

# The SydneySiders Men's Barbershop Chorus A Personal Memoir of the Early Years 1990-1992

*George Walker*

## Initiation

“Are you interested in singing in a barbershop chorus?” This invitation by Rob Fergusson was the start of my involvement in barbershop. It was just a few weeks after we moved to Sydney after 21 years in Townsville. Mary and I were leaving a Christmas tea party at the home of a fellow engineer, Bob Potter and his wife, whom I had known as a fellow student at school and university in New Zealand, at which Rob was also a guest. We were both going from the party to a carol service at Wahroonga Uniting Church and Rob, noticing I had an Australian Hymn Book in my hand, found out I had sung in church choirs most of my life. He told me a little about the group of which he was a foundation member – see history of SydneySiders on [www.SydneySiders.org](http://www.SydneySiders.org) – and indicated I would be very welcome, giving me his business card which indicated he was a dentist.

At the time I had heard of barbershop quartets but knew nothing else about barbershop music. I said I would think about it, and it quickly went to the back of my mind when a few days later we moved into a house at Berowra and I focussed on settling into our new environment as well as my new job. There it may have remained if Mary had not had a problem with one of her teeth. Although we had only met Rob once, he was the only dentist we knew in Sydney so she made an appointment to see him. When she saw him one of his first questions was when was I going to go along to their barbershop group. So around the end of January 1990 I mustered up some courage and went along.

Shortly before then they had moved their practice venue to the kindergarten room of the Wahroonga Preparatory School in the grounds of the Wahroonga Uniting Church. I arrived to find a small group clearing away the little pre-schooler's chairs and low tables to make room for the practice – a routine repeated every week until the group moved to the larger hall when numbers became too large for the kindergarten room. At that time there were about a dozen members plus Dale Jorgensen, the young American Music Director, who had sung in a top US chorus at the International Barbershop Convention. On hearing I sang tenor in church choirs, I was put alongside the 2 tenors, Stuart Taylor and Ian Miller. It was an embarrassing night. I could hardly sing a note they were so high. I thought if this is barbershop it is not for me, but it was quickly pointed out that next week I could try singing lead – which I enjoyed and have continued to do ever since.

So I became a barbershopper – the result of an invitation by a friend to a Christmas party, a chance meeting with a barbershopper who also happened to be a dentist, and a chance dental problem by Mary necessitating a visit to a dentist. Such is life.

## My First Year - 1990

I have very fond memories of my first year with the SydneySiders. We were a small group which enjoyed a wonderful camaraderie and were to become core members of the chorus for a number of years. It was also a year in which there were many firsts for the group. The first Annual General Meeting in March, a visit by Bruce Okely from Perth in April who had us ringing chords for the first

time, the first eastern region workshop at Bathurst in May, our first uniforms in June, our first singout in July, our first public performance at a concert in Gosford in August, and our first annual SydneySiders concert in November. I missed the first AGM and the Bathurst workshop – although benefited from the experience of those who went – but participated in all the others. I can still remember Bruce Okely's visit as if it was yesterday, and his inspirational coaching of us based on *My Wild Irish Rose*. It made us realise how far we had to go, but also gave us confidence we could get there.

We loved our initial uniforms. After considerable searching the committee settled on the material from a supplier who agreed to put aside the remainder of the bolt of material for use when additional uniforms were required. I think it was a wife of one of the members who agreed to make the uniforms which were all made to measure for each member. It was with great pride we wore them for the first time in public at our first singout at the Redleaf Apartments seniors village in Turramurra – see photo on website. I seem to remember we all put in \$50 towards the cost of the uniforms which was held in trust by the chorus to be refunded if we left and handed in the uniform. (Sadly a few years later the company which had supplied the uniform material went bankrupt and the material was sold off, necessitating a change of material and therefore of uniform as the group continued to

expand. I forfeited my deposit and retained my waistcoat – which I still have. Most of the original waistcoats were passed on to the new group which had by then been established at Parramatta - and ultimately merged with the SydneySiders to form the current SydneySiders Express Chorus.)

