



# WORKING MUSICIANS

Stephen Smith & John Robinson



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# Introduction

I

The text for this book came out of 1985 'Art and Working Life' project funded by the (then) Literature and Community Arts Boards of the Australia Council, and the Western Australian Arts Council (now Department for the Arts).

In the original project a writer and photographer worked together amongst the membership of the Perth Branch of the Musicians' Union to produce a statement about the 'lives of working musicians in Perth'. The funding allowed for six months' wages. A series of articles with photographs were published in *Music Maker* magazine and then the photographer and I parted company.

Stephen Smith, whose photographs accompany this text, came into the project at a point at which I had completed my research and was writing a first draft. He started with some limited funds left over from the grant and has pursued the project ever since. He was instrumental in getting the Fremantle Arts Centre Press interested in publishing. He set out to find the images which could complement the words of the musicians which make up the substantial body of this text, and in this sense the book is his work.

There are more than nine hundred members of the Musicians' Union in Western Australia. In Perth, on any night of the week and particularly at weekends, you can take your pick of live music from reggae and rock and roll to classical, with everything else in between. The brief from the union was to work amongst its members and write a story about their working lives. How was this to be done?

In the beginning I adopted an *ad hoc* approach. I spent a couple of months going out to see musicians at work in their workplaces. I went to pubs, rehearsal rooms, concert halls and more pubs. I gained strong impressions of the remarkable diversity of music in Perth. I sat in on the rehearsals for a production of *Die Fledermaus* by the W.A. Arts Orchestra, watching the process from beginning to end. I conducted 'preliminary interviews' with the five principal players in the orchestra and several other musicians. From the transcripts of these interviews I set out to derive a methodology which arose from the ways in which they told me their stories. I wanted to know if there was some kind of generalised structure to the 'working life' of a musician.

I devised a questionnaire of some forty or fifty questions which I circulated by post to musicians who agreed to be interviewed. I spent four months gathering seventy or more hours of taped interviews from which the text of this book is derived. As far as possible I have tried to allow the musicians to speak for themselves, but these are edited rather than verbatim transcripts.

What makes a musician? What do they do? How do they feel about what they do? What are some of the experiences which stick in their minds?

At first glance, most musical lives originate in some formative early experience. The basic motor skills required to play an instrument are only learnt by endless repetition. Theoretical knowledge must be tied to a somatic ability to instantly articulate musical thought through the action of fingers upon keys, strings or buttons; breath upon diaphragm; mouth upon reed or mouthpiece; feet upon pedals. This ability, generally, must be gained by the age of ten or fifteen, at which time a decision is made to pursue music either as a vocation or avocation. There then follows a period of training or preparation; a 'break' into semi-professional or professional playing; then a settling into musical work with its various hopes, fears, successes, failures, co-operation and disputes.

These are some common aspects of the *lives* of musicians. But what of the *working* life? What constitutes the daily work of a musician?

To a degree it is possible to generalise. Most musicians do some or all of the following things in a day's work: 'maintenance' practice (keeping up motor skills); learning and practising new material alone; learning and practising new material with other musicians; rehearsing with fellow musicians; setting up for performances (or 'gigs'); rehearsing in the performance situation to get used to the acoustics; performing; packing up from performances; unwinding after the event (allowing jangled nerves to calm).

We considered whether to structure the book around the notion of 'A day in the life of...' It was impossible because there is such a range of work experiences.

The term 'musician' or 'working musician' applies to a diverse group of people, occupying a wide range of social positions. It is possible, however, to distinguish between two broad groups of people: the salaried players, and the rest. In Perth, the vast majority of salaried musicians are in the orchestras. At the time of researching, there were two orchestras in Perth: the Western Australian Symphony Orchestra, and the Western Australian Arts Orchestra. Since then they have amalgamated, making a group of approximately 80 to 100 musicians in Perth who are on salaries, with paid leave, superannuation, an industrial award and all the other trappings of 'public servants' (including the sense of alienation generated by working for a large bureaucratic organization). Apart from a small handful of players in restaurants, night clubs and theatres, the rest of the membership of the Union are casual workers, self-employed, teachers, or 'part-time professional' with a regular 'day job' to keep them and their families clothed, fed and housed.

No-one forces musicians to be musicians. The frequent complaint that 'no-one understands how hard we work, or even that we don't need to be paid,' disguises a truth about music: musicians *love* performing. Many musicians might wish to engage you in passionate debate about the creativity required by their 'art'. Others might point out that it is only really composers who 'create' music: musicians are in fact at best, skilled interpreters, at worst, technicians, automata for producing the correct notes. For some, it is a vocation, for others an avocation; for some a job, for others a chore. For all, there are moments at least, of passion.

