

Mic Conway: A Bio Burlesque

By Joel Swadling

Gather 'round people! Hear tell the story of 'ol Mic Conway. That's right folks, *the* Mic Conway! Of Captain Matchbox Whoopee band, Circus Oz and the National Junk Band...Tales of ragtime and jug-bands, multimedia galleries and international folk-circuits... Come to believe that one man can play to anyone from infants to the elderly...Marvel at the changes technology can render upon the careers of innumerable performers in contemporary incarnations of traditional musical-theatre...

Born with vaudeville in his blood, Mic Conway came into the world as Michael Aarons, in February of 1951. Mic's paternal grandfather, Manny (Emmanuel) Aarons, was Jewish; his grandmother a gypsy ("we never knew what her origins were"). Mic's father Conway Aarons changed the family name to Conway, and took up the Christian name of Jim when Mic was very young – 2 or 3 years old. Manny Aarons played the Wurlitzer organ at Sydney's State Theatre; he was known variously as "Mr Wurlitzer" and the "Wizard of the Wurlitzer" and wrote music for silent films. Among Manny's brothers and sisters were Adelaide and Lyla. Onstage, "Addie" played the role of soubrette, a female vaudevillian all-rounder who performed any role from chorus-girl to magician's assistant. Lyla - who had "this kind of very little minuteness about her" - played the role of children on-stage until the age of 38.

Mic's mother loved the tongue-in-cheek ragtime music of Fats Waller. Her brothers, John and Don Cameron, were opera and light-musical singers, but Mic "didn't get into opera at all". Both Mic's parents played music in the house constantly, 78s or long playing recordings transferred from older materials. From a very early age, 7 or 8, Mic became obsessed with music from the 1920s and '30s, frequenting school fetes and 'op' shops: "I couldn't get enough of it."

Mic's first musical performance was in high-school, a school which took theatre very seriously. He and his friends - "an odd bunch of friends, really oddball" - performed at a school theatre night, "taking the piss out of modern theatre". Rather than responding in shock, the audience took the piece very seriously; "so it was actually a bit of a failure...we thought everyone would laugh but they didn't".

Given a recording of some blues music by his sister's boyfriend, Mic was instantly struck by the unique sound of jug-bands: Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers ("Walk Right In") and the Memphis Jug Band on "Stealin, Stealin". The sound of the original jug-bands is exceedingly makeshift; off-the-cuff recordings of a bluesy, semi-improvised music. Mic decided to form a jug band of his own, to perform at a school charity event. Although previously he hadn't played an instrument, he started playing wash-board, jug, "all these home-made things". He was particularly taken by the ease with which the music could be played, the lack of expertise required. His brother Jim Conway played harmonica: "Within a couple of weeks of him starting, he was fantastic – he just had a natural thing for it." A great success at the school charity event, they went on to play Melbourne's folk circuit and Mic's career in music was up and away.

Look over yonder, the Circus this way comes! Formed as the Jellybean Jug Band, they hit the folk clubs in 1968/69 and played Melbourne's Outpost Inn, where the 8 musicians in the band were paid the pittance of eight dollars per set collectively. Through the '70s, the band went through many

changes of line-up and name: from Jellybean to Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band to Soapbox Circus, to Circus Oz and back to, simply, "Matchbox". "Just to let people know we'd changed."

These were the days of the hippie craze: "We were definitely counter-culture!" says Mic. One particularly important educational experience for the band was a week-long engagement at Martin Sharp's "Yellow House" multi-media gallery in the late '60s. Sharp had been famous as the artistic director of the underground street press, "Oz" magazine. The Yellow House was a psychedelic mansion in King's Cross, where each room had separate themes and individual artists would create surrealist paintings and sculptures. Here Mic met painter Brett Whitely, comedian Marty Feldman and others he didn't recognise at the time - including one coke-fiend who'd been the inspiration for the Rolling Stones' "Jumpin' Jack Flash". Mic and his fellow musicians would sleep on the floor after a particularly late night, while patrons wandered through, stepping over their bodies. Mic remembers it as "a cultural overload, we didn't know what had hit us." "We were really just schoolkids, but we had this funny little jug band." After about a year or so, the Yellow House was closed due to complaints, but the building on Macleay street remains and its legend lives on.

