

Ray Jones

Singer and library
owner

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Interviewer: Robyn Buchanan

Interview available on CD



Ray Jones - publicity photo for ABC concert tour

Track 01

My father came from Wales as a lad - he couldn't speak English at first, it was all Welsh, but he soon overcame that. He was very musical, particularly for brass bands. He was a cornet player himself and it became almost one of his great loves in life.

There was a band here at the time, not a very experienced band but struggling and over the years my father raised, organised and built up what became known as the Ipswich Vice-Regal Band into the Australian champion band.

I think they maintained that - to my knowledge they won at Ballarat and places like that. In those days brass bands were very, very popular and it became champion of Australia at least six times. It was mostly from Ipswich players, though my father was ruthless in this respect, he was determined to build up a band of big reputation for Ipswich. It was the time of great depression and my father in his work - he was a salesman with the State Government Insurance Office - knew most of the people who employed people. He was very popular with people and had a very good personality. And where ever he found across Australia a very special player - it could have been in Perth or Darwin or anywhere - and he was out of work, my father - if I may use this word - "pinched" them and got in touch with this person who was playing in a band up there and offered them a job down here.

So, in many ways the Vice Regal Band was built up of champions from various parts of Australia, though in the main, they were from Ipswich. Outstanding people - they were quite famous - and it became really and truly Australia's finest band and that existed for quite a long time.

Not satisfied with that, before an eisteddfod (I think they were called an eisteddfod in those days) he would employ one of Australia's leading conductors or musicians, brass band men ...one famous one was Ossie Summerton ... would come up here in be in Ipswich for about a month putting the band through its paces. It was very organised in a lot of ways. It was a huge success, and that was how it was done. He was a very good organiser. It was a magnificent band, it was known right throughout Australia.

Interviewer: They must have taken their playing very seriously.

Yes, it was a big thing in those days, a brass band.

Interviewer: Do you remember him practising at home?

No, he didn't play in the band. He wanted to keep away from that side. He was completely organising because he felt if he belonged to the band, it would create - human



Ipswich City Vice-Regal Band in 1923. Will Jones (Ray's father) is in the second row, far right wearing a suit.

nature being what it was - it could create little difficulties. He built it up from a very small band into Australia's greatest band for quite some years.

Interviewer: *Did you every play a brass instrument yourself?*

No. As a matter of fact, this is intimate really, but my father was so busy and was out such a lot that my mother used to find that he was out too often really for the sake of the children. Dad wanted me to join the band but my mother was against it because she realised it would take up too much of my time when I should be studying. So I didn't go into the band at all. I would like to have, but still, singing was my aptitude.

Interviewer: *What sort of singing did you do?*

I was a tenor and I remember people used to comment on my voice and the quality of my voice right from childhood. I found it very easy, singing was so easy. By the time I'd gone through and got older, I did most sort of singing - operatic, musical comedy, all that sort of thing.

I didn't actually perform a lot. In Ipswich there was not much opportunity in those days. There wasn't a decent piano in Ipswich in those days - the Town Hall didn't have a piano, well they did but you couldn't call it a piano. And so, they were handicapped in that way.

Interviewer: *What date was this?*

Well, I was in my teens then and I was born in 1907. Ipswich was only a small place then and we had come through a very serious depression. The workshops and the mines, of course, were what made Ipswich.

What kept us before the public eye right throughout Queensland I suppose - was the music, choirs.

Most of the choirs came from Welsh people. What started Ipswich was the mines and a lot of Welsh miners came out here and the Welsh are noted for their singing. It was the Welsh that really started a choir, which later became the Blackstone-Ipswich Cambrian Choir. That's where all the Welsh people were, in Blackstone. There were some lovely voices. That started a famous choir and it was the choir and the band that brought Ipswich into the world of Australian music.

Interviewer: *Did you sing with the choir yourself?*

I joined the choir when my wife was conducting it, not before. As a matter of fact, I didn't learn singing with a singing teacher. Mine was a natural voice and gradually developed. When my wife took over the Cambrian choir, I joined the choir then. And I found that being a soloist, I could not adapt myself to choir singing because you had various voices beside you. My way of singing didn't quite suit. I just couldn't adapt myself to it. So I was in it a while, but I didn't really stay.

Track 02

Interviewer: *You said you didn't really sing in Ipswich. Did you sing in Brisbane?*

Yes. I joined the ABC. I went for an audition and they claimed me and I did a lot of work for the ABC. As a matter of fact, I was quite successful and got to be discovered by a well known musician who used to compose for me. Then the ABC used to send me to various places for concerts, one particular one happened to be at a big regatta or something in Townsville. They had a lovely choir, and being away from a capital city,



Ray and Nancy Jones on the verandah of their home "Mayorene" in Roderick Street, 1985

they really enjoyed their music and their singing up there. They were having this big regatta or whatever they call them (I've just forgotten) and I was sent up as guest artist and my wife, who was my accompanist.