Fourteen of us performed in our first singout plus Dale Jorgensen. Our repertoire was: *My Wild Irish Rose*, *This Little Light of Mine*, *Darkness on the Delta*, *Heart of My Heart*, *Lo how a Rose is Blooming*, and *Margie*. It was just about everything that we knew. Of these *Darkness on the Delta* was our big song. Mike Nelmes, who had been a top bureaucrat in Canberra before retirement, particularly loved it. He couldn't read music and relied entirely on memorising it, but once he got it he sang his heart out. He was a sad loss when a couple of years or so later he became the first of our members to pass on. We sang the same repertoire at our second singout at Lindfield Community Hall 5 days later.

The concert at Gosford was our first big event. It was the first concert put on by the then relatively new Central Coast Barbershop Chorus and we had been invited to sing a bracket of songs. Our bracket was *Darkness on the Delta*, *Caroline*, a lovely song which we had been learning for a while, and *This Little Light of Mine*. In addition we had been invited to join in a massed chorus which was to sing *Give Me that Barbershop Style*, *My Wild Irish Rose*, *Wait Till the Sun Shines Nellie*, *Lets Get Together Again*, and *Keep the Whole World Singing*. The last two we had never sung and only learned on the day at the practice we had before the concert. I remember several of us feverishly trying to learn the words in the couple of hours between the practice and the concert. This concert was also my first introduction to Linc Abbott, a dynamic barbershopper whose infectious enthusiasm further inspired us.

Our first concert was held in the Wahroonga Uniting Church hall in November before an audience that largely comprised family and friends of the members of the small chorus, which by this stage had grown to 18 members excluding Dale Jorgensen. I don't have a programme of the event but assume that in addition to our own brackets of songs there were also guest performers, and also some community singing of old favourites with Phil Dean on the piano. In addition to the songs already mentioned we would have sung other songs we had been learning under Dale's direction including if my memory is correct *Forgive Me*, which was one of Dale's favourites, *You'll Never Walk Alone*, *O You Beautiful Doll*, and *Baby Won't You Please Come Home*. Naturally we got a rousing reception from a very friendly audience, ending our year on a high note in terms of our performance.

There was also sadness as the end of the year also saw us farewelling Dale Jorgensen. I think it would be correct to say that we had all enjoyed Dale as our Music Director. Dale was a relatively quiet person who very patiently coached us in the art of barbershop singing in an encouraging manner. Although he had sung at the highest levels he was relatively young and had not directed barbershop before. It must have been very challenging for him. I think all the members were significantly older than he was, some over twice his age, our numbers were small, and most of the members had had less than a year of experience singing barbershop, and some like me had had none. Unfortunately for us Dale was employed by an American firm on a three year visa which expired at the end of the year, so he had no choice but to say goodbye.

## **The Next 2 Years – 1991-92**

During the next two years the chorus almost doubled in size from the 18 members at the end of 1991, with loss of only four of these members of whom one – Mike Nelmes – had had to retire because of poor health. It was period of consolidation and improvement as the chorus developed a core of more experienced singers under the direction of Ian Miller, a founding member and erstwhile musician who had played a significant role in its formation having been the judge of the Rotary barbershop competition from which the SydneySiders evolved. Sometime during this period we also moved from the kindergarten room at Wahroonga Preparatory School to the Wahroonga Uniting Church hall, which became our practice venue for a number of years.

1991 got off to a good start with a regional workshop at Springwood organised by the Blue Mountainairs with a US barbershopper, Ron Black, and his wife, Elaine, as the guest educators to which both Mary and I went. It was my first experience of a barbershop workshop and I loved it, especially the teaching we received from Ron and Elaine, which made me realise how little I really knew about singing even though I had been singing in church choirs most of my life. It was also my first experience of meeting and mixing with barbershoppers from other choruses and quartets. The workshop included a public concert at the Springwood civic Centre where for the first time I heard the other choruses in the region perform, along with some quartets like Crying Out Loud who were not part of a chorus. We sang *This Little Light of Mine* and *Darkness on the Delta*.

