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NOEL WALTER MELVIN (1924 – 2003)

Born in Sydney on 23 July 1924, Noel Melvin's singing talents began to emerge during the time he was at then Enmore Activity School when he was encouraged to have formal voice training. He did not have an easy childhood and he was helped by outstanding teachers like Bob Staines and Alan Strom. His music teacher at the school quickly realised that his 15 year old pupil had a glorious bass voice. As Noel once said: "I went to bed one night and said 'Good night Mum' and woke in the morning and said 'Good morning Mother'."

Noel's great career was launched when he sang in the school concert to considerable applause. He had some lessons and he began winning prizes in the City of Sydney and Railways Eisteddfods, which were, at that time, the proving ground for young singers and musicians.

Noel then gave his first recital. He was terribly nervous and, lost the words and melody singing 'On the Road to Mandalay'. He was violently ill in the toilet and, when he looked at his pale and haggard face in the mirror, he vowed that he would never be nervous again. He wasn't - and that was the measure of the man.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Noel was too young to join the services and he was recruited into the Department of Aircraft Production where he worked in the Beaufort Bomber factory. This was a reserved occupation and he was able to continue his musical studies. He performed in concert parties to entertain the troops and a lifetime of travel had begun.

He won a prize of 50 pounds on 'Uncle Frank's Amateur Hour' and he was able to marry Jean in May 1945. They had a son Graeme, and daughter Glenys, and they were later blessed with seven grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

At age 16, Noel sang 'Congo Lullaby' (My Little White Dove) on the ABC Youth Show for a fee of 2 guineas. He nearly ruined his voice by singing incorrectly but Vern Barnett at the Conservatorium of Music, where Noel was a student for two years, helped to correct the problem. He then was accepted as a pupil of the very experienced basso, Stanley Clarkson, who was a Past Master of Lodge Caxton No. 508 and who had performed at Grand Installations and other Masonic functions. Bro. Stanley Clarkson was involved with the establishment of the Masonic Jubilee Choir in 1938. Noel studied with Clarkson for the next ten years and he developed that superb articulation and extensive voice range. You could hear every word he sang and his voice projected with effortless ease to the back of the Sydney Town Hall.

His interpretation of a huge repertoire of songs was always a delight. When asked how he could remember the words for so many songs and yet have trouble with Masonic ritual, Noel replied: 'It would be easy if I could sing it.'

When he was 22 he was invited to sing the bass solo in the St. George Society's 'Messiah' at the Sydney Town Hall. Noel thus began a wonderful career in Oratorio in which, he estimated he had sung bass solos in the 'Messiah' 168 times, often with leading symphony orchestras in all States and New Zealand.

In 1947, Noel won the vocal section of the ABC vocal and concerto competition and made his first appearance with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Joseph Post.

By chance, Noel met Joan Allan in 1948 and a wonderful friendship developed between Joan, Jean and Noel which ended only with Joan's death in 1991. Joan Allan, who had provided piano accompaniment for Peter Dawson, became Noel's musical partner in performances and, later in teaching. Joan would join Noel in singing a duet performance of the Scottish ballad 'The River Clyde' to the delight of the audience.

Jean, meanwhile, had become one of Sydney's leading landscape painters and, as someone once remarked: 'So much talent should not be allowed in one family'.

In 1956, Noel won the prestigious Mobil Quest, singing the ballad 'Randall My Son'. This enabled him to pursue his studies overseas at the Julliard School of Music in New York and the Royal College of Music in London. Joan Sutherland had also won the Mobil Quest and Noel sang with her in 'Dido and Aeneas'. He performed the bass solos in 'St. John's Passion' under Henry Kripps and the baritone solos in Faure's 'Requiem' under Sir Eugene Goossens. These performances spotlighted his extensive voice range. The ABC looked after him and he had his own radio programme 'Noel Melvin Sings'.

He was involved in the first productions of opera by the ABC on television which were broadcast live. There were three cameras and someone waved to you which meant you were to look at that particular camera but it was all most confusing and Jean, who had watched the show would ask when he arrived home 'What on earth was going on there?'