I had an amazing success, I really did. The Wintergarden Theatre it was and it was packed. They really loved their music. I was the chief artist and I was down for three appearances to sing three songs. I finished up singing 29 - they wouldn't let me go and eventually the bus driver came and said we can't wait any longer.

Now, that was very definitely wrong of me to be boasting like that, but it was such a surprise really. That could never have happened in Ipswich or Brisbane.

The next day going down the street they would pull you up and say "You're the singer". I used to go in and buy some drinks for people who had taken us for a drive in the car and they wouldn't take anything for the drinks. They were absolutely, really hospitable. They really gave me a great time. Coming home, at Home Hill, it was two o'clock in the morning I think the train arrived. There was a crowd from Townsville and those places waiting for the train - this was about two o'clock in the morning! They had fruit and flowers to give us. Oh, it was amazing. You'd never find that anywhere else. But that's just so typical of them, and they had such a beautiful choir. But that was really quite a thrill. That was a long time ago. I was only 28 years of age then, so it was a long time ago.

Interviewer: *Did other artists travel with you?*

At Townsville, they had other artists, other chief artists. The ABC used to be very good to me. I got a letter from ...his name is very well known but I can't recall it, he was the head of the ABC in those days... asking me if I would like to do a tour of Australia - all the stations right throughout. But at that time, I was running a very successful business and I would've been away too frequently, too long, so I couldn't do it.

Interviewer: *Recording for the ABC, did you go down to the ABC studios? Did you do any ABC concerts in Ipswich?*

I went down to the ABC studios to record. I didn't do any ABC concerts in Ipswich, no, for some reason or other. It was quite backward in those days. With Brisbane, you know. Even so, Brisbane didn't have a Conservatorium in those days and even Brisbane was backward. It took a long time for Queensland to come up.

Interviewer: *So it wasn't possible to be a professional singer in those days? You had to rely on your own business?*

You couldn't have made a living out of singing in those days. Ipswich actually turned out some very good singers -- a girl called Buchan, she had a very fine voice and she did alright. She did professional singing through Australia and another girl, Josie Bytheway, a lovely soprano who went overseas. So Ipswich turned out some very good singers and some very good musicians, my wife for instance.

Interviewer: *Did you ever sing on the Ipswich radio station 4IP?*

Yes. I used to do a literary talk once a week on 4IP and I used to sometimes do a song or two, a bit of extra work for me. The studio was up over Johnson's Garage. The program was live to air.

Track 03

Interviewer: *Tell me about starting your business in Ipswich.*

It was a time of depression, my father kept us at school - I studied at two. I did my senior year at Christian Brothers. There were some fine people amongst them.

I think I wasn't a very good student so my father sent me to the Brothers. He knew one of them, Brother Carroll. I did my senior there and then I had to come away and there was no work. I did some reporting for the QT, freelance. But I had to do something. In a magazine of my mother's there was a little article about an old man who wanted something to do and started a travelling library. He had a lot of books and started around the neighbourhood. So I thought, well, I'll do something like this, I was at my wit's end. I worked at Beirne Ltd for some months but it was very difficult. And I started off on a bike and a port. It was hard work.

Unfortunately the Municipal Library in the old Memorial Hall (two very lovely ladies were looking after it) with the Council. Books were very expensive - there wasn't enough money to make it a success although it was a fairly good place.

I must have gone to hundreds of houses. I got a truck and that sort of thing. Then, eventually, I started in Ipswich and took the whole top floor of the National Bank. From then I had a very successful library. We were open every day except Sundays of course, and at night time up until 8 o'clock four nights a week. I had about six girls working for me. It became a very popular place. I was able to add books and books. Books were my life really and I knew what the people wanted. It turned out to be a success.

I think I could mention this, the Deputy Mayor came to me one occasion and he said "I'm afraid our place is too far out, down at the Memorial Hall" and he said "We are not going to continue, would you like to take the managementship of it over and build it up?" - which was a remarkable compliment of course. I said "Are you stuck for funds?" and he said "Oh, very much so" and I said I couldn't under those circumstances. Over the years, it built up again. It wasn't anybody's fault - it was just Ipswich in those days was a scattered place. My going from house to house built [my library] up.

Interviewer: *I remember very clearly when I was a child, my parents used to come into your library. We used to go down town on Friday or Saturday evening, you would listen to the Salvation Army band, window-shop, then go to Ray Jones Library.*

That is marvellous, it became a place where people used to meet.

