Ian ‘Peewee’ Wilson

COME A LITTLE BIT CLOSER

Harmony, Disorder and The Delltones

Affirm Press
Ian Wilson

Come a Little Bit Closer
Four major episodes determined the course of my life. Each of them was unsought, and each brought irrevocable change.

Growing up overlooking Bronte Beach in the 1940s and 1950s, the home I shared with my sister and low-income parents contrasted starkly with the picture-postcard environment of our surrounds. In my early teens, I joined the local surf club and it was there that I happened to be in the right place at the right time for the birth of The Delltones.

A decade later, not long after The Delltones arrived in the UK to record and perform, I met a woman that changed my life forever and who remains by my side.

The third major event in my life occurred on the shores of Clovelly Beach in 1971, not long after The Delltones arrived back in Australia. It was to change my thirty-one years of accumulated ideas about life, and to alter my direction from hedonistic entertainer to
cerebral dropout hippie. From that moment on, I set out on a spiritual expedition to seek answers to the endless confusion and conflict that plagued me as an individual and, so it seemed to me, the world at large. The fourth surprise came about in 1979, when I needed some money to buy farming equipment. Together with the other Delltones, we planned to re-form the group, raise funds for what we needed and disband again. Through many twists and turns, this became a full-blown revival. And we’re still performing, some fifty-five years after the band was formed – despite our total absence from television and contemporary radio in recent decades. And I’m the last remaining original member.

In 1958, we were told not to give up our day jobs, and that our type of music was only a passing fad. Perhaps that’s why I’ve never planned too far ahead in life, and paradoxically it may be part of the reason why we are still around.


On 25 February 1940, I dropped in to the Benevolent Asylum and Lying-In Hospital in Paddington, Sydney, otherwise known as the Royal Hospital for Women. My parents named me Ian James Wilson, though for most of my life I’ve been known as Peewee, the name given to me as a teenage surfing cadet at the Bronte Surf Club. My father, a Scottish migrant, told me that if I had been born in Scotland the locals would have called me John Hamish Wilson, a name he preferred. He never understood nor uttered the name ‘Peewee’, except under his breath.

I was born in Paddo, went to school in Paddo and spent my early married life in Paddo, but for the next twenty-odd years I lived in the beachside eastern suburb Naissance
of Bronte, at Flat 9 Bronte Court on Bronte Road, about 500 metres from the beach.

My earliest recollections of Bronte are the barbed-wire fortifications that lined the beach during World War Two in preparation for the anticipated Japanese invasion. I remember that some of the windows in our tiny apartment were covered in brown paper to shut in the light during the evenings in case of an air raid. The Japanese midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour and the shells that were fired over us, demolishing a house in our suburb, were talked about for years. The war was often discussed among my family and their friends, long after it came to an end, an early immersion that has sustained my fascination with the Second World War to this day.

Bronte Court was a three-storey block of flats, with four small one-bedroom apartments to each floor. We lived on the top floor, and the flat next to ours was occupied by Forbes Carlile, the first Australian to compete in the modern pentathlon, at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952, and later coach to Olympic champion Shane Gould. He and his wife were only a single brick wall away but in the ten or so years he lived next door, not a word was ever exchanged between the enigmatic but distinctive-looking Mr Carlile and his fellow tenants. Our family talked about him but never to him.

The second floor was home to another champion swimmer, Jon Donohue, who was a member of the 1956 Olympic team. He became better known for his surfing talents and went on to win many championships
for the Bronte Surf Club. We were mates in our early years, playing around Bronte Beach before our respective careers changed our lives, Jon emerging as a successful businessman and me as an entertainer.

During the war, Jon’s father, Wally, was the designated air-raid warden for our block. He would sometimes come into our flat with his helmet on, his gas mask tucked under his arm. I remember putting on the rubber mask and steel helmet and breathing heavily as I looked out through the circular eye pieces, imagining that the room was full of deadly mustard gas.

My sister, Kerry, arrived in 1947, seven years after I was born. I have fond but very few memories of our relationship prior to Kerry reaching her teens. Even then, we spent most of our time apart because I discouraged her from having anything to do with the Bronte Surf Club, where I spent most of my time, as I wanted to protect her from the attentions of my mates.