It was at this workshop I first met Charles Matthews who had just joined us. He was a very talented singer who showed us some of his individual talents at the concert, his rendition of Mamie, repeated on occasions for us at subsequent practices, being especially memorable. His wife also made a special contribution to our practices, baking scones for our supper after practice every week.

Unfortunately while blessed with a wonderful bass voice, it was strong on vibrato which doesn't fit with barbershop. Charles realised this and regretfully resigned after being with us a year or two. We missed both him and his wife's scones after he left.

The big event in 1991 was the first national barbershop convention at the Gold Coast in July, participation in which was another first for the chorus. In the preceding 6 months we spent a considerable amount of practice time learning and fine tuning our two songs for it – a rousing big number called *Paddlin' Madelin Home* and *If There had Never Been an Ireland*. There was a complicated bit in the middle of the *If There had Never Been an Ireland* which most of us struggled with and proved our undoing at the Convention. Not surprisingly it did not stay in our repertoire for very long. Not so with *Paddlin' Madelin Home*. It became a favourite for a couple of years and created another first. It was the first song we sang with actions, which included a very vigorous paddling sequence. My memories of the Convention itself are staying high up in a high rise hotel and watching from it the Annual Gold Coast Marathon, which was held the same weekend, our disappointment in our own performance, but overall the excitement of being part of a large group of barbershoppers and listening to some great performances. The formal Convention photograph of the SydneySiders shows 17 of us went including Ian, 12 of whom had been part of the our first singout a year earlier. Before going to the Convention we were starting to feel we were pretty good. Our results brought us down to earth with a thud as realised the big difference between us and the top choruses like the Banana Blenders and the Men in Harmony from Perth. Lifting us was the great fellowship with fellow barbershoppers from across Australia, and listening to both the singing and words of encouragement and advice from The Ritz, the International Gold Medal winning chorus from the US who were also the judges. Also if my memory is correct it was for this Convention that we produced our first T-shirt, a red one which we continued to wear until the merger to become SydneySiders Express.

Following the Convention The Ritz toured Australia visiting the various barbershop choruses to pass on their expertise. For me their visit to the SydneySiders was one of my barbershop highlights. As was usual in those days visiting barbershoppers from the US were required to be billeted. We billeted the bass, Ben Ayling, his wife, and a friend travelling with them. They were in Sydney for a few days and Mary found herself being one of their tour guides and getting to know them well. We still exchange Christmas cards with Ben and his wife. Their visit to our chorus corresponded to one of our practice nights which they took over. It was a practice the likes of which we had not previously experienced. Some of us thought we learned more about barbershop in that one evening than we had learned in total previously. A personal highlight was being invited to sing with them on stage briefly, a highlight I nearly fluffed by being so nervous I almost forgot the words!

Although preparing for the Convention dominated our practices in the first half of the 1991, we continued to learn new songs including polecats in addition to the Convention pieces including *They Go Wild*, *Simply Wild Over Me*, *What a Wonderful World* and *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*. By the time the Convention came along we had 25 songs in our folders. We had also embarked on an ambitious programme of singouts the first Sunday afternoon of every month. These were mostly at retirement and nursing homes, but one exception was three consecutive Thursday nights as the entertainment at the Bridge Hotel in Rozelle for which we were paid a performance fee. I think these performances were the first we did for money. For someone like me who rarely went to pubs it was a very interesting experience. These singouts provided us with great performance practice as well as being very enjoyable for most of us. Personally I have always enjoyed singouts much more than competition singing, and 1991 was no exception. One of the most memorable was at Cherrybrook Retirement Village at the end of the year where we were the entertainment for their pre-Christmas dinner held in a big marquee. In the words of Phil Dean, 'we wowed them'.

Another first in 1991 was the decision to adopt a charity to which we donated money raised through singouts and the money from the raffle at the concert. The chosen charity was a project being undertaken by the Hornsby Shire Sporting Trust to build a fully automated fishing boat for the disabled, to which we ended up donating \$1,800.

