

The Strangers 1961-1975

by Geoff Jermy, edited and assisted by Peter Robinson of The Strangers

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All hailing from Melbourne, the Strangers started in 1961, with Peter Robinson (bass), Graeme (Garth) Thompson (drums), Laurie Arthur (lead guitar) and Fred Weiland (rhythm guitar). Peter, Laurie and Fred had attended Glenroy High School, and had each played with popular Melbourne bands. Garth had been with The Earls, Laurie had played with The Planets and The Chessmen, and Fred was one of The Lincolns. Peter Robinson had played with The Thunderbirds and Ray Hoff & the Offbeats.

The boys, with the exception of Graeme (Garth) Thompson (Melbourne Grammar), all attended Glenroy High School, but lost touch with each other when they left school and joined other bands.

In 1961 Peter, returning from W.A after an 18-month apprenticeship with Ray Hoff, had already approached Garth Thompson and was keen to form a group based around material by popular overseas artists like The Ventures/Shadows, Rick Nelson, Presley (Sun session era), Carl Perkins, Ray Charles and Hank Ballard: generally more gutsy stuff, and a little more left field than most of the Top-40 material popularised by popular Melbourne groups at the time.

Laurie and Peter chanced to bump into each other on a train ride from Glenroy to the City, and discovered during the conversation that they had both been working on a similar concept (Laurie with Fred Weiland, Peter with Graeme Thompson), and it was decided to join forces and form a group which was to become the STRANGERS.

Their first entry into the Melbourne scene began with a residency at their own venue created at the Glenroy Police Boys Youth Club, where they also booked many of the current popular solo acts like: Johnny Chester, Colin Cook, Kevin Gulliver, Beverly Trim, Ian Macausland, Bobby Shaw, Terry Dean, Merv Benton, The Kay Twins and Betty McQuade, attracting regular crowds between 800 to 1200 every Saturday night, and pouring the proceeds back into the latest musical equipment.

The Shadows/Cliff Richard influence was obvious: one of their dance "brackets" at this stage comprised "Cry Of The Wild Goose", "Man Of Mystery", "Peace Pipe", "Tough Enough", "Twenty Flight Rock", "She's Gone", "Do You Want To Dance", "Gonzales", "The Breeze And I", "Leavin' Town", "We Say Yeah" and "The Stranger" - all titles except "Wild Goose" and "Leavin' Town" having been recorded by Cliff and/or The Shadows!!!

As their popularity gained they began working at all the major Melbourne dances, as well as starting their own new venues at Essendon Plaza, Newmarket Theatre, Coburg Town Hall.

At the end of 1962 they signed with W&G records after working as studio band for artists including The Seekers, Pam & Ade, Frankie Davidson, The Thin Men, Margie Mills, Adrian Usher, Bobby Shaw, Ian McAusland, Terry Dean, and Johnny Chester.

A number of recording demos, including "Gypsy Rock" and The Shadows' "Tales Of A Raggy Tramline" among others, helped to secure their first recording with Ron Tudor's W&G label.

It was rumoured that some "fiddling" by Alan Kidston the Strangers sound guru had to be done to W&G's rather ancient recording equipment to get the right sound for their first single, but the move paid off. "Cry Of The Wild Goose"/"Leavin' Town" was released in January 1963 and reached number 12 on the Melbourne charts. Three follow-up originals by the band, "Torlido"/"The Outcast" and "Undertow"/"Along The Navajo Trail", also instrumentals, were released in 1963, and two reached the Top 40.

An album "Colin Cook And The Strangers" which featured seven tracks by Colin (with backing by The Strangers) and seven of the group's own recordings "Blues By Five", "Walkin'", "Never On Sunday", "Stagecoach" (all instrumentals), "Matchbox", "Fun, Fun, Fun" and "I Call Your Name". was also released.

1962 and 1963 were good years for instrumentals, with The Shadows, The Ventures, Duane Eddy, Johnny and The Hurricanes and others enjoying huge success overseas. It is interesting to note that "Leavin' Town", "Torlido", "The Outcast" and "Undertow", all written by Laurie Arthur, and arranged by the band, were recorded by instrumental groups from Brazil, The Philippines, Holland, Belgium, Italy and elsewhere.