My sister and I slept in a partially enclosed verandah, with me on the top bunk and Kerry on the lower. The room faced north, which meant that when the wind and rain were blowing from the north-east, the bunks had to be covered with plastic raincoats to prevent them from getting soaked. The verandah’s asphalt floor was painted red, and I remember on many occasions mopping it after a summer storm had passed over Bronte.

The great advantage of our bedroom was that I could sit upright in bed and have a panoramic view of the beach. This scene was so attractive and appealing, I
would make plans for playing truant from school. I had two schemes: one was to fake sickness for an hour or so, which my mother invariably fell for, and to then recover just enough to be allowed to ‘get a little sunshine’ but not enough to go to school. The other strategy was to wave to my mother as I got on the tram, which terminated about a hundred metres from our block of flats. If she was watching, I would jump off the other side and hide behind the terminus shed until both the tram and Mum had left.

Kin

Mum and Dad were a very sociable couple. They spent most weekends with their many friends and relations playing cards, telling stories, dancing, singing and generally having a good time. Most of these parties went on in number two in our block of flats, where Dad’s sister Mary and her husband, another Wally, lived. When they’d immigrated to Australia after the war, Mary and Wally had brought with them a pet rhesus monkey, which now stood stuffed in a glass box on top of a cupboard. They told me lots of stories about this animal, how it would run and climb around their very small flat. They had no children, so the monkey got a lot of attention.

Uncle Wal was distant but likeable. He played the piano at parties and I was very impressed with his style of
playing, which seemed to have a very busy left hand. My aunt would proudly remind me that he was untrained and played by ear. Their flat was my second home, and I spent a lot of time with my aunt, who seemed more accessible than my mother.

Mum was a slim, attractive woman, her features quite delicate in contrast to Dad’s lean, six-foot-three-inch frame. The son of a Scottish coal miner, Dad immigrated to Australia in his early teens, and went immediately to work. He had many jobs but the only memory I have is of his years spent working as a cook at the now-demolished Australia Hotel in Castlereagh Street. He often complained about the poor pay and felt justified in pilfering food from the hotel kitchen to fill our Kelvinator Silent Knight refrigerator with perishables and keep our pantry well stocked with tins of whitebait, asparagus and baked beans.

The walls and ceiling of the tiny kitchenette where Mum and Dad cooked our meals were painted with white kalsomine, which turned patchy brown over the years from the stove’s smoky fumes. Most of the meals my mother cooked were basic meat and three veg, but Dad’s gourmet concoctions were the result of his culinary philosophy. He would often remind us that the secret to creating a tasty and satisfying meal lay in the sauce and garnishes he used so liberally. We were never exactly sure what was hidden away under the blanket of Dad’s elixir.

I don’t think Dad really liked cooking, but he did like to drink and smoke. His favourite roll-your-own
tobacco was Champion Ruby. I remember him with a cigarette paper hanging from his lip, taking a few strands of coarse tobacco out of the plastic pouch and rubbing it between the palm and heel of his hands until he was satisfied with the texture. He would sprinkle it onto the cigarette paper and with one sweeping lick, he’d roll it into an almost perfect cylinder. Popping the cigarette between his lips, he’d wet one end before turning it around and lighting it. I recall watching this ritual with interest and anticipation, because if he forgot to dampen it, the cigarette paper would burst into flames, causing him to jerk his head back and pull the cigarette quickly out of his mouth to avoid burning his nose. After a few drinks, this was a common occurrence.

Dad loved classical music; it was his passion. The radio was always tuned to the ABC and on many occasions in my mid teens, when I was coming home from the movies or a party, I would hear loud music coming from Flat 9 Bronte Court. It was no use knocking to get in, because Dad would be off in another world, so I’d let myself in by putting my arm through the servery and unlocking the door from the inside. And there would be Dad, his wavy hair dangling over his forehead, the school ruler in his hand a substitute for a baton. Lit only by the light of the dial on the Kriesler Triple Throat radio, and accompanied by a full ashtray and half-empty bottle of dry sherry, he conducted the classics with such great emotion it impressed me enormously. With brief acknowledgement of my presence, he would attend to the
next recording, miming an instrumental solo or singing along with one of the *World’s Greatest Tenors*, one of his favourite radio programmes.

