PART TWO

Second try

About ten years later, well after I'd interviewed my batch of retirees about their working lives, I decided to have a go at writing about my own working life, which had been somewhat varied. Following is what I wrote, this time about 2008:

Growing Up

"Louisa Road, Birchgrove, which runs down the spine of Long Nose Point, was not yet gentrified when I was born there in 1937 in an upstairs flat. It was solidly working class, at a time when maritime heavy industry around the waterfront was in full swing in places like Mort's Dock, several small shipyards and, of course, Cockatoo Island. Dad was a working class man, born and bred in Balmain, and Mum was a Balmain girl from a poor family as well. Their social and family networks were strong - especially Mum's. When I was three the family moved up a rung on the status ladder - over the Iron Cove Bridge to a semi-detached house in South Street, Drummoyne, where I grew up. I lived at home with my parents and my younger sister till I married when I was twenty three.

I went to Fort Street Boys' High at Petersham for my secondary schooling. It was a "selective school" in those days, and it was a bit of a feather in your cap to go there, though I could never understand what was supposed to be so crash hot about it, given my experience of it. They weren't exactly the happiest days of my life. The hierarchical male culture that held sway there only encouraged the sort of person that subsequently I've tried not to be. If you didn't choose subjects that fitted you for one of the conventional professions you were made to feel your caste position - like if you chose to do the classes in woodwork and tech. drawing that were grudgingly offered and half-heartedly taught, or gave "plumber" as your chosen future occupation (as I did to the raised eyebrows of the Careers Adviser when he interviewed me in Third Year). We constantly had it dinned into us that we were something special because we were at Fort Street. Overall, teaching methods were anything but innovative and conservatism reigned supreme. I found the overweening self-confidence of the predominantly privileged student population irksome, even though I wouldn't have described things in those terms at the time. Looking back now, I see it as an indubitably elitist educational environment. I didn't like it then, and I still don't like what the primary values they touted stand for. You can read about a couple of things that I went through at Fort Street on p45 of *The Dunny Book,* in Drawer One of the website).

I was a mediocre student (I used to think of myself as "Mr Sixty Percent"), but I managed to scrape through without actually failing anything - until the all-important Leaving Certificate, when I bombed out and only passed in three subjects out of the seven that we did then. My parents, who had been looking forward to a bit of extra money coming in when I got a job, kept their belt tightened for another year and sent me back to have another go. The second time around I got through solidly enough, though it was nothing spectacular. It was good enough to enable me to go to university later, but I suspect that in these much more competitive days now it wouldn't get me in.

After I failed the Leaving Certificate I was sent for a Vocational Guidance Test and was told that I would be best suited for a career in either architecture, journalism, or advertising. I hadn't chosen the right subjects to qualify me for entry into architecture, (not enough maths) and journalism didn't kindle much enthusiasm – mainly because I had little idea of the scope of the occupation. But advertising sounded to me then like a glamorous, varied and interesting way to earn a quid. Of course at that stage I had no ideas about advertising being a key part of our culture that subtlely (and not so subtlely) helps define our reality for us. So when I finally left school I got a job as a messenger boy in a small advertising agency

called Nichols-Cumming. Their biggest account was Lee Gordon, the cigar-smoking, sleazy, American entrepreneur who brought out the big names like Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and the like to The Big Shows at the Sydney Stadium. This would have been around the mid-1950s.

This was exactly the sort of glamorous occupation that I had fantasised about when I decided to "go into advertising". It was exciting, interesting, and a bit hectic. I was a pretty ingenuous and unsophisticated suburban kid, and leaving my girl friend sipping on a milk shake in the foyer of the Plaza Theatre at interval while I rode through the night up to Castlereagh Street on the pillion of the Smith and Miles delivery man's Harley Davidson with a locked up forme for the next day's Big Show ad cradled in the sidecar seemed like a much better job than being a salesman or an accountant. (No overtime for this sort of thing of course. But I didn't mind -- the way I saw it then, it was part of what you did to get the job done well -- part of being a responsible employee. This approach came from my Old Man, who, I now belatedly realise, instilled a whole lot more ideas into me than I realised at the time).

