

PLOD ESSAY: Sam Joins the Citizen's Band, pt 2

In order to participate in the 1957 South Street band Competition we had to stay in Ballarat for two nights. I had never slept away from home before and the very idea of sleeping in a hotel was very exciting, a new adventure for me, and I suppose for all the other



Wonthaggi kids in the band. I remember arriving in Ballarat and being so impressed by the cast-iron adornments on the balconies of the buildings. The old hotel that we were to sleep in had a big wooden staircase that fascinated me and creaked as we climbed our way to our room while the men went to the bar. When we climbed down again, the Preston City Band, which was in A grade, was rehearsing in the big lounge. What a treat it was to hear them playing! I remember most vividly the quality of the sound of their soprano cornet player, who later that night, somewhat under the influence, started playing softly to himself, unaware of the spell that he was casting on a young mind or the soft tears that he had aroused either. What a treat the whole trip was for both Peter and me. Our first holiday ever away from home, and it did not cost Mum or Dad a penny. The band, better said the Wonthaggi community, paid for everything – our tuition, uniform, travel, meals and hotel expenses, with lollies and other sweets handed out during the trip thrown in. This was my Australia! I did not know at the time how exceptional all this was. I hate selling raffle tickets. Being in the band in the fifties meant that I always had raffle tickets to sell. Nowadays I can afford to buy all the raffle tickets that I am given to sell. In the 1950's this was impossible, so when I had raffle tickets to sell I very reluctantly went around to all my usual victims, always with the feeling that I was embarrassing them into buying tickets. The results of the South Street competition made it so much easier for me to sell tickets and for my victims to buy them.

The next year was also a very busy one for the band and Peter and I never missed either a practice or an outing. Mr Abraham, the owner of the Melbourne Furnishing Company, where I worked every Saturday morning and during school holidays, like his father before him, was a keen supporter of the band and I was always allowed to leave the shop to go and play. He never docked me a penny. After the Hospital Garden Party, a big event that year, the Band Concert and other outings, the South Street Band Competition came round again. We were now in C Grade, but confident that we would win. For

this competition Matt asked me if I would join the Bass section to make up the traditional minimum of four basses. I really wanted to be promoted to playing the euphonium, but with Vern Garth and Jock Orr playing I had no hope. So reluctantly, I joined 'Darby' Bremner, Syd Lumsden and Sim Gage, to form a well-balanced bass section. For some reason I was able to produce a full and rounded sound on the Eb bass, a much better sound

than with any other instrument that I had ever played. The problem was that when Mr Bremner could not give us a lift to the band room, we had to walk and after a while the bass got pretty heavy, and when it rained it was even heavier since I did not have a case for it and it was much easier to carry the instrument with the bell up. Peter and I were usually famished when we got home. During that year Mum and Dad had made a lot of salami, which was hanging from hooks on the kitchen ceiling to mature. It was actually quite a beautiful sight as these thick, small bunches of salami, which almost covered the ceiling, hung down like thin bats from the roof of a cave, there were so many of them. Returning home that winter the temptation was too great. 'Mum won't notice if we take one,' Peter and I agreed. I bent down, Peter got on my shoulders and with a pair of scissors he cut one down. We devoured it before we could get caught. We fooled ourselves that by carefully selecting the sausage to be eaten and then rearranging the remaining ones we would fool Mum, but it did not take Mum long to work out what was happening so we had to return to making our traditional Dagwood sandwiches again.

The 1958 South Street competition was one that the bandsmen and women who were there will never forget. It did not begin very well for Arthur Constable. When we made a toilet stop near a thick piece of bush along the way, nobody bothered to check if everybody was on the bus. Fortunately somebody looked out of the rear window and in the distance he saw a squat figure running after the bus and waving his arms. We kids thought it was hilarious; Arthur, of course was not amused, but he was too nice a bloke to say anything. We were confident when we arrived, and even more confident when we left the hotel the next morning in bright spring sunshine. Full of high hopes we lined up for the inspection. We lost only one point. Hopes of victory increased. But, as we lined up to go into the arena for the march proper, the sky ominously became darker and darker. By the time that we were ready to start the march the sky above the arena was tense and very black. It was clear to everybody that

it was about to burst. In the silence just before the storm, Alf Kiely lifted his baton and blew his whistle. As if the command was for the sky and not for us the cloud burst. After two or three paces it was a downpour. Apparently an official made an appeal to stop the march but the judge ordered the band to keep going. We were soon soaked to the skin. My bass filled with water, as did all the other instruments with the bell up, and gargled as we played; the sound of the drums was muffled as the tops of the drums filled with water and then one of the skins burst; we could hardly see Alf Kiely, our Drum Major or his baton and we could not hear his whistle; in the noise and fury of the storm we could barely hear each other. But we kept on going and the judges kept on judging. Needless to say we did not do very well. We lost twelve points in the first 100 yards, our strong point, and finished the march section of the competition 19 points down. The judge would hear no protest. The points stood.

With our shoes and uniforms saturated, we were taken back to our hotel, where we changed into our street clothes. Our uniforms were taken to the Warragul hospital in a vain attempt to have them dried for the evening performance. After lunch the competition continued. We gained third place in both the Hymn and Test Piece sections, but the first three placements were within a point or two of each other. The Own Choice was still to be played in the evening. The atmosphere over dinner was quite jovial as we told the story of the march each from his own point of view and congratulated each other on how well we had done in the afternoon sessions despite the experience. Not even the news that our uniforms had not been dried and that we would have to play in our street clothes dampened our spirits. We played really well and won the Own choice, a piece by Rossini, if I remember well. We did not manage to make up the points we had lost in the march but we came a close second in the aggregate. In our minds, however, we had won. We were definitely 'C' grade standard. We young people sang and joked all the way home much to the annoyance of some adults who were nursing massive hangovers.

The next year was also a busy one for the band with regular outings and the annual concert in May. For two weeks in April there was no practice since most of the instruments had been sent to Melbourne to be serviced; some had dents taken out of them and others had to be re-plated. The Women's Auxiliary raised the funds to pay for this and for the painting of our tired old band-room. As the South Street Band competition in October neared, we intensified our preparation. At the end of September we participated in the Heidelberg 'C' grade Band Contest and came second in the

aggregate behind the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Band, in front of bands from Williamstown, Dandenong, Bendigo, Brighton and Footscray. As the Powlett Express reported this was 'a good omen' for Ballarat.

After another very successful Variety Concert, in the Union Theatre on October 14th, which featured famous TV personalities of the time such as Janet Crawford and Frank Rich, we set out for Ballarat confident of success despite the fact that we had lost a few players from the previous year such as our excellent cornet player, Louise Fuller. We were confident that the kids who had taken their places would once again rise to the occasion. They did, and we won the Hymn section, but we marched very poorly- we scored 14 points fewer than Mildura, the eventual champions. Our hopes of winning 'C' grade and being promoted to 'B' grade would have to wait quite a few years.

I continued to play with the band all through high school until the middle of 1961. By this stage I was playing the euphonium and was playing well enough to be allowed to play an occasional solo or two. In 1961 I was studying for my Matriculation certificate at Wonthaggi Tech and Higher Elementary School. I was studying one subject, English, at school; three subjects, English literature, Renaissance and Reformation History and French, by correspondence and Geography on my own, using mainly the excellent notes given to me by a friend who had matriculated the previous year. The pressure was too much; I decided to cut down on my band commitments. In May I handed back my instrument and uniform, with a heavy heart and a sense of loss. For many years afterwards I would wake up from a nightmare with an acute feeling of guilt, having dreamt that I had not yet handed in my uniform. Perhaps this was a reminder of how indebted I am to the band for the musical education it gifted me with, and the wonderful time I had being a part of this wonderful institution.

In December 1963 another desperate appeal for bandsmen was made through the local press. 'Only five senior players remain,' Matt Cameron said, 'The other 11 are learners.' 'If the band is unable to accept all engagements, the public will know why.' But as the Powlett Express commented 'The band was also down to 16 players in 1953. Yet four years later it had built up to be Victorian D Grade Champions.' It was a privilege for me and the other kids of that generation to have been part of that revival. I'm proud that my son has also been part of the Wonthaggi Citizens Band and that the band itself has gone on to become B grade champions, one of the best, if not the best country band in Australia, an integral and invaluable part of our community. **(This is the second of a two-part story by Sam Gatto.)**