My father was a charming man, and most people seemed to like him. He had a wonderful sense of humour and a baritone singing voice that sent family and friends into wild applause at parties. He was totally untrained, but could sing popular classics with a mock foreign accent. Unlike Dad’s undisciplined musical talents, Mum had learned to play the piano in her early years, and she had the certificates to prove it. But as far as I can remember, she never played at the frequent parties they attended.

While he was working at the Australia Hotel, Dad befriended the owner of a pawn shop close by, whose name was Edgar Balls. I had my doubts as to whether this was his real name because Mum giggled every time my father mentioned him. Over the years, Dad would bring home small inexpensive gifts and on one occasion he arrived with a violin inside a scruffy case. I was very impressed as he opened the lid to reveal the instrument sitting snugly in its bed of green velvet. Dad had found the violin while rummaging around at the back of the store, and he told me it was a priceless Stradivarius that had been overlooked by Mr Balls and customers alike because of its unsightly case. Mum scoffed at this story, but I was so excited when Dad told me the violin was mine, and that my tutoring would start as soon as he could afford a teacher. It never occurred to me to
wonder why Dad didn’t consider reselling the violin, if it was so priceless. I tried drawing the bow back and forth over the strings but was unable to produce more than a horrible squawking sound that sent shivers down the spines of my family, who pushed me into the next room and shut the door.

That evening after dinner and a couple of sherries, Dad sat on the ‘Stradivarius’ and it disintegrated. He put the pieces back in the case, along with the bow and resin, closed the lid and mumbled something about shoddy workmanship. And that was the end of my formal musical education.

Dad often expressed his dislike of religion, calling it a lot of bullshit and the exploitation of the poor. He was a supporter of the Labor Party and a big fan of Ben Chifley, who led the party from 1945 until his defeat in 1949 by Robert ‘Ming’ Menzies, whom Dad disliked as much as religion. He thought Mum was a God-fearing Church of England supporter and Liberal Party voter, but I believe that, just like Dad, she was an agnostic and voted Labor. Dad believed he was intellectually superior to Mum and repeatedly told her so by innuendo. In response, Mum refused to talk to him about her religious beliefs or her political allegiances, which drove him crazy.

Dad’s drinking increased over the years, a constant irritation to my mother, who routinely scolded him for it. He in turn argued that she should give up her daily habit of taking Bex powders and get on with
the housework, as our small, one-bedroom flat always looked run-down and untidy. This vicious circle continued for years.

I don’t remember having too many ‘deep and meaningful’ conversations with Dad, but I do recall one intimate episode from my teen years. We were leaning on the balcony of our verandah overlooking the beach, gazing up at a crystal-clear night sky filled with stars. Out of the blue, Dad began to wax lyrical about the enormity of the universe and the insignificance of humankind. He then spiralled down to his own sense of unimportance as an individual, and how powerless he felt to be able to make any real change to his circumstances. He went on about the arrogance of religions and the posturing of those in power, with their think-they-know-everything air of superiority.

This was one of the first conversations I had about life’s bigger picture. It led me to ponder whether religions and ‘those in power’, as Dad put it, did in fact know something that my father didn’t. I was doubtful I’d have access to this knowledge through the normal channels of education, and would have to discover it elsewhere.

This ‘elsewhere’ emerged as a dream that recurred intermittently for years. In the dream, I encountered a man of magic, a wizard, who gave me a potion that transformed me into a superman. I dazzled my peers with my scientific insights and a show of superhuman strength that humbled my enemies.
The Bug House

My recurring dream probably had its roots in the Saturday-afternoon movie matinees I used to watch at the Bronte Picture Palace in Charing Cross, Waverley. From the age of eight or nine I’d been a regular visitor to the Bronte Bug House, as the dilapidated movie house was known.

