

# COUNTLESS MILES

AN ANCIENT CHINESE PROVERB SAYS  
THE JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES  
BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP.

BY ANNA ROSE

For 2013 Australasian Country Music Roll of Renown recipient Wayne Horsburgh, that first step was onto the Swanpool Memorial Hall stage when he was eight, singing in public for the first time at a 21st birthday party.

Since then, countless thousands of miles have been covered by Australia's own truly international country star, who over a 25-year period has paved the way for many others to break into the American market.

Born and raised on a farm in Benalla, Wayne was the only one of three siblings to follow the musical path laid by their father, one of 10 children, all of whom sang or played a musical instrument.

Although spare time was rare on the farm, in those luxurious chore-free moments Wayne would listen to late night radio – Hoedown on 2TM, or programs from Shepparton and Wangaratta.

“Country was mixed in with pop music in those days – you would hear a song from The Beatles, then Jimmy Little or Frank Ifield next,” Wayne said.

“From the early days on the farm we’d listen to the old gramophone records, 78s of Wilf Carter, Jim Reeves, Slim Whitman, Bing Crosby, Buddy Williams and Tex Morton.”

Once he’d learnt a few basic guitar chords from a cousin, Wayne would write out the words of a song, try to figure out the chords and practice until he could

sing it. The only problem was cows don’t clap, so by the age of 11 he was playing in dance bands with the repertoire he’d amassed, something he continued until age 20.

When the seven-student Lima State School entered district choir competitions, Wayne was the choir!

He tried banking as a career from 1971-75 but his musical calling was greater so he resigned at the end of 1976 and worked in a Benalla music shop and taught guitar.

Talent quests weren’t a big part of Wayne’s grounding – it was more performance-based, but he did enter and win a talent quest at Albury where John Minson – the much-loved Mr Hoedown – was judge, and he won male vocal at the 2PK Parkes Jamboree.

Around this time Ray Kernaghan invited Wayne to open his shows in some southern NSW clubs, where he worked with the Barry Sisters. Dorothy Barry suggested Wayne move to Sydney and try the club circuit there.

“To me, that was like going to Las Vegas,” Wayne said. “It was just too big a jump at the time.”

Late in 1977 he got a call from Buddy Williams, asking him to go on the road in 1978.

Before taking off with Buddy, Wayne went to the Tamworth Country Music Festival in January and won the overall prize at the CCMA Jamboree and National Talent Quest.

The tour left Tamworth in March bound for the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia.

Six months into the tour at Whyalla, Buddy suffered a heart attack and the tour was cut short. Most of the troupe disbanded but Wayne stayed on in Whyalla with Buddy’s wife and daughter, Grace and Karen, for five weeks until the veteran entertainer was well enough to travel.

Between them they got the two trucks and caravans safely back to Tamworth.

“After that time on the road with Buddy, I

got up the courage to phone Dorothy Barry and she kindly put me in touch with manager Maurie Porter, who told me he didn’t want to take on any more acts,” Wayne said.

“Dorothy talked him into it and he managed me for three years. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

“It established me on the Sydney circuit, built my confidence and I was able to have charts done and work with some great house bands and tour with acts like The Singing Kettles, Laurie Allen and Jean Stafford.”

Then an offer came for Wayne to work on cruise ships, so in 1981 he set sail on the Fairstar, the first of many cruises he would take in the next decade.

The following year Wayne was invited to go to England but Maurie was not in favour of this move, so they parted company and Wayne self-managed for the next few months in the Mother Country.

It was a hectic schedule – 47 shows in 42 days around Newcastle, Sunderland, South Shields and other areas – but the English liked the style of the boy from Benalla, likening him to Frank Ifield and Slim Whitman.

Back on the Sydney club scene in 1984, Wayne had well and truly caught the travel bug so he went to America for five weeks, seeing lots of the countryside and playing his guitar wherever he went. He enjoyed it so much he returned two years later.

With all the cruise work he’d done, Wayne wrote to the Los Angeles office of Sitmar and in 1987 was booked to perform on an Alaskan cruise with the orchestra, becoming the first Australian country act to break the cruise market on American ships.

The following year he did three months in the Caribbean working out of Fort Lauderdale on Sitmar’s Fairwind.

In 1989 Wayne wrote to four festivals in the States and received a positive reply from the Hodag Country Music Festival in Rhinelander, Wisconsin.

“By sheer chance the festival owners had been to Tamworth that previous January, so they invited myself and Deniese Morrison,” Wayne said.

“Deniese couldn’t go, but I flew over there with Alan Clement and two other directors of the record company [Country City Entertainment].

“They hadn’t arranged a band to back me and as I’d judged the band pick-off competition the day before, I spoke to one of the bands afterwards, the Queote Band,



and asked them to back me the next day.

“We rehearsed that morning and that afternoon played to 30,000 people. It was amazing and the reception was simply overwhelming.”

Wayne shared billing that year at Hodag with Emmylou Harris, The Oak Ridge Boys, Freddy Fender and Ricky van Shelton, among others.

“The organisers asked if I would do another spot the next day. The reaction was bigger than the day before, so between then and 2007, I performed at Hodag another eight times,” Wayne said.

From those two appearances, Wayne was booked for state and county fairs, festivals, theatre shows, clubs and more. Americans couldn’t get enough of the boy from Benalla.

Returning stateside for the next five years, Wayne realised he needed a base there. He’d spent the majority of his time in the US in Nashville, and managed to secure a contract with Rotation Records and made his first Nashville recording in 1994.

Although he’s never chased awards, plenty have found him during a career that’s produced 26 albums – including MO awards for excellence in live entertainment and ACE awards for club and live work. He was a Golden Guitar finalist in 1985 with Shepherd’s Farewell, but that trophy has remained elusive.

Wayne has been a regular visitor to New Zealand since 1984 and will return again in March this year. Last year he took his first tour party to Scotland and Ireland with the Howie Brothers’ Travelrite group, an enjoyable exercise he will repeat in August this year.

He visited England in 1991 playing with Frank Ifield’s band and was delighted to see his plaque placed on the same slab of granite as one of his musical inspirations.

“I’m on the rock beside Frank Ifield, Kenny Kitching and Terry Gordon. Pooley’s on the other side, so I’m in pretty good company,” Wayne said.

While yodelling has been a significant part of his career, it remains a popular part of his repertoire and sets him apart from many contemporaries.

“I’m a singer who happens to be able to yodel – not the other way around,” he said.

“As long as I can continue to include some yodelling songs in my shows, I will.”



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After 25 years of living six months in America and six in Australia, he did a series of farewell concerts in 2009 and will now spend more time in his homeland.

“Out of 25 years back and forth to America, the one disappointment for me was I never got to appear on the Grand Ole Opry. I just didn’t know the right people, apparently,” he said.

Wayne’s achievements are far too numerous to cover in one article. His www.waynehorsburgh.com website has just had a revamp and carries his detailed career history and discography, his gig guide and classic photos from his distinguished career.

“To be honoured back home with the Roll of Renown was an absolute career highlight,” he said.

“It started off 2013 on a major high. I’m extremely proud to be among the great names already on the rock before me.”