These were the days before television, and most of the advertising was in the press and on radio. They had a young Production Manager at Nichols-Cumming to whom I was directly responsible, and when I wasn't running messages around town he would explain the ropes to me - how to order artwork, photography, process engravings, type and repro proofs, mats and stereos and how to oversee printing jobs. In short, he introduced me to the world of printing and typography - which I found fascinating. I think I was intrigued by the combination of complex machinery (linotype machines, printing machines of various kinds), craft skills (Linotype, Ludlow and hand typesetting operations, process engraving etching skills), and aesthetic considerations (especially in typography) -- all within the adrenalin buzz and rush of tight deadlines.

After about eighteen months of doing this, catastrophe struck the agency when Lee Gordon took his business elsewhere. They were only a small outfit, an offshoot of a Melbourne agency that had been set up in Sydney mainly to service the Lee Gordon account when they won it in Melbourne a couple of years earlier, and the loss of the greater part of their billing brought them to their financial knees. The young Production Manager, my mentor, was given the boot. I was given a salary increase from twelve quid a week to eighteen quid a week and appointed in his place to handle all the agency's print production (as well as run my own messages). I thought all my birthdays had come at once -- Production Manager of an advertising agency at 19! The only trouble was that my training for the job had been rudimentary to say the least, and I was acutely aware of my youngness, greenness, and ignorance. I'd been thrown in at the deep end when I could only dogpaddle, but it was a great opportunity.

The suppliers I had to deal with - the printers' reps and the like - helped me a lot. I made no secret of my relative ignorance and was quick to ask for advice. I found it highly satisfying to get through a hectic week of complex logistical organisation and still meet most of the deadlines -- and I sure learned the rest of the ropes quickly. I had to.

Music figured in my working life for a while at one stage, and I want to digress and talk about music for a bit here. Mum had sent me to the local Catholic convent for piano lessons from the nuns when I was about nine or ten (not that we were Catholic – they just happened to be the nearest and the cheapest), but I only lasted about a year because my heart wasn't in it - I'd rather have been out playing cricket or football after school than sitting inside practising scales and exercises for the AMEB examinations. When the order of nuns changed at the convent the new teacher was of the old "rapping the knuckles with a ruler" school and my interest evaporated completely, so Mum liberated me to more conventional boyish pursuits and cut her losses with the tuition fees. Besides, in those days it was much less common for kids to learn a musical instrument than is the case today. (Mum's motivation in having me learn was "so that I would be popular at parties".)

Later, when I was delivering parcels for the chemist in my early teens, I saved enough to buy a couple of terms of piano lessons from a local teacher who taught the Shefte method,

which, although a pretty corny technique, did at least teach me the rudiments of chords and harmony. Practising was no problem when the tuition was my own decision (and when the tuition fees were coming out of my own pocket), and I think my lifelong interest in music dates from this time.

I soon realised that I needed to improve my playing technique if I was to get anywhere, so next I bought some more lessons from a more "legit" local teacher - the sort that taught young ladies elocution and prepared kids for Eistedfodd performances in music and recitation. About this time I discovered traditional jazz and it became my major hobby interest. I devoured books and magazines about it and used to go down to the old Ironworkers' Building in George Street to hear the Paramount and Port Jackson jazz bands that were in their heyday at the time. After a couple of terms with this snooty teacher I had a difference of opinion with her. I discovered that she considered the only real music to be what she called "classical" music, and when I mentioned my interest in jazz she was totally dismissive. To her, anything that wasn't "classical" was "jazz", and had no musical merit. She made no distinction between popular music, the different types of jazz, or even the rock 'n roll of Bill Haley that was becoming popular at the time. I wonder what she would have made of World Music. To me, this showed a lamentable degree of musical snobbery - ignorance even, so I decided she wasn't the teacher for me, and I left.