Circus Oz, a cross-breeding of circus and theatre, was a way for performers from Melbourne's famed Pram Factory to tour its own "Soapbox Circus" as a travelling theatrical troupe. Performers would teach each other theatrical and acrobatic skills; it was here that Mic first learned fire-eating. Queried as to its "trick", Mic responds: "There's no trick, it's a technique. I've been doing it for 30 years. Get it right, it's fine; get it wrong, it's really painful! Doing it outside's really tricky. Some people die from it."

A natural fire-eater, the flames he exhales tell many another story: "One of the reasons I left Melbourne in '82, was I felt typecast as Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band...I wanted to do more acting, I wanted to do more Cabaret and theatre."

Mic's first major on-screen role was playing a CIA killer in the Kennedy-Miller TV mini-series "Vietnam". "I actually got to meet him. I was expecting him to be some, ogre. But he was a short little fat guy...I knew this guy's history, he'd killed hundreds of people! He got no credit in the movie because he didn't want to be - he said there were people in Australia who would kill him if they knew he was here. But he helped train us. I thought he'd be an Arnold Schwarzenegger character but he was more like Santa Claus!"

In the mid-1990s, Mic hosted the ABC documentary-series "Vaudeville". The series consisted of original clips from the bygone era, as well as contemporary live-performance material filmed at Melbourne's "Last Laugh" theatre. His great-aunt Lyla - in her late '80s at the time - was brought in as a creative consultant. As Mic recalls, "[she had] all these people coming up to her, treating her like she was the queen of vaudeville...she lapped it up, she was just loving being treated like the queen of vaudeville and she went with it." Lyla lived to 104, dying in 2002. It was during the filming of "Vaudeville" that Mic first met his bride-to-be, Ro, while they both were tending to Lyla.

Mic's most triumphant moment came during a performance at the AFI awards. He was to perform a show tune ("Circus of Dreams") which required him to sing and mime alternately, to climb up stairs over the audience while dancing, juggling, "eating fire" and performing a magic trick. Despite a number of pre-show takes, the number was never rehearsed successfully. Add to this a Codral high from the flu and Mic had visions of great failure on nation-wide TV. "There's this last shot of

me...I've gone up to where Bob Hawke is and back down and I've done the dance, everything's worked, and at the end I've done these big fireball spits and then I've put the flames out in my mouth and then I stand up in this sort of tableau of dancers around me doing my final kind of pose and you see on my face this look of COMPLETE RELIEF! It would have been awful to fail in that situation."

Upon his return to Sydney in '82, Mic - along with brother Jim and a group of friends - formed the Conway Brothers' Hiccups. In 1986, while playing a gig at the 3 Weeds Club, a visiting British "punter" convinced them to tour England - which they did, at their own expense. As well as the Edinburgh and Capitol Music festivals, they drummed up work for themselves along the way: "we worked our butts off!" At the end of one concert, singer Freddie Mercury of the rock group Queen came on stage to congratulate them. "Later on, people came up and said "what did Freddie say?" and I said, "I dunno, who's Freddie? I'd heard of Queen, but I didn't know any of their stuff."

Despite such an accomplished past, it's clear that Mic places primary emphasis on the present. His current group, Mic Conway's National Junk Band, have been together for over 10 years and have recorded 4 albums. The group was formed with fellow jug-band enthusiast Phil Donnison. The underlying concept was to find a contemporary jug-band sound by using equivalents of the jug-band instruments; kitchen sink for a washboard, etc. Other instruments include a national guitar, junk-percussion and a garbage- bin drum kit. On-stage with the Junk Band, Mic is an incredibly busy front-man: He sings!...He juggles!...He breathes fire...He engages in repartee with both musicians and audience members!...He plays several instruments at once on his one-man-band kit! As a result, a Junk Band show - although consisting of only half a dozen musicians -feels very much like a circus.

