The Pure Land* (1974), winner inaugural Age Book of the Year Prize, *Plumbum* (1983), *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross* (1985), *Dog Rock: a Postal Pastoral* (1985), *Mates of Mars* (1991) and *The Glade Within the Grove* (1996).

capacities. I was inspired to be part of this artistic expression and thought the way forward was to commit to jazz performance.

On one occasion whilst playing with David Foster at the *Royal Hotel* in Orange, I was approached by a gentleman from the audience who asked if I was currently studying music. When I responded in the negative, his response was advice that I should take music seriously and undertake formal music study. He was a teacher at the **NSW Conservatorium of Music** and offered to teach me classical piano. The notion that I might become studious about anything, and especially classical music, was of great amusement to my band colleagues and David introduced the sentiment that I would not last more than six months and dared me to follow up on the offer. I accepted that challenge, went back to Sydney and started learning the piano from **A.M.E.B. Preliminary Grade One**. I continued working for six months on the basic early levels and subsequently transferred my lessons to another teacher who took me to fifth-grade. Later that year I transferred to teacher Gordon Watson², then applied for, and received, a scholarship to study the double bass. Gordon Watson inspired me to look into musical areas I had hitherto ignored or did not understand.

Studying the Double Bass

The notion of studying the double bass arose from the need to fulfill the mandatory obligation for a Conservatorium student to study two instruments. However after a few months of study I became fascinated with the bass, especially its function in jazz ensembles, and with my drummer friend Dave established a small trio with an American pianist who was living temporarily in Sydney. It was during this period I realized the immense talent David Foster possessed, not only as a musician but as a science student and creative thinker. At the time David was studying science at Sydney University, composition with Ray Hanson³ at the Conservatorium, and was interested in writing novels. In due course all of these commitments developed substantially. He completed a Doctorate in science which was followed by a world trip lecturing on his area of expertise. Some years later David developed a successful career as an Australian writer.

In retrospect I can see the influences that surrounded me were of such depth and high-quality, I was bound to benefit from their contributions to my life. My double bass teacher, Charles Gray, had been a member of the first English chamber orchestra, The Boyd Neel Orchestra⁴, and after his arrival in Australia was the principal double bass of the **Sydney Symphony Orchestra** a position he held during my time of student study with him. Charles' influence on me was good

² Gordon Watson AM (1921-1999), Australian classical pianist and teacher. Taught at Sydney Conservatorium of Music from 1964, retiring as Head of the Keyboard Department in 1986.

³ Raymond Hanson AM (1913-1976), Australian composer and lecturer in composition at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music.

⁴ Established by conductor and academic, Louis Boyd Neel (1905-1981), made its debut in London in June 1933. Toured Australia, New Zealand, Canada and USA from 1947. Later renamed Philomusica of London.



The Boyd Neel Orchestra with Charles Gray, double bass, 1933.

for two reasons. Firstly, it was not centred on an academic basis and, secondly, he was a man with vast experience of some of the icons of 20th-century music. As a member of the Boyd Neel Orchestra he was part of the development of the music of Benjamin Britten and Vaughan Williams, premiering many of their works in the 1930s. His understanding of the role of the double bass within the orchestral environment was immense, backed up by substantial firsthand experience with good international conductors and orchestras in the United Kingdom.

After a year of study with Charles, I was fully committed to the double bass and a possible career in music as a double bassist. There were, of course, huge gaps in my musical education needing to be filled, but despite the fact that the Conservatorium would not admit a double bass student into the diploma course, I had access to some fine teachers with immense practical knowledge and experience. These teachers, in my opinion, were prepared to give of their time and knowledge over and above that which was expected of them. These influences stood

me in good stead later on when I embarked on my musical activities in the United Kingdom. George Humphrey in particular. He took on the role of filling the holes in my musical education by providing me with one-on-one lessons to address essential theoretical issues as they arose throughout my study. Since I did not have the benefit of structured classes in history and harmony, this was invaluable and allowed me the opportunity to keep pace with my colleagues, all of whom were either in teaching or performance diploma courses.

I began at the Conservatorium in 1962 and left in 1965. During that period I concentrated on getting my bass technique to the highest level I could achieve, necessitating a commitment of up to six hours practice on the instrument per day. I did not own a good-quality instrument but there were two at the Conservatorium available to students. Consequently, I attended every day to gain access to one of those instruments upon which I could practice. Considering my very bad



financial position, I made the most of the opportunities presented simply because, if a student showed commitment, my teachers were interested, experienced, knowledgeable, and committed. My interest in jazz and limited experience in jazz related music assisted in me obtaining casual work in small dance bands throughout Sydney. I secured a regular Saturday night engagement at Manly Rugby Union Club which paid enough to see me through the week if I lived frugally and conserved my spending.

First Work Opportunities

In 1965 I was offered a job in the Bull 'n' Bush theatre restaurant band in Sydney⁵. This was full-time, six nights a week with an acceptable salary, my first real income!!! The Trio in which I worked was led by pianist, Sybil Graham, who wrote the score with Jim Walleth (Associate Musical Composer) for a theatrical revue, *A Cup of Tea, a Bex and a Good Lie Down*, staged from 18 September 1965 at the Phillip Street Theatre⁶. It was an immense success, playing to full houses throughout its entire run of 18 months including touring. Playing for this production was extremely educational for me. I learnt how the techniques of a good script, impeccable timing and flexible delivery combined to deliver the success of a show. I admit this depth of understanding did not occur to me until much later in life, but I believe, when I was involved in music management in the UK, it helped me with the solution of some difficult problems.

By 1967 I had a reasonable income and could assist my mother financially, but it was clear there was no

Warwick Ross (double bass) with Carl Sampson (guitar), July 1962

⁵ The Bull 'n' Bush, East Sydney: "for 20 years offered a singalong with a jovial host and costumed songstresses. It lost popularity after the sudden death of its long time host Noel Brophy in 1983 and closed soon after." (Currency Press *Companion to Theatre*, editor Philip Parsons, 1995, p.588)

⁶ *A Cup of Tea, A Bex and A Good Lie Down*, written by John McKellar, directed by William Orr, featuring the talents of comics Ruth Cracknell, Gloria Dawn, Reg Livermore and Barbara Wyndon, was one of the most successful intimate revues presented at the Phillip Street Theatre between 1961 and 1989.



The Bull 'n' Bush trio, 1965: Peter Pearcy (piano), Warwick Ross (double bass) and John Monterey (drums).

ladder to climb and no career progression visible in my unqualified musical condition. I was without the benefit of an academic qualification, which might have guaranteed long-term regular employment, but I did have hard earned experience in the field as a performer. It seemed to me I needed to obtain some widely recognized credentials. At the time the major employment for classical musicians was the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and a newly formed Elizabethan Trust Opera Ballet Orchestra. Both these orchestras were considered by the **Musicians' Union of Australia** to be full-time permanent opportunities for professional musicians.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), who managed the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, had set up a program of training for young musicians to prepare them for entry into the symphony orchestras throughout Australia. I auditioned successfully for the newly created ABC National Training Orchestra and commenced work with them in 1967 which required attendance five days a week. Within the orchestra were some extremely talented young musicians destined

to hold positions in the ABC orchestras in the future. My time there was beneficial as our entire time was spent playing orchestral repertoire and preparing some of that repertoire for public concerts.