The noisy tin roof leaked when it rained, the paint was peeling off the walls and ceiling, and under the seats there’d be wrappers and empty cups left from the session before. *Tarzan* was always a favourite, along with the ubiquitous cowboy movies of Gene Autry and Tom Mix – and of course the shorts and cartoons – but the Bug House created the ideal atmosphere for an evening horror movie. The dark walk home to Bronte Court was terrifying after a scary Boris Karloff movie, particularly if there were only two or three of us. We’d start the mile or so walk down Bronte Road at a brisk pace but would soon break into a trot, and if we got really spooked it would be run, run, run all the way home. As we peeled off, one at a time, into our homes, I’d usually be the last one, and I’d fly the final hundred yards or so with my little heart in my mouth.

When the Bug House was demolished in 1950, our mob moved to the collection of beautiful art deco movie houses in Bondi Junction – the Star, the Metro and the Coronet. The Star was the largest and most popular, and going there in my mid teens on a Friday or Saturday night was an event. It was a chance to dress up and rub
shoulers with the mainly young audience, the girls with their bobby socks and guys wearing peg-bottom trousers and winkle-picker shoes, reeking of Brylcreem and Old Spice. There was excitement in the air as we milled around on the lush red carpet, trying hard to look cool as we chatted up the girls and caught up on the latest gossip. In fact, the gatherings before the film, at interval and after the movie were the real highlights of the evening.

I don’t recall going to the pictures often as a family, but I do remember my father taking me to see the re-release of Walt Disney’s Fantasia. He’d seen it in 1941, the year after I was born, and he’d loved it. The music score was by a string of composers, including Bach, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and Beethoven, and I’m sure he wanted to introduce me to classical music at an early age, perhaps in the hope I would grow to love it as much as he did. The music was wonderful, in Fantasound, a pioneering stereophonic form of surround sound, and was enchantingly accompanied by Disney’s colourful animation. I saw the movie many times over the next twenty or so years and I have a copy in my video collection today.

Dad pointed out one of the singers in Fantasia who had a bass voice that shook the walls of the old theatre. His name was Thurl Ravenscroft. I never forgot his name, or his incredible basso profundo…

At home, the radio was our main form of entertainment, programmed by my father who favoured the ABC for its shows imported from the BBC. Week
nights we would sit around our small Kriesler to listen to English comedies, including *Much Binding in the Marsh* starring Kenneth Horne and *Take It from Here* with Dick Bentley, Joy Nichols and the man with the ridiculously oversized moustache, Jimmy Edwards. But the family favourite that was rarely missed was *Hancock’s Half Hour*, which never failed to send us all into hysterics.

Dad never warmed to Australian comedians such as Roy Rene’s Mo McCackie character, and he left me alone to listen to *Yes, What?*, an Aussie comedy set in a school classroom. My personal favourite was *The Goon Show* created by Spike Milligan, but Mum never missed *Larry Kent, Private Detective*, which complemented her prolific reading of crime novels.

It was through the triple throat speakers of our Bakelite Kriesler that I first heard the unforgettable sound of Elvis Presley’s ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ in 1956, the same year television was introduced in Australia. Until then I’d been looking forward to hearing Frank Sinatra’s latest hit, although my favourite that year was Tennessee Ernie Ford’s ‘Sixteen Tons’, which my dad also liked. But ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ was different from anything I’d heard before. The song made an indelible impression on me, though not on my father, and I would later listen closely to The Jordanaires, Presley’s vocal backing group.

Television came to the Wilson family around two years after its introduction to Australia. Before then, like a lot of other kids, I would watch it in a department store or electrical appliance shop. Of course, there was
no aerial installed on the roof of our apartment block, so a rather ridiculous contraption perched on top of the telly was used to pick up a signal. Made out of plastic, it was very much like a coil spring wrapped around a curtain rod on a stand that resembled an upturned funnel, and it never produced a clear picture. The three channels, Nine, Seven and Two, were constantly snowy, and to get any sort of picture with reasonable weather my father extended the lead so we could move the aerial around the room to find the best position for each channel. Sometimes it was necessary to put it on top of the refrigerator in the kitchenette. Bob and Dolly Dyer’s *Pick a Box* was among the must-see Australian programmes, although we all had to endure Dad’s constant comments on dopey Dolly and Bob Dyer’s American accent. Graham Kennedy’s *In Melbourne Tonight* was another favourite. (Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that, in just a few years, I’d be appearing on *IMT* with The Delltones.)