Laurie left The Strangers in early 1964, and was replaced on lead guitar by John Farrar.

A turning point in The Strangers musical direction came when they were approached to be the support group and provide the backing for ROY ORBISON and PAUL and PAULA on a 1964 Australian tour featuring the SURFARIS and the BEACH BOYS.

With the emergence of THE BEATLES in England and hanging out with the BEACH BOYS on the tour, it was not surprising that the group's vocals would achieve higher prominence.

Early vocal recordings, "Poppa Oom Mow Mow", "Sunday Kind Of Love", "If You Gotta Make A Fool Of Somebody" and later "In My Room", a Beach Boys' ballad, showed this influence.

In July 1965 they made the charts for the first time with a vocal performance, "If You're Gonna Make A Fool Of Somebody" attaining a No. 2 chart position. An excellent E.P. was issued, with Peter taking most of the lead high voice vocals at this point, later vocal performances being more evenly split, and close friend Ian MacAusland was often enlisted to sing bass parts (Poppa Oom Mow Mow etc) as Garth Thompson was still attending University at the time and was unavailable for some vocal sessions.

By the mid 1960s, The Strangers had become renowned for their musical and vocal ability, and were in huge demand as session musicians, doing countless backings for top artists, along with commercials, jingles and, of course, their own recordings. With personal appearances at dances such as Opus and The Swinger, the boys were the busiest in town. To cater for the overwhelming workload and bookings, the group started their own Entertainment Agency, managed by old friend Ron Fletcher, and also formed a private company, Magnum Productions Pty. Ltd. (under the wing of Elmo Moss & Assoc.) to handle their business affairs, a basic formula to be emulated by many other performers. The group were voted top instrumental/vocal group of 1964.

In 1965, it was reputed that The Strangers had only 15 free days - in March 1966 according to Brian de Courcy (Artist Management) they had worked "twenty-nine hours a day, fourteen days a week, four hundred and seventy two days last year".

Among the artists that The Strangers had backed, either collectively or individually, were:

Johnny Farnham, Russell Morris, Johnny Young, Neil Sedaka, Johnny O'Keefe, The Seekers, Merv Benton, Ted Mulry, Lynne Randell, Ross.D.Wylie, Yvonne Barrett, Grantley Dee, Pat Carroll, Little Gulliver, Peter Doyle, Billy Adams, Terry Dean, The Field Twins, Barry Crocker, Buddy England, Ronnie Burns, Town Criers, Masters Apprentices, Axiom, Hans Poulson, John and Anne Hawker, Bev Harrell, Liv Maeson, Lionel Rose and Colin Cook.

Apart from the continuing stream of sessions at Bill Armstrong's studios (they must have slept there!) the group had landed a job as backing group on ATV O's "Go!!" show. After the show folded some years later, they became the resident vocal group on HSV 7's "Sunnyside Up". In all, The Strangers appeared on TV at least once a week for nine years straight! (I wish we had VCR's back then!)

The group were all seemingly unaffected by their success, all being quiet, approachable and professional. Perhaps the only outward sign of their "affluence" was their penchant for fast cars - the "stable" at one time or another included Mustangs, Jaguar 'E' Types, Mark 10 Jaguars, Javelins and Sting Rays.

The Strangers' obvious talent and versatility led to even more work in 1967. In February, Terry Walker (ex Ray Hoff and the Off Beats, Glen Ingram and The Hi Five, The Times) replaced Fred Weiland, who left to join The Mixtures (who later enjoyed enormous international success with "In The Summertime" and "The Pushbike Song").

In May 1967, "Western Union"/"Cool Jerk" was released on the "Go!!" label, and became the group's fifth chart hit - however, more was to come. "Happy Without You" and "Lady Scorpio" heralding a switch to the Philips label, achieving considerable chart success. Both featured Terry's strong deep soul voice and the group's superb harmonies. "Sweet September"/"Paper Cup" proved to be their last Philips release, apart from a self-titled L.P., "The Strangers", which contained a selection of great tunes. The album again showcased the tight harmonies and superb production for which the group had become renowned, and a distinct Beatles/Beach Boys/Four Seasons influence was evident.

Early 1970 saw a radio ban on British recordings. This led to the foundation of Fable Records, many of whose early discs were "covers" of British hits. One of these was "Melanie Makes Me Smile" (a minor hit in the U.K. for Tony Burrows) which, coupled with "If You Think You're Groovy" (a P.P. Arnold hit featuring the amazing falsetto voice of John Farrar) was the Strangers' first Fable release, and proved to be the group's biggest seller ever. Three other singles were recorded for Fable in the next two years - "Mr. President" (a much improved cover of a record by Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich)/"Looking Through The Eyes Of A Beautiful Girl", "Sweet Water"/"Wishing My Life Away" and (original compositions) "Tennessee"/"That Sunshine Feeling" were all excellent recordings, but none achieved the success that "Melanie" had.

The last three singles had all been recorded with a new line-up of Robinson and Thompson with guitarists John Cosgrove (ex Fendermen) and Bill Pyman, who had joined when John Farrar and Terry Walker left. Terry had departed to embark on a solo career at about the time John accepted an invitation to join Hank Marvin and Bruce Welch in a new group arising from the break up of The Shadows. John's success with Marvin, Welch and Farrar and later The Shadows (re-formed) was considerable, and he later achieved fame as Olivia Newton-John's producer, arranger, writer and musical director.

The musical "Grease" was one of his greatest songwriting successes*, and in 1997 he achieved even greater fame as co-writer of the English musical "Heathcliff" with Sir Tim Rice, starring Sir Cliff Richard.

The Strangers recording career ended after two singles for Astor - "Home Ain't Home Anymore"/"HitchHike" and "Kentucky Poor Boy"/"Sweet Song Of The Country", both of which, although excellent and imaginative, did not sell well. A later compilation L.P., "The Best Of The (Original) Strangers" included all but one ("Paperback Writer") of the tracks from "The Strangers" album, plus "Melanie Makes Me Smile", "Wishing My Life Away", "Sweet Water", "Looking Through The Eyes Of A Beautiful Girl" and a different mix of "Mr.President" (which incidentally featured pedal steel guitarist George Xanthos, from the Hawking Brothers).

The Strangers ceased to exist as a group in late 1975 after two further personnel changes which saw Jim Sifonius (ex Dove), Lloyd Poole and Rick Berger (all keyboards) briefly appear with the group.

Subsequent careers of The Strangers members have followed widely differing paths. John Farrar recorded a fine solo album in 1980 for U.S. Columbia in addition to writing such giant hits as "Have You Never Been Mellow" "Hopelessly Devoted To You " and "You're The One That I Want"

Peter has a successful career in orchestration and record production and also became a member of The Seekers for 12 years (replacing Athol Guy), touring Australia, Europe and the Far East. He now performs with the re-formed "Thunderbirds": full circle!

Garth teaches drums and percussion at Scotch College and Billy Hyde's Drum Clinic, while continuing to play freelance gigs recording and TV work.

Terry pursued a wide range of professions, from helicopter pilot to (successful) designer of children's toys, now a successful furniture exporter living at Dee Why in Sydney.

John Cosgrove is an executive specializing in banking & security and still plays guitar with a number of groups, including the re-formed Fendermen

Bill Pyman does solo work and duo performances, giving much of his time for charity performances while pursuing a keen interest in his work at the The Divine Light Mission.

The Strangers' contribution to the Australian music industry, and particularly the recording industry, is immeasurable - literally hundreds of Australian produced records have benefited by the talents of Laurie, Fred, Peter, Garth, John, Terry, John, Bill, Jim, Lloyd and/or Rick - collectively

The Strangers.

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* John Farrar wrote additional songs for the movie version of "Grease" . - LN