Back at Nichols-Cumming, as soon as I had a bit of money under my belt, I bought a secondhand trumpet and began to take lunchtime lessons from a jobbing trumpeter around town called Gerry Goodwin. My father hated the trumpet, (a raw beginner on a trumpet is no joy to the ear), and when he was around I had to practise under the eiderdown with a sock in the bell for a mute, so he couldn't hear me. Not exactly encouragement.

One of the reps who did print jobs for me was a bloke in his forties called Bob Anderson. One day he spied my trumpet case in my office, and we began to talk about music. It transpired that he had been a professional alto sax player around town when he was younger, working as a full time musician with the likes of Frank Coughlan at the Trocadero. He mentioned that there was a production assistant about my age at George Patterson's who played guitar, called Bill Pownall, and when he learned that I played a bit of piano as well and was interested in jazz, we arranged to meet and play together.

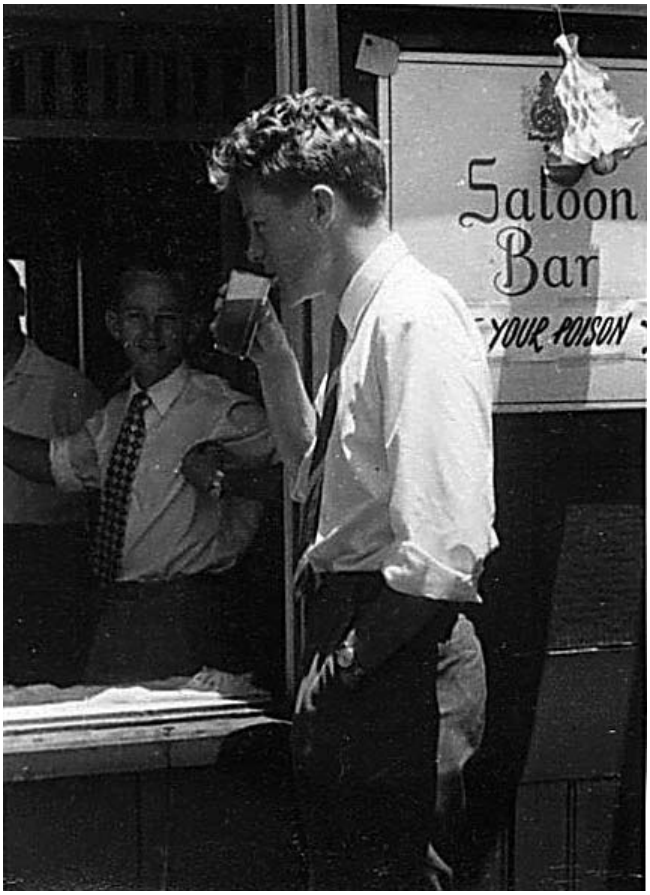
Bob lived at Dundas, and the memory is still vivid of the first time we got together there. I was sitting at his piano and nobody had yet played a note, when I innocently made the observation: "I really like trad jazz, but I'm buggered if I can work out what this modern jazz stuff is all about." (I was an avid listener to Eric Child's Saturday morning programme Rhythm Unlimited, which was just about the only radio programme at the time that took jazz seriously.) I saw Bob and Bill exchange meaningful looks, and there was an awkward silence. Gently they explained to me that to them, trad jazz was a bit simplistic, and it was modern jazz that they were into - and it soon became obvious that they were into it in a fairly advanced and proficient way.

It's still a mystery to me why they persevered with me, and kept inviting me along to sessions. My pianistic skills were really quite rudimentary, and my musical knowledge was very patchy. Anyway, they introduced me to the wonders of modern jazz - "progressive" jazz as it was often called then. It was as though I had been unknowingly living in a musically constricted space, and they opened a door out of it for me and gave me a glimpse of a world of musical expression and creativity beyond that I found quite breathtaking in its extent. I still feel like that about it.

My interest in music burgeoned, and I enrolled with Ramsay Pennicuick at The Conservatorium to try to fast-track my playing technique. The Conservatorium in those days was very highbrow in its approach - narrow, even, by today's standards, and he was about the only teacher there who was at all sympathetic to any other forms of music that weren't from the highbrow repertoire, and quite a few of the established jazz musos of the time used to go to him to improve their technique. My interest in the trumpet abated - it's an unforgiving instrument to try to play, and piano offered me more immediate musical rewards - so I swapped my trumpet lessons for some tuition in modern jazz harmony.

As well as playing guitar, Bill Pownall doubled on five-string acoustic bass (electric basses

The Bob Anderson Quartet in the Methodist piano teacher's studio



At a process engravers' Xmas party not long after I was promoted to Production Manager

Soon after I joined Lintas

were not yet very much on the scene), and we added a drummer to the group and used to practice every week in a musty third floor walk-up room in an old building where Australia Square now stands. We rented it from a very straightlaced Methodist music teacher for 8/6d a week. One night sticks in my memory: we'd augmented the group with a valve trombone and a tenor sax, and we were jamming away - and drinking our grog out of the Methodist music teacher's teacups (grog was de rigeur, of course). When we went to rinse the cups out at the end of the night we found to our dismay that the water to the building had been turned off, because downstairs they were doing night repairs to the water system. One of the conditions of renting the room was that we have no booze there (the music teacher was strictly Methodist teetotal) and we didn't want to risk losing the premises, which were cheap and convenient, being downtown, and had a certain appropriately seedy and musty charm. We ended up rinsing away the smell of alcohol from his teacups in the cistern of the toilet one floor down.

After several months of playing together we'd built up a sizeable repertoire of standards that we could play passably well. Most of the "passably" came from my input - the others were real pros and very much carried me, I fear. We began to do gigs around the place - weddings, pub jobs, dances - we even played the Bel Air in Cooper Park at Bellevue Hill. This was before El Rocco had started as a jazz venue, and the Bel Air was a rather ritzy coffee shop sort of place where the musos used to come and jam after their gig for the night had finished. No-one got paid - they were happy to do it because they could play whatever they liked, and many of Sydney's best could be heard there after midnight. (When we played there we went on early in the night, while the Names were still doing their commercial gigs.) There was another place a bit like this at the time, The Mocambo - a coffee shop at Newtown. I sat in with a small group there once as well - but again, appropriately, early in the night.

I registered with an agent (Wally Norman), and I began to work regularly playing suburban gigs. I'd ring Wally up on a Thursday and he'd tell me where I was to play on the weekend. I got to play at a diverse range of places this way. One week I'd be in the back parlour of a Surry Hills pub on a piano that sounded like a hurdy gurdy and the next I'd be on a white Steinway at a wedding reception place, or at a fishermen's club accompanying drunks who wanted me to accompany them while they whistled somethingorother. "Paying your dues", they used to call it. The general standard of musicianship was pretty low in those days - especially compared to today. It wasn't uncommon to find that the bass player that turned up knew no music and simply plucked away at the strings randomly - whatever the key we happened to be in. The public didn't seem to notice - which is probably why I kept getting jobs, too, since I was no Oscar Peterson. But as a part of my money-earning working life, music began to provide me with some pocket money.

But back to advertising, which was my main occupation: After a couple of years at Nichols-Cumming I moved to a couple of similar jobs in bigger agencies for more money, and when I was 21 I joined Lintas, a large agency that was part of the Unilever empire. There I moved on from the production side of the business to the client contact side. I was called a Junior Account Executive. Lintas had just moved into Unilever House (gone now) down at the Quay. I can remember working late there one summer, on the phone to a client and looking out of the seventh floor window at the sun setting behind the Harbour Bridge, puffing on a Temple Bar and feeling terribly cool. I suspect that these days I wouldn't much like the sort of trendy upstart that I was then. But at the time I thought it was great -- very Madison Avenue and with-it."

That's as far as I got. Reading it over some weeks later again I found it fairly unsatisfactory, and I abandoned it with the note: "Er, look, I suspect that this is becoming the very sort of boring self-indulgence that I feared it might be when I first began it. "