Internment

Movies, radio and television were no competition for my favourite pastime: goofing off at the beach with a few like-minded kids, fishing, exploring the coastline and lying in the sun. One of my favourite activities was catching toadfish in the rock bogey hole at Bronte Beach.
Holding the fish in a cupped fist, I would blow into its mouth and the fish would blow up like a balloon, after which I would hurl it into the surf or cruelly throw it onto a rock where it would burst with a bang.

I was particularly accident-prone as a pre-teenager – a tendency that’s continued throughout my life – and this nonsense with the toadfish stopped after a particularly memorable incident when I squeezed one too tightly and it slipped from my grip and latched onto my protruding bottom lip. Anyone who is familiar with toadfish knows that their front teeth are extremely large and powerful, and that once they get a grip they don’t let go! Screaming with pain every time the fish wriggled, I half walked, half ran from the crowded Sunday-afternoon beach with a flapping fish firmly attached to my lower lip. The beachgoers’ and picnickers’ faces registered shock and disbelief as I ran past. Was I trying to eat a raw fish or spit it out? My mother saved my lip but not the toadfish, cutting off its head on the breadboard.

I continued to play truant and spend my days at Bronte Beach, and my dislike of school was well developed by the time I began my secondary education at Paddington Junior Technical High. My first day at high school got off to a bad start. Having received my father’s genes, I was now over six foot tall, and about one foot wide, placing me head and shoulders above most of the other kids. To compensate, I would hunch my shoulders forward and bend my knees slightly, in an attempt to sink to the average height of the other pupils.
A rite of passage in the public school system was the change from short pants in primary school to long pants at high school. However, I’d been given the choice of receiving a Meccano set for Christmas or a pair of long pants for my entry into secondary education. What choice? I hadn’t given long pants a second thought until that first day at high school. Out of two hundred or so kids, I was the only pupil wearing short pants, which were now three years old. To make matters worse, I seemed to have had another spurt of growth over the summer holidays, which meant the legs of my pants ended not far below my crotch. I looked like a giraffe in a field of meerkats.

A lack of attendance, plus chronic lateness, soon placed me with a group of slow-learning students who, for all sorts of reasons, including cultural confusion and language difficulties, found themselves in the same class. In my case, I had a complete lack of interest in anything remotely academic and no competitive sporting talent whatsoever.

Soccer was the only sport that I showed any interest in, simply because I was familiar with a game that my father approved of. He continually bagged rugby league as a sport played by thugs, and declared that both rugby league and rugby union should not be called football. Cricket, he opined, was a boring game for the middle class. Of course, the two major sports played at Paddo Junior Tech were rugby league and cricket. In my first game of rugby league, after I was roughly tackled and
my opponent pushed my face into the turf, I cried foul. It was explained to me that such tactics were part of the game, and that playing in the forwards I would have to learn to dish it out as well.

I tried cricket twice. In my first game, a high ball was lobbed my way when I was fielding. As I stood with legs apart, my hands cupped to receive the slowly descending ball, it slipped through my hands and struck me in the jewel box, leaving me to roll from side to side on the ground. The second time, when I was opening batsman, the first ball from the opposing team’s fast bowler came at such a pace, I lifted the bat to protect myself. The ball struck me first on the hand and then on my shoulder, knocking me back into the stumps – out for a duck. Thereafter I avoided these dangerous sports.

If you didn’t show any promise at sport you were virtually ignored, which meant I could spend my designated sports periods skating at the Glaciarium ice rink on George Street in the Haymarket. During the cricket season, sports day would find me at Bronte Beach, which on most occasions I would have to myself. This was a good arrangement until the school changed its swimming venue to the local pool at Bronte and I was busted.

Life at school was the exact opposite of Bronte. The only thing organic at Paddo Tech was the patch of grass growing in front of the church next door, which was frequently used to settle disputes between students after school, attracting more of a crowd than any church service. There was no tuckshop, so most of the older
kids would congregate at the local milk bar, the Swallow Inn on Oxford Street, mainly for a cigarette, which the owner would sell as a single out of the packet. There’d be so many kids packed in there at lunchtime, puffing away, you’d have thought the place was on fire.