Noel sang the 'Prologue to Pagliacci' dressed in the traditional clown's costume and when he reached the great climax 'Ring up the Curtain', he clown hat fell off much to the hilarity of all who watched. Noel had many amusing travel yarns. Two singers and accompanist Joan Allan were engaged to sing at the western NSW town of Warren. They travelled by train but the train didn't stop at Warren so they pulled the emergency chain, got off at a small siding and made their way back to Warren on a fettlers push and pull trolley hoping there were no trains coming the other way.

On another occasion, Joan Allan was playing a piano solo when one leg of the grand piano fell off and she continued valiantly with a slowly sloping piano to the delight of the audience who thought it was a staged comedy act.

Noel loved conducting and he was Choir Master for a time at Holy Trinity, Concord where he built up a choir of 40 voices. He was described that year in the Anglican Journal as the 'Anglican of the Year'. It was at Concord that he met his lifelong friend Right Wor. Bro. Revd. Harold Ctercteko, Past Grand Chaplain, who was then a young student minister. Harold said: 'I was terrified of the Choir Master.'

Noel supplemented the family income by working at the Amory Reception Centre at Ashfield where he sang 'I love you truly' and 'I'll walk beside you' at wedding receptions. Jean did just that for Noel whose exact words were: 'I am eternally grateful that I had such a wife for I couldn't have done what I did and travelled as much as I did without someone to back me and to have a home base that was so serene and so solid where everything was done to help me.' This was why he resisted the overtures to go overseas.

Many charities have been assisted in their work by the generous donation of Noel Melvin's time and talents. The NSW Masonic Hospital and its Auxiliary and the other Masonic Charities probably head the list but he also did a great deal for the NSW Institute for Deaf and Blind Children in a fund raising and administrative capacity. He was involved in the establishment of the schools and hostels for deaf and blind children at North Rocks and he was sent overseas to Boston USA, Paris Sweden and Holland to represent the Institute at world conferences dealing with the latest advances for the care and education of deaf, blind and multi-handicapped children. The knowledge he gained from these trips was put to practical use in expanding the North Rocks complex.

In 1974, he helped the Royal Blind Society set up the Talking Books programmes. He used his knowledge of music and theatre to create the Mitchell Street Theatre so that blind adults could participate in drama and music.

After all the years of travelling, Noel established a teaching studio at his home and, with the help of Joan Allan, they passed on their skills to others. His students were involved, not only in solo singing

but also in musical productions so that they could gain in confidence and experience as well as enjoyment. In later years, when he performed with soprano Lee Richardson, he would say with justifiable pride: 'She's one of my pupils'.

Noel also formed a musical group called the Lyndelle Singers and, together with his students, they gave many performances for charity.

Right Wor. Bro. Noel Melvin's musical and Masonic careers ran along parallel lines. He was initiated in Lodge Austral No. 194 on 16 January 1947. He was passed Fellowcraft on 16 October 1947 and raised a Master Mason on 20 May 1948.

It was Bro. Noel Melvin who won the Mobil Quest and it was Bro. Noel Melvin who compared and performed at a number of Masonic charity concerts held in the Sydney Town Hall in the 1950's and 1960's.

Noel called off Lodge Austral on 19 April 1963 having previously affiliated with Lodge Earlwood No. 582 on 11 September 1962. He called off this lodge on 8 March 1977 after affiliating with Lodge Stability No. 320 on 11 October 1976. He was installed as Worshipful Master on 11 September 1978. Lodge Stability surrendered its charter and Noel affiliated with Lodge West Epping No. 731 on 12 June 1987. He called off on 11 March 1994 as a result of a move from West Epping to Killcare on the Central Coast where he affiliated with Lodge Gosford No. 742, now known as Central Coast Lodge No. 2001, on 24 November 1993.

His contribution to the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales was outstanding. He served as Grand Director of Music for a record period from 11 November 1969 to 1 August 1997. He received the conferred ranks of Past Junior Grand Warden on 11 June 1982, Past Assistant Grand Master on 12 June 1985 and Past Deputy Grand Master on 13 June 1990. He was appointed the Representative near this Grand Lodge of the Grand Lodge of California in 1985.

