

John Butler

Biography

Tuba virtuoso John Butler first came to mainstream public prominence in 1968 when he appeared on Australia's first televised talent quest, Channel O's Showcase - the X-Factor of the 1960s.

John was a showman as well as a superb brass player and his dancing performances of fast-moving popular tunes like Tico-Tico and Flight of the Bumblebee, gained him third place in the grand final, a remarkable achievement with such an unfashionable and unwieldy instrument.

John Butler went on from there to become one of Australia's best-known tubists and was a regular in recording studios for jingles and advertisements as well as playing with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra. He was also often seen soloing on the very popular Music for the People at the Myer Music Bowl.

In 1976, John was invited to play at the first International Tuba Festival in Switzerland. Ever-proud of his Australian heritage, John commissioned new works from local composers Larry Kean and Johnny Hawker for the occasion.

In recognition, John was invited to join the Advisory Board of International Tuba Association and is listed as one of only 18 worldwide honorary life members of the association

John Henry Butler was born in 1932. His father, Herb, was a cornetist in both the Preston City Band and the Preston Salvation Army Band and he gave John his first instrumental lessons. It's fair to assume that John wasn't the most attentive Sunday school scholar but he was a precocious instrumentalist.

John started on the cornet but swiftly graduated to the euphonium on which he rapidly became an outstanding young soloist.

He was invited to join the Salvation Army's premier band, the Melbourne Staff Band, and from 1951 to 1964, played solos on virtually every concert, recording and broadcast the band undertook, generally without notice. John would arrive at an engagement to find his name on the program.

John was not fazed – nothing much fazed John Butler – but he would sometimes take small revenge on his conductor, Norm McLeod, by improvising during cadenzas – the bandmaster had no idea where it would end. Sometimes, neither did John!

In 1963, John auditioned for the RAAF Central Band under Sqn. Leader Laurie Hicks and got in – as a tuba player. Hicks promised to put him on euphonium later. John soon found it was trick "the old man", as the bandsmen called him, used to get good players into the band. He would then deny or forget his promise!

John got his own back in two ways: firstly by becoming the finest tuba in town, and secondly, by becoming teaman. The latter appointment used to get him out of tedious rehearsals – and he would make the old man's tea and stir it with the most inappropriate items he could lay his hands on, much to the delight of the men, before carrying it in to him.

It's a wonder the late Laurie Hicks survived as long as he did after all the dreadful things he unknowingly imbibed!

But Hicks, again unwittingly, did the young musician a favour. John gave up his euphonium to concentrate on the tuba, realising you couldn't make a living from the smaller instrument outside the Forces whereas every professional orchestra needed a tuba. John's incredible facility and technique as a euphonium player made him an outstanding tubist.

Again, he became a superlative soloist featuring on a wonderful "Tubby the tuba" with the RAAF Central Band as well as his dancing and playing TV talent quest-winning performances on Channel O.

The recordings he made during this period and his performances at the International Tuba conferences mentioned earlier were quite outstanding.

Towards the end of his playing career, John became a brass teacher at Blackburn High School and, later, Scotch College for 12 years. A whole new generation of tuba players benefitted from his experience and knowledge.

In October 1980, John was surprised to get a phone call from the Nunawading City Band: John had left brass bands behind many years before.

He was asked to "fill in" as conductor and his father, Herb, told him it was time to put something back into the movement. John's "temporary" engagement with the band lasted 28 years till his retirement in 2008.

The band, now known as the City of Whitehorse Band, became a major part of his life and he took the group in a new direction away from empty contest halls to entertaining concerts for the public.

He taught himself arranging and put together hundreds of settings of popular songs for his audiences. His band attracted his old friends from the Channel 9 bands like jazz trumpeters Freddie Thomas and Bruce Gardner, who would not have played in a normal brass band. John worked the band and the crowd that turned up to fill the halls, with a great energy and cheek.

He didn't change much in all the years. He remained an incorrigible, funny, loveable bloke celebrated for his talent, his fantastic playing, his conducting, his teaching and, simply, his joie de vivre.

John Butler was always larger than life – his talent matched by his personality and his outrageous – and occasionally misplaced – sense of fun.

He is survived by his wife of 60 years, Joan, his daughter Joanne and granddaughter, Zoe, and son Peter.

Merv Collins is a family friend

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