Most of my time at school was preoccupied with avoiding any trouble for fear of the cane, which was often used, along with pacifying bullies and dodging all forms of competitive sport. I found school utterly boring, and was convinced that my destiny lay somewhere out there, through the classroom window.

Every report card I handed to my parents included the same comment: ‘Ian could do better if he would pay attention.’ But no matter how hard I tried to concentrate at school, my mind would drift to the image of the beach, only to be snapped back to reality by the words, ‘Wilson, wake up and pay attention!’ A sense of alienation pervaded my days at this inner-city school, saved only by anticipation for the three-o’clock bell, when I would be on the first tram heading east towards Bronte.

After a pep talk from my maths teacher, Jack Pollock – who for some reason thought I was worth saving – I was able to achieve a Certificate of Merit at the half-yearly exam in 1955. I received a First in English, Woodwork and Technical Drawing, which elevated me to Dux of the class. But it was all downhill from there. My lack of attendance and interest saw me plummet close to the bottom of the class, and I barely passed with my Intermediate Certificate in my final year.
My parents never had any illusions about me being a scholar, and were quite happy just to see me pass. I am grateful for the fact that they were not disciplinarians, but while this gave me the opportunity to grow up in an atmosphere of freedom, and with a certain ambiguity about what is strictly right or wrong (a result, I think, of my parents constantly arguing a point), it also gave rise to a lack of self-assuredness that emerged much later in life.

Peewee

I joined the Bronte Surf Club when I was fourteen, though I’d already found a way to use the club’s facilities by developing a friendship with some of the club’s members. Growing up with those views of Bronte Beach, it was almost a given that I’d gravitate towards learning how to surf. Bronte claims to be the first surf club established in Australia, and the world for that matter, a claim backed with solid evidence; the counter-claim by the ‘best known beach in the world’, Bondi, remains contentious. However, there were no swimming or surfing schools back in the mid 1950s, so apart from picking up tips from older, more knowledgeable surfers, you were left to learn by experience. Each step forward gave me a great sense of satisfaction. Learning to survive in the surf, and the sheer excitement of body surfing a wave from the break line to the shore, transcended
all other experiences in my life up to that point. I was obsessed.

My active membership of the Bronte Surf Club began as a cadet, and I moved through the ranks to a junior and then on to senior. Growing up with a large group of volunteer lifesavers from all walks of life and ages was a joy and a privilege. The club was a home away from home, with a family of colourful characters with nicknames like the Monkey, the Duffer, Black Dick, the Map, Ming, the Bear, and so on. My nickname was stamped on me as a cadet. Generally, red-haired blokes were called Bluey and overweight blokes were called Slim, so Peewee seemed appropriate for a skinny, six-foot-three beanpole: Aussie irony.

Apart from a couple of years with the rescue and resuscitation squad, I was unable to garner any enthusiasm for competition. My passion was surfboard riding. It interfered with every other activity in my life, even chasing girls. I’d heard about the legendary Duke Kahanamoku bringing the first surfboard to Australia in 1915, and the equipment hadn’t changed much since then. My first board was made of plywood, around fourteen feet in length, pink with black footprints stencilled onto it. I wanted to be noticed.

In 1956, when a group of Californian lifeguards introduced the Malibu board to Australia, I joined the rush to purchase my first Okanui, as we called them. A much shorter board – nine foot six – and also made of plywood, it offered the opportunity for more control
than the old racing-style long board. It was a quantum leap in manoeuvrability and a more satisfying ride.

Riding waves of around two to three metres was well within my capabilities, but anything over three metres proved too challenging. I found myself making all sorts of excuses not to go out into the big surf if it was too intimidating.

Surfing didn’t take off in a big way in Australia until after the movie Gidget appeared in 1959. Before the movie, most surfers belonged to a lifesaving club, but from the 1960s the movement grew outside lifesaving into the surf industry and culture we have today. As music started to enrich my life, I became increasingly disenchanted with the direction surfing was taking. Back in the mid to late ’50s, there’d be only three or four board riders surfing at Bronte during the week and perhaps twice as many on weekends. But as the sport grew, the waves became increasingly congested, the riders aggressive, and the joy of riding diminished. The boards were shorter and faster, and the style and technique more frantic. Surfing became professional, and what was once a soulful cult was hijacked by secular interests and corporations with big bucks and celebrity surfers.