The Musicians' Union is a Federal union with state branches. By law any person who earns money from playing music is entitled to join the union. This has not always been the case. Prior to the establishment of the Federal union there were a variety of State organisations. Western Australia had the Professional Musicians' Association which saw itself as a guardian of musical standards and accepted members on the basis of their musicianship. At the beginning of this century such a position was relatively easy to enforce because the same musicians who did orchestral work also played in dance bands and they were all well-trained.

The arrival of the jazz era was the first step toward the diversification of the music business. In Sydney there was a major split between the jazz musicians and the 'legit' musicians. The jazz musos were barred from joining the Sydney Musicians' Union in 1919 and had to set up their own headquarters in the pub across the road. Eventually the split was healed and the jazz musos were allowed into the union but the animosity between the two groups remained. Except in some cases of musicians working as employees, there is no compulsion on jazz or rock and roll musicians to join the union and many still do not do so because they see the union as irrelevant to them.

Perth has always been different because of its isolation and the relative smallness of its orchestras. For years the State Secretary of the union was Harry Bluck, a jazz pianist. When Harry retired he was replaced by Peter Woodward. An anonymous letter sent to all members of the union at the time described Woodward as a 'communist ratbag' and called upon members to nominate a 'non-political' musician to the post. In the event he was elected unopposed, and was re-elected unopposed in 1987.

Under Woodward the Perth Branch of the union has taken an activist, progressive (some would say subversive) role in promoting the interests of its members. The Branch negotiated a State award (the first of its kind in Australia) for musicians who work as employees. Whilst unsuccessful in its attempts to exert influence on the Federal branch of the union with regard to the salaries of the W.A.S.O. players, the Branch has taken an active role in disputes between the orchestral players and their respective managements. Perth was the only branch of the union to make a submission to the Tribe Enquiry into Orchestral Resources in Australia. The Branch employed a Research Officer for two years to investigate the impact of new technology on musicians, which resulted, amongst other things, in a detailed submission to the Broadcasting Tribunal Enquiry into the third commercial Television license. It has sponsored Jazz and Rock and Roll co-ordinators who have encouraged many rock and roll, jazz and pop musicians to join the union. The Branch runs a very active booking agency for its members and a benevolent fund to help musicians who fall on hard times. It ventured into publishing by placing its newsletter in a commercial magazine (*Music Maker*, an arrangement subsequently dropped for financial reasons), and sponsored the Art and Working Life project under which this book was written.

Woodward grew up in the bush, where he became interested in folk music, singing around the campfires at night. The seeds of a future Musicians' Union secretary were sown under the West Australian night sky as 'Woodie' sang with his mates. I have chosen to start this 'oral history' with some of Woodward's story, in his own words.

John Robinson



## II

I went to W.A.I.T. to do a geophysics degree because out in the bush everybody who were getting their arses kicked were workers and everybody that were kicking their arses were geophysicists. I decided it was about time I started kicking arses rather than getting mine kicked.

I got arrested one day out at W.A.I.T. I had a bit of a dispute with the coppers about putting yellow stickers on students' cars and I ended up in gaol. The Student Guild came and bailed me out so I started to develop a political interest in things of a left nature. That was the ideological thing that I could match to my own personal working experience. I never did very well academically in the end because I developed a greater interest in politics.

I started working for the Union in 1974. At that time Harry Bluck was the secretary of the Union. The people in the rock and roll business were dissatisfied with the role of the Union as they perceived it and they wanted an organiser. The rock committee offered me the job and I started working as a part-time organiser.

I used to have a big red beard and a kangaroo dog. I sometimes wore a big fur coat. I had long hair and a black cap with a red star on it and I started getting out into the rock and roll area.

I separated from my wife in 1975 and just spent more and more time working for the Union. I became a sort of advocate for the Union. I cleaned up my image a bit and when Harry retired I stood for election for secretary. An attempt was made to smear me and get up another candidate but nothing came of it and I was elected unopposed.

I started playing in folk clubs in about 1976. I became known as a solo blues performer, playing the old-style 20's and 30's blues and singing. It is funny because I started out fancying myself as a player but seemed to get a reputation more as a singer of that old-style blues.

I worked in a duo for a while and then we formed a band called the Ten-Cent Shooters. We worked the Loaded Dog and Clancy's Tavern, they were our two big nights of the week. I think we still hold the record at the Loaded Dog for the most money ever taken over the bar in one night.