Interviewer: *One thing I remember, you used to have interesting book covers.*

I learnt a bit about business, when I worked at Beirne's. One thing I did learn was that the customer was always right. I said to my girls you can talk as long as you like but you as long as you bring them back here, be cheerful to them, and help them pick their books.

Vermin was always a worry where lots of books were concerned so to make sure that people understood to keep them clean, and I did have people coming in spraying regularly, I got an idea. I had a lovely, particularly good cover, attractive colour (the Wintergarden paid for the advertising on it) and on it I had "Wherever you look, there's a Ray Jones Library Book in the new hygienic cover" with underlines under "hygienic". All those little things helped to build up, you see. In business it's keeping your name in front of the public all the time.

Nancy and I were in Melbourne where there was a conference for one of the big eisteddfods down there, I saw people coming in with these pink coloured books with Ray Jones on it.

Interviewer: *They were a very distinctive pink, I remember. I was too little to read the books at that time, but I used to read the "pictures program" very carefully on the cover.*

Yes, the program was there. So actually, I had a quite interesting life there and it made my living for me.

Interviewer: *How long did you run the library?*

For 30 years, I suppose. Probably more.

I used to sell books as well to schools, and I used to import books. I got in with the University, sometimes there'd be books advertised in magazines or something that'd come in. I got to know one of the professors down there quite well. I used to import books for the University, and they came from all over the world.

Interviewer: *Was there an interest in books and literature in Ipswich? Were there many writers in Ipswich?*

No, lots of people liked writing, but not highly successful. I don't know about the *Queensland Times*, it was so long ago, but it was a popular paper.

But they loved to read, they enjoyed their reading.

Track 04

Interviewer: *And tell me about Nancy. When did you meet Nancy?*

It was when I joined the choir. Unfortunately, I'm not a musician, I'm a singer. Now, I'll have to describe that. A singer need not necessarily be a knowledgeable musician. It's better to have learned the piano so that you can read music and that sort of thing. I'd had a few lessons on

the piano. There's a difference between an instrumentalist and a singer. A singer doesn't have to do that because with his voice - he can learn the music so easily, and the accompanist helps you.

I joined the Cambrian Choir and Nancy was the accompanist. When I heard her play, her playing was really beautiful. From then on, I used to go to her to learn my songs with her, and our friendship grew from that. We had a wonderful friendship for 55 years.

Nancy was born in England, she was seven when she came out here. She went to a teacher by the name of Mrs Ponti, whose father was a pupil of List and there was another name mentioned, one of the famous names anyhow. She was right in the music thing. So she brought to Ipswich, the continental method of teaching the piano. Now, there are people who would say "well, there's no such thing". That's not true. There is a tradition and the singing masters over there would have this tradition behind them so Mrs Ponti gave to Nancy her knowledge of that sort of teaching.

Our teachers teach it, but in those days there was no way students could learn very much from Ipswich because there was no Conservatorium. But Mrs Ponti had this knowledge, you see.

But Nancy had natural talent, it was an outstanding talent. Her sight-reading was exceptional. And she decided, as she got older, that the great opportunities for people who are talented - they must go overseas. Well, in her lifetime, I think she raised enough money to send five outstanding students overseas, and one called Margaret Barton, she is world famous. They've all done very well. Of course, there were no opportunities here without a Conservatorium. Eventually, they brought teachers from overseas. Our teachers did alright, but they didn't have the chance to have the knowledge but Mrs Ponti, she really had the art of teaching.

Everywhere she went, Nancy was received very highly. When she won her scholarship to London, she would have been about seventeen, I suppose. When she went in, it was a very hot day, she had to have ice blocks on her wrists, in the Technical College there, she had a two-hour program from memory. She had only started and they pulled up their chairs and sat down beside her, and they were very interested. They told Mrs Ponti to keep it to herself, but they were awarding Nancy a scholarship to London.

Unfortunately, the scholarship was not for the boarding or travel and there wasn't the money [*to allow her to accept it*]. The examiner told Mrs Ponti and the headmaster of the College - it's said that unless you can play Bach the way Bach should be played, you will never be considered to be absolutely well up in piano playing.

Well, they said "If this girl goes over and plays Bach the way she played for us this morning, she'll become world famous."

Another little story - we were married for some time-



Nancy Jones

one day Nancy was playing and she said to me "You like Bach don't you?"

I said "I'm not sure, he sounds like five-finger exercises to me.

"Oh, does he," she says. "You'd better come over here!"

After about three months of playing and listening to Bach, and explaining it to me, I suddenly realised you've got to know music to get the full beauty of it. It's useless listening to something unless you know it. Well, she opened my eyes.

Mrs Nancy Jones - Biographical Notes

This was compiled from biographical notes read at a gathering of former students and friends in November 1986. The function marked her retirement after 66 years as a music teacher.