But back in the late ’50s, hanging out at the surf club was still special, particularly on a Sunday if the surf wasn’t up, as a day of drinking beer and entertainment lay in store. After the morning surf race, we’d stroll over to the Splashers’s clubhouse, a small wooden shed on the southern end of the beach next to Bronte Baths. The
Splashers competed with the Bondi Icebergs, and both clubs provided year-round social occasions for winter swimmers.

Around fifty to a hundred blokes of all ages would be seated at rows of long tables, as volunteer waiters served the thirsty half-naked drinkers with a constant supply of juggled beer. The noisy atmosphere was only interrupted by the weekly roasts that would send the crowd into hysterics. From time to time professional entertainers, comedians and magicians would perform on the small stage at one end of the clubroom.

As my passion for surfing and the surf club social scene increased, so did my growing obsession with sex. Active membership in the club meant taking part in rostered beach patrols, but apart from the occasional rescue, we spent most of the time talking about girls. In those days it wasn’t sex, drugs and rock’n’roll; it was sex, surf, sun and beer. These pursuits were discussed endlessly, but unfortunately for me, I didn’t achieve much success with one of the four passions: sex.

Like most groups of blokes, ours had its big scorers, who were invariably olive-skinned and well built, medium height and square-jawed. As for myself, I didn’t think that being over six foot tall, skinny with a large head, big lips, small feet, a deep voice and no career prospects would be terribly appealing to the opposite sex. Also, being tall and fair-skinned put me not only closer to the sun than most of my mates, the lack of melatonin led to frequent sunburn and a line of blisters on my
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bottom lip. In those days, the ‘cure’ for sunburn was to slowly immerse yourself in a bath of hot water, as hot as you could handle, which is just what you should not do. It was bloody torture.

Being self-conscious about my appearance, it slowly dawned on me that there was an alternative to the advantage of being physically attractive. I’d grown up to be the spitting image of my father, and I discovered I’d also inherited one of his talents: the gift of the gab. I used to watch Dad move himself to the centre of attention at social affairs, singing and telling stories with his raconteur humour, and I’d always admired that part of his personality.

I don’t remember when I first became aware of this inherited social skill but I do remember using it to my advantage to attract girls. When I was on the prowl and found myself in conversation with a girl, I would use my arsenal of ‘gab’ tools to woo her, including flattery, vulnerability and self-deprecation, which to my constant surprise worked a treat.

I was in my early teens when I had my first ‘naughty’, as it was called in those days. It was an overwhelming experience, which didn’t involve any foreplay simply because it was a group event. Being second cab off the rank didn’t faze me at all. The girl, who was more mature than we were, was procured by one of my handsome surf club mates, and two of us were invited to join them at a secure spot in the bush gully not far from the beach. There was no doubt as to who was in charge, as the girl chose
the order of her seducers. We waited nervously outside the bushy enclosure, while the ‘bun master’ opened the proceedings. My anticipation almost got the better of me and I had to recall some of the tricks I’d picked up from older, more experienced blokes to prevent shooting the bolt.

After what seemed like a matter of minutes, it was my turn. I was dressed only in my ‘budgie-smugglers’ and the bird was trying to escape. I stood between the girl’s extended ankles, stripped off my speedos, dropped to my knees and, without a word from either of us, took up the missionary position and entered the overly anticipated tunnel of ecstasy. With a few thrusts of my pelvis, all heaven broke loose. I lay there immobilised until she pushed me away and uttered her first words to me: ‘Get off.’

I staggered out into the clearing, feeling dazed and thinking how much better this was than fooling around with Mrs Palm and her five daughters. This short but overwhelming experience gave me a goal for the first time in my young life: to repeat this event as many times as possible.