That band split up some years ago and now I mostly play in a duo. I don't have time to play much and I don't play at home at all. I just do the odd gig which I enjoy to do.

As far as the industrial side of the working conditions of musicians goes there are some

legal problems that we have in relation to the fact that industrial legislation doesn't sit well on the shoulders of the music industry and that is a serious impediment now and historically to getting protection of musicians' working conditions before the established industrial tribunal. It's always been a terrible problem for the members of this Union.

Those legal issues have got very widespread ramifications into areas such as workers' compensation and a national superannuation scheme if one comes up. We always have one leg in and one leg out of the industrial system due to the legal niceties of the jurisdiction of the Industrial Commission. The Union has to sometimes assume the responsibilities of a union and sometimes act as if it were a guild and do the same sorts of things that a guild would do to enforce peoples' rights in contract.

Allied to that is the issue of technology and the overseas, chiefly American and British, control of our entertainment industry and the cultural tastes of our community. In Australia the dissemination of entertainment by technological means has created a very narrow view of the world and very narrow cultural expectation amongst people as to what constitutes acceptable entertainment. I am as much of a Marxist as I have ever been and I believe this is because the control of the media is subject to commercial and not social considerations. They programme it at the lowest common denominator of peoples' desires and that has now reached the stage where people have had created in them the expectation of what they are going to see by way of entertainment and anything that doesn't conform to that is heavily disadvantaged, like jazz and folk and non-mainstream sorts of performance, plus the terrible impact of things like video and disco.

Fifty years ago if you wanted to hear music you had to see a musician. People forget that you could never hear any music unless there was a musician actually standing there doing it. Now everybody is bombarded by music all the time. It has in some ways devalued the occupation of musician and more than that it has created in musicians a need to climb onto the very bandwagon of technological dissemination which has taken their jobs away from them. Its almost like people working in a factory to build robots that are going to do the job of building other robots.

The thing that concerns me most as an official of this Union is a lack of cultural diversity. What the Union has to do now is get into areas of public policy rather than trying to solve

things at the grass roots level out on the job because the influences at work are larger.

We need to see the development of an effective Community Arts Programme in Australia and start to re-value live entertainment and to try and offset this narrow cultural expectation amongst people. We need changes of public policy in relation to broadcasting and television to force them to be more socially responsible. We need protection. Every industry in Australia has some protection except ours. It is cheaper to dump thousands and thousands of overseas records on the Australian market than it is to make local records.

The worst thing about it is that these are not issues that are generally appreciated by musicians. They are too busy trying to survive in a narrower and narrower opportunity market and they are being forced to comply with demands that artistically many of them find unacceptable.

Culturally we are like the 52nd state of the United States. We have to provide people with a more diverse range of experiences which they will want to reflect in some sort of live situation. People have got to be encouraged to get out from in front of television sets and get into watching some sort of live performance. I believe that it is a valid cultural experience to which people ought to be subjected and in the long-term continued exposure to technological entertainment is alienating. It is an alienating activity taken alone. In my view it is not culturally or socially desirable. It creates a whole society alienated from each other because they are all sitting in front of the television set at night.'

Peter Woodward  
Musicians' Union Secretary

## The Musicians

Stephen Smith, John Robinson and Fremantle Arts Centre Press sincerely thank the following musicians who allowed us to reproduce their words in this book:

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Lee Buddle, reeds player, composer and entrepreneur.  
Gary Burke, bassist.  
Mike Burns, composer and multi-instrumentalist.  
Duncan Campbell, pianist/entertainer.  
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Jeff Carroll, composer/arranger, currently musical director of a capella mixed voice choir.  
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Steve Tallis, singer/songwriter and proprietor of a record distribution business.  
Reg Zar, drummer in the 'Coolgardies' and various other bands. Professional musician since 1968.

In addition we thank those musicians who allowed us to use their interviews but did not want their identities revealed.



'Musicians must keep developing. For certain musicians the daytime job conflict gets stronger and stronger. Other musicians are quite content to hold down two jobs. Its a very daunting field to be full-time in because the criteria for being full-time are creativity, original compositions that win public favour, recording contracts and a book that's full of engagements of the sort that you want.

I've grown to respect very much any professional musician who just keeps on coming up with new stuff. They've got to pull it out of themselves, they've got to bring from within new ideas and have the confidence, the daring to push it out for the public to buy like any artist does. I sometimes wonder whether I've got that sort of courage and daring.'

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