Nancy White was born in North Seaton, Northumberland, England in 1907. Her parents were Thomas and Elizabeth White. Her father was a keen amateur musician, able to play both stringed and brass instruments and fond of vocal music and choral singing. He sang in the church choir and played cello in the orchestra of Ashington, near North Seaton.

Nancy's maternal grandparents named Pyle migrated to Queensland, They came to Ipswich and her grandfather worked for Thomas Glassie. They encouraged other

members of the family to come to Australia. Nancy's family did so when she was seven. The family first lived at Booval House, later converted into a convent, and later at Silkstone. Nancy first attended Bundamba State School.

The family bought an old Bord piano for 15 pounds and in 1916, Nancy began to learn music with Mrs Ida Ponti.

Mrs Ponti was "of French birth". Her father was a violinist who trained under Dr Podlich, who in turn was a pupil of Franz Liszt. As a girl, Mrs Ponti travelled in Europe and had experience in French, German and Italian languages. She married an Italian before coming to Australia in 1899. By 1903 she had settled in Ipswich and was teaching music.

She encouraged her pupils to love music and to work very hard. She believed in the value of examinations and said "If the competitive stimulus were removed, it would stifle ambition and the student would never rise to great heights."

Mrs Ponti encouraged Nancy to enter public competitions and she won prizes in eisteddfodau in Ipswich and a gold medal at the 1927 [Queensland?] eisteddfod at Gympie.

Nancy won her ATCL at the age of only 13. She reached Licentiate standard (LTCL) in 1924 and Fellowship standard (FTCL) in 1926 when she was 19.

She gained a LAB (now known as LRSM) with the Associated Board in 1927 and L MUs A in 1929.

In the Licentiate exam of the Royal School in 1927, she obtained the highest pass in Queensland with 192 out of 200 marks. She was offered a two-year scholarship to London but because of family circumstances, was not able to take it.

At the age of 12, Nancy had become accompanist for the Silkstone Male Choir (later to become the Silkstone Booval Choral Society under Tom Bird). She became pianist of the theatre orchestra for Bossie Martoo's Olympia Theatre, playing to accompany silent films. She later became pianist and orchestra leader for the new Wintergarden Theatre, until theatre orchestras disappeared with the advent of "talkies".

Thomas White became the conductor of the Methodist Church choir and Nancy was introduced to the pipe organ by Mrs Ivy Shenton. She sometimes deputised for Mrs Shenton, later became the organist at St Stephens Presbyterian Church for two years. She studied organ for three years with Archie Day, official organist for Brisbane City and became organist at St Pauls for 18 years.

In 1930, Isobel Minnis retired as accompanist to the Cambrian Choir and Nancy took her place. The conductor at this time was Leonard Francis. This link with the Cambrian Choir lasted more than 40 years, 30 as accompanist and 10 as conductor.

In 1939, Nancy married Ray Jones and they lived at "Mayorene" in Roderick St.

Teaching Career

Nancy began teaching at the age of 13. Her first pupil was Thelma Bickle, later Mrs Bridley, who played at the retirement function in 1986. Several Silkstone parents had said they wanted their children to play "like Nancy" and asked her to teach, Mrs Ponti encouraged her to do so - this was the time of the pupil-teacher in schools, and a young music teacher did not seem unusual.

She later opened a studio in Goleby's building in the Top of Town, and eventually taught from her home.

Her most outstanding pupil was Margaret Barton who gained her ACTL at the age of 12. She also was offered a scholarship with the Royal School of Music in London and was able to accept. She became a distinguished professional pianist and is now Mrs Stefanato and lives near Rome.

Other notable pupils include Dr Peter Roennfeldt, Peter Ingram, Leisa Risson, Mark Kruger.

Music Career

In her early 20s, Nancy and Thelma Marsh presented a classical recital in the Town hall at a concert attended by Governor Sir John Goodwin. Her last major recital was in October 1979 when she played Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto in G Minor in St Pauls Church. Between the two, she played at many functions and recitals.

She was an exceptional accompanist and was official accompanist for the Queensland Eisteddfod and in 1959, for the Australian National Eisteddfod in Canberra which included the Shell Aria Contest. She also acted as adjudicator at Eisteddfodau.

She organised Saturday morning student broadcast on Ipswich radio station 4IP and appeared herself on ABC radio.

She helped organise benefit recitals for promising students such as Mark Kruger to allow them to study overseas.

She was awarded life membership of the Queensland Eisteddfod Council, the Blackstone- Ipswich Cambrian choir, the Ipswich Junior Eisteddfod Society and the Music teachers' Association of Queensland. She was a foundation member of Ipswich Quota Club and Ipswich Little Theatre, also helping to found an orchestra for ILT.

In 1977, she was awarded a British Empire Medal for services to music and the community.