My two closest mates at this time were Frank and Tony, who lived a few doors up Bronte Road in middle-class houses. Like me they went to Paddo Tech, but they were in different classes. Tony was older than Frank and me, and a little more mature. I was attracted to these blokes by their apparent fearlessness. Their approach to dangerous activities was to go for it, whereas I took a
cautious approach to anything that might lead to pain and discomfort, due to my increasing awareness that I was accident-prone. I hoped their lack of fear might eventually rub off on me. It didn’t work.

When we’d somersault from the promenade onto the beach, Frank and Tony would invariably land on their feet, while I would land on my head. When we’d hurtle down the steep hill on Bronte Road in our billy carts, I would let them go before me and, after gathering courage, launch myself fearfully and stiff as a board, totally prepared for a crash. As I lay on the road bleeding from the lack of bark that now decorated the road, halfway down the hill, Frank and Tony would be already making their way back for another daredevil thrill ride down the slope.

I never acquired their relaxed approach to danger. Instead, I was learning the skills to avoid physically threatening situations, which I continue to put into practice today.

It was also in my mid teens that I struck up a conversation with a girl called Carmel on Bronte Beach. I had seen her on many occasions on the beach and coming home on the tram from school. Carmel was a tall, statuesque redhead and I had the temerity to think I could seduce her. She was hard to crack. No girl was respected in those days if you made it on your first date.

After weeks of struggle, trying to undo bra straps and many cunning strategies to give the ferret a run, a rather disappointing event took place in the lounge
room of Carmel’s parents’ semi-detached house in Paddington. Nevertheless, it held promise of better things to come.

Carmel loved to dance and so did I, and we jived and jitterbugged the night away at parties and Sunday social nights at the Bronte Surf Club. We were pretty good, too. Sometimes the crowd would clear a space for us and watch, although maybe they were just getting out of the way of my flying feet. After the dance there’d be more groping in the front seat of my Volkswagen, a real challenge for two tall people.

We enjoyed each other’s company, and our fling developed into a long-term relationship, but I had a feeling Carmel’s mother thought I was untrustworthy.

Pyjama Parties

In 1955, between leaving school and starting my first job, I took a trip to Queensland, along with half a dozen of my surf club mates. We drove up from Sydney in a Bedford truck owned by the son of the local fish shop proprietor. Apart from stinking of fish, it was ideal for stacking our longboards and surf skis on makeshift racks. How we managed to get to Coolangatta I don’t recall, but we made it and stayed in a tent city behind Griffith Street.

The surfing off Greenmount was fabulous, and we’d ride the right-hand corner of the metre-high waves
almost to Kirra Point. Young people were coming to Surfers Paradise from all over Australia by plane, train and automobile for the major attraction, which, apart from the sun, sand and surf, was the incredibly popular ‘pyjama parties’. Dressed in their pyjamas, kids would dance to records at these parties, which were held at guesthouses in Coolangatta, and places like Bernie Elsey’s Beachcomber and Seabreeze Motel in Surfers. As the drinking age was then twenty-one, the parties were notorious for under-age drinking. It was common to have a visit from the ‘pyjama party police’, checking IDs, taking names and generally having a good perv.

Rock’n’roll was yet to make an impression, so the dancing was an odd mixture of the jitterbug or jive, the quickstep, the Pride of Erin, the foxtrot and everybody’s favourite, the barn dance, where you change partners. The most popular line dance was the traditional hokey-pokey, with its accompanying sing-along instructions:

You put your front side in, you put your front side out  
You put your front side in, and you turn it all about  
You do the hokey-pokey and knees bend, knees bend  
That’s what it’s all about.

There were many risqué versions of this seemingly innocent little sing-along/dance-along.

In the same year I first visited the Gold Coast, Bill Haley’s ‘Rock Around the Clock’ was released, along with the movie Blackboard Jungle. Everything was about
Get a Job

Leaving school was an enormous relief, and after a few weeks’ holiday I was told by my parents to get a job. There it was in the employment section of the *Daily Telegraph*: ‘Wanted: labourer at Cyclops Toy Factory Leichhardt’. The job was to roll a coiled sheet of steel onto a cradle attached to a large metal press. The steel would feed into the press, and with every downward push of a pedal, a dozen or so washers would fall into a bucket. A set of revolving wheels not unlike a poker machine would register the number of washers that were punched out of the ever-disappearing roll of steel. The job seