

Quiet Achiever

As any mother will tell you, it's the quiet ones you have to watch.

And so it was with the Skyhooks, one of the supergroups that spearheaded the Australian rock music renaissance of the 1970s. While the freaky stage garb and antics of Shirley, Red, Freddy and Bongo kidnapped the audience's attention, it was the conservative-looking Greg Macainsh's songs that quietly seduced them.

As the band's principal songwriter, Macainsh wove insightful lyrics into tunes you just couldn't get out of your head, providing something for everyone. At a time when popular music as social comment was edging towards a well-deserved retirement after its gruelling outing of the 1960s and early 70s, Macainsh managed to slip evocative musings into his lyrics with masterful subtlety. Songs like *Horror Movie*, *Ego is not a Dirty Word* and *Living in the 70s* are now the stuff of legend with fans and critics alike.

But nothing lasts forever, so when the stage lights dimmed for the last time, Macainsh diversified into writing for other artists like Ray Burgess (remember *Sad Rock 'n' Roll?*), then moved into executive positions with the APRA (Australian Performing Rights Association) Board, and the PPCA royalty collection agency.

And then he went back to uni.

'I'm not entirely sure [what prompted my return to study]', says Macainsh. 'I'd been thinking about studying something, and with what I was doing [with APRA], Law was one of the most practical courses to do. So I applied and sat an entrance exam, and lo and behold – I got in!'

Being accepted for the course was only the first surprise of many. 'Returning to study was a shock to the system,' Macainsh recalls, 'because as one gets older, one likes to do things well or not at all, so it wasn't always satisfying. But we all make mistakes at times - that's how we learn - so you've just got to keep at it; not for the glory, but for the long haul.'

And a long haul it was – six years, in fact, studying on a part-time basis. 'I don't think I could have done it at a faster pace,' he reflects. 'I watched people attempting to do it quickly, and they'd be fine for a couple of years, then you wouldn't see them for a couple of years. For me it was slow and steady.'

'For instance, it takes two to three years to learn to read a legal judgement and understand what it's about, because it's incredibly dense stuff. And some of the judgements we studied were written two hundred years ago; language has changed a lot since then.'

As has society – in more ways than we consciously realise. ‘People used to settle their disputes with swords – [whereas] the law is about resolution through language,’ Macainsh explains. ‘The law is language pushed to its absolute zenith, because it is trying to make sense of totally opposing concepts – while a judgement can make perfect sense, the opposite can also make perfect sense. And it’s not about right answers per se; it’s about how well you can argue a particular case, because you will always be on one side of the equation or the other.’

Macainsh’s proficiency with language as a songwriter provided unorthodox and perhaps unexpected pre-vocational training for his legal studies. ‘Writing songs and writing essays are both about intention,’ he explains. ‘With songs, the chorus is what you want to prove, and the verses contain the evidence to support it. Legal writing is the same – you make a point, then provide the evidence to back it up. Although the advantage with writing songs is that you don’t have to put footnotes at the bottom!’

‘I did consistently well with my essay writing, and came up with some original thoughts, which sometimes seems a pretty amazing thing. And I enjoyed being able to put a bit of my own style into my essays.’

For Macainsh the essay-writing, an element of his chosen assessment option, provided a deeper insight into the content of his studies. ‘I found I really got to understand the subject in a much better way if I wrote an essay and spent time researching it,’ he says. ‘But I had the luxury of doing it part-time; it’d be almost impossible [to do that] if you were working as well.’

Macainsh’s passion for his university experience, and indeed the learning process itself, is infectious. ‘It was an education about oneself as well,’ he enthuses. ‘Life is about expanding and doing new things, and I’ve found my life works well when I’m learning something new. It’s great for one’s mental health, and really, education is the best thing you can spend your money on, because no-one can ever take it off you.’

‘And it was great to be among a bunch of young people who have their own take on the world, and to be able to experience the perspectives of a new generation. Some of my friends would ask me: “How can you stand being around twenty-two-year olds all day?” But I found the younger students incredibly sharp and inspiring.’

So, with a degree in Law under his arm, half a lifetime’s experience in business and a continuing passion for the power and complexities of language, what’s next for this Greg-of-all-trades?

‘Right now I’m taking a couple of months off, catching up on personal administration,’ he says. ‘It’s been a while since I’ve had the freedom to do that, because when studying, one always has something hanging over one’s head. Then the next phase will be to get my practicing certificate, either by way of an articulated clerkship or attending the College of Law.’

The step from featuring in magazine articles to writing legal articles is significant, but something Macainsh has no regrets about. 'The trick with fame is to let go of it, not become beholden to it,' he says. 'These days I tend to look back and enjoy a lot of the things that occurred [in the Skyhooks days]; whereas at the time it was a lot of hard work and it wasn't always so pleasant. But it gave a lot of people a lot of pleasure, and if you can do that in life in any small way, it's got to be good.'