Bro. Noel Melvin was perfected in the Gordon Bennett Rose Croix Chapter, then No. 626 English Constitution, now No. 142 Supreme Council for Australia in 1979 and inducted into the Shield of David Conclave No. 14 of the Brotherhood of David and Jonathan for New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory on 25 November 1976. He was admitted to the second degree on 31 August 1977 and he was installed as Deputy Supreme Ruler of the Conclave on 30 March 1988 and was appointed Grand Director of Music of the Order in 1988 and later was conferred the rank of Past Deputy Grand Supreme Ruler. He contributed extensively to the musical ceremonial of the Order and was to sing a solo at the installation meeting of the Shield of David Conclave on the night of his death.

In 1988, as part of the celebrations of the Centenary of the establishment of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, Right Wor. Bro. Noel Melvin established the NSW Masonic Centenary Ensemble to fill the void left by the NSW Masonic Jubilee Choir which had ceased to exist some years earlier. The Ensemble was an immediate success and, in conjunction with the Grand Organist, Very Wor. Bro. William Caukill and Sound Engineer Right Wor. Bro. Bruce Sheldrick, has produced several recordings which, together with live performances, have raised considerable sums for charity.

Noel Melvin was involved with Probus and together with his friend and accompanist Paul Edgar, he gave dozens of concerts for charity.

Noel had suffered a warning heart attack and the loss of a kidney to cancer but, in spite of encouragement by family and friends to slow down, he still had a full diary including a contribution as a member of the organising committee for the celebrations of the bicentenary of the dawn of freemasonry in Australia. He was attending a committee meeting when he collapsed and was rushed to St. Vincents Hospital where he died.

What manner of man was Noel Walter Melvin?

He has been described as a strong-minded, punctual perfectionist whose theme song could have been 'I did it my way' or perhaps more appropriately the Paul Robeson song from 'Showboat', 'I still suits me'.

He loved his family and his friends and to receive a hug and sometimes a kiss (men included) was an acknowledgement of friendship that needed no words. He once concluded an interview by saying: 'It was a wonderful life and I wouldn't change it'.

An obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated:

He was a larger-than-life character with a great sense of humour and capacity for friendship. *The Directory of Performing Arts in Australia Vol. 11* acknowledges his contribution to Australian music and to those of us who knew and loved him, he was a national and local treasure.

Noel died on 30 April 2003 survived by Jean, Graeme, Glenys and their families. The family obituary notice in *The Sydney Morning Herald* aptly quoted:

Now I have sung my songs to you.
I'll sing no more

A service was held at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium on 6 May 2003 where Right Wor.Bro. Revd. Harold Ctercteko officiated and presented a eulogy. A family eulogy was presented by Jean Melvin's brother, Dr. David Dufty, Dip.Ed., Ph.D., who concluded with:

Dear Noel
You will never die
While we who are here
Are still alive
And your story will live on
When we are all gone

You set a swift tempo
And sent strong melodies
Ringing in our heads
And in our hearts
You helped make life a song
Which we sang together

For all who had the pleasure
Of knowing you
You are an Australian treasure.

Right Wor.Bro. Roger Donsworth, Past Assistant Grand Master and Most Wor.Bro. Ronald Johnson, AM, Past Grand Master presented the Bible readings from Psalm 121 and Revelation 21:1-6. Most Wor.Bro. Noel Dunn, Past Grand Master, presented details of Noel's Masonic career and Most Wor.Bro. Revd. Raymond Green, Past Grand Master, and Most Wor.Bro. Russell Foster, Past Senior Grand Warden as Grand Director of Ceremonies, conducted the Masonic Tribute. The NSW Masonic Ensemble sang 'Ode to Life'; music by Bro. Jean Sibelius.

REFERENCES:

The NSW Freemason, February 1994

Ibid, June 1997

The Sydney Morning Herald, 3-4 May 2003

Ibid, 8 May 2003

Dr. David Dufty - Eulogy

United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory - Membership records.