Their latest album, "Corporate Chook" (2008) was recorded mostly at (mandolin/violin/guitarist) Marcus Holden's "backyard studio". Their previous album was recorded in the studio of Jeremy Cook, the band's drummer. Questioned on the differences between the recording scenes of the 1970s and today, Mic is highly enthusiastic about the current situation: "Unfortunately, for a lot of people in the '70s, a lot of people who had a real lot of talent didn't get anywhere because they weren't, they didn't have a record company...But now, you do it yourself...There's an absolute avalanche of people doing their own recordings and recording studios are backyard jobs or backroom jobs in people's houses...It's a different scene altogether. It's just blossomed out of sight." As well as having clips on YouTube, the National Junk Band has a highly detailed MySpace site. Mic enjoys the archival aspect of YouTube. "All those performers from the 1920s and 30s, some of whom I've only ever heard on recordings, I've never seen live, on film, I've never seen vision of them. Absolutely fantastic!"

He's out there still. And Boy Howdy! is he ever out there! Wherever there's an audience, Mic can play to it. He has several shows for children of different ages, on subjects such as music, the environment, and "life before television". He stresses the importance of not talking down to a young audience: "Early in the piece I saw performers who I thought were really talking down to the kids. What I wanted to do was to get the kids on the same level and laugh along with you rather than be told that they should feel guilty or bad or whatever. I just thought, "if there's another way of doing this..." He's developed the skills necessary to deliver material at just the right level. Mic gives the kids credit for the longevity of his career: "If it wasn't for the kids' shows I wouldn't be here

performing anything. They've kept my whole career going, in every way. I would have had to do a straight job...the kids' shows have meant the whole career for me."

Mic also enjoys playing for seniors - partly because he relates so strongly to their era: "the Golden Age of music for me is the 1920s and '30s. The "New Trocadero Dance Orchestra" - the only musical group Mic has joined rather than formed - models itself on the old swing orchestras. It uses sheet music from the dance-hall era and plays original arrangements. "I like playing the 'oldie mouldy' songs...I want to do an album of crooning, sweet stuff, I've never done an album like that and people have been saying I should have been doing that for a long time."

Somewhere in this whirlpool of activity, Mic has his own family: wife Ro and two daughters. Asked how he manages to balance family life with life on the road, he responds, "You mean, "How does Ro handle it?". "I deliberately didn't have a family for a long time because I thought I just didn't have the lifestyle for it. And then I kind of had some sort of epiphany or something when I was about 40, and when I was doing children's shows for the ABC I thought, "Well, I really have this connection with children" and I really wanted to have children." His daughters have grown up going to the Woodford and National Folk festivals. "Some of my kids have come over to Western Australia with me. And we're about to go up to the Blues Festival at Byron Bay; Ro's coming with me, and one of my daughters. The girls are a bit older now so they don't have to be dragged along."

Through all the permutations, the dissolutions and reformations, Mic Conway has had a vision of a social conscience with a smile. Although extremely subtle, many of Mic's songs feature lyrics of social import: evolution ("Darwin's Human Race"); cultural appropriation ("Cliché Blues"); and social upheaval ("Rearranging the Deck Chairs on the Titanic"). "What I've always done with my performance, and what I've always been interested in, is mixing, cross-pollinating, performance art. I've always been interested in mixing music with theatre, with circus, with magic, with illusion. I love dressing the visuals around the audio, that's what I've always been about, right from the start. And I also love something with a message, something that has to say something. I don't want to be just a bit of fluff. I don't want to be dogmatic. Trying to get a message across in as entertaining a way, I don't want to preach to people and make them feel guilty. I want them to get an idea. And I think that's the great thing about entertainment. It's the way you deliver it that counts."