Another highlight of 1991 was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Concert held in October with two performances on successive evenings in the Wahroonga Uniting Church hall. It was a huge success. In addition to our own performance, we were supported by the Hills Harmony ladies' chorus and one of their quartets, and quartets from the Central Coast and Bathurst. The concert closed with us singing the *Irish Blessing*, the first time we publicly sang this lovely song which had been introduced to us by the Ritz and was to become our closing song at practice for many years.

1992 began with a bang when we participated in an Australia Day concert at Bi-Centennial Park in Pymble. If I remember correctly this is where we first sang *Advance Australia Fair*. Then it was all hands on deck to organise our first eastern region workshop which was held at Lane Cove River Park. The workshop attracted over 70 barbershoppers from around New South Wales along with a number of special guests including the special guest educator from the US, Garry Bolles, and Andy Aberle, Bruce Okely and John Little from Men in Harmony in Perth. It required a lot of effort from the chorus, with as usual most of it being undertaken by the 'willing few' and was a great success. Combined with the visit of The Ritz in 1991 it did much to strengthen barbershop singing

in our region. As part of the workshop we presented a well attended public concert 'Harmony in the Autumn' at the Lighthouse Theatre, Macquarie University on the Saturday night to which all the participating choruses and quartets contributed. For this workshop we produced a barbershop sweater in different colours for sale which proved very popular. I still have mine – and still wear it.

Meanwhile we continued to grow in numbers, learn new songs and have regular singouts. A list of our songs at the middle of 1992 shows we had now learned or were learning 42 songs, including polecats, some of the notable new ones being *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, which was replace *Paddlin Madelin Home* and become the original SydneySiders most popular song, *Let a smile be Your Umbrella*, *Lida Rose*, *Me and My Shadow*, *Moonlight Bay*, *Somebody Stole my Gal*, and *When You and I were Young Maggie*, which was to become a song that regularly brought tears to eyes of many of our listeners at singouts. The latter was largely due to the introduction to it given by Eric Phillips, which often had even members of chorus wiping their eyes.

Another change this year was the nature of our singouts with the first hiring of us to sing at a public venue when in the middle of the year we were engaged to perform as 'wandering minstrels' at Darling Harbour on three Sundays from 11.30 – 3.30. This was a new experience for us, standing and singing, while most of the crowd continued to go their own way. Another first was our participation for the first time in the Sydney Eisteddfod, the first night at the Town Hall and the second night at Willoughby Civic Hall.

1992 was also the first year when we adopted the Oncology Unit of the Children's Hospital as our charity, the head of which, Michael Stevens, was one of our members. The Children's Hospital was still at Camperdown at that time and none who were present will forget our visit at the end of year to sing to the children and present Michael with a cheque for \$3,000 to use in buying new equipment for the unit. It was an emotional experience for all of us.

For our end of the year concert we presented two performances at the Mosman Town Hall. It was a big move from our previous venue at Wahroonga Uniting Church, and from memory not as successful as we had hoped, but it demonstrated how far we had come in 4 years. We were now an established chorus.

Special mention should be made of the participation of our wives in these activities. Mary usually came to most of the singouts with me, along with a number of other wives, as well as the Convention. At our concerts they played a major role in organising the supper and Mary seems to remember that at the Lane Park workshop the wives looked after the meals. We also had the occasional social get-together in which the wives participated. The result of all this was that the chorus became very much a family affair enhancing the enjoyment of being part of it, especially for Mary and I having only recently come to Sydney and not knowing many people in Sydney before we came.

I have had a great deal of enjoyment over the past 20 years from singing barbershop, and am continuing to enjoy it having recently linked up with the Sunshine Coast Statesmen after a break of about 5 years, but for me these first 3 years were the most enjoyable of all. The small number, the pioneering spirit, the family involvement, and the great camaraderie we enjoyed during that period were no doubt major factors in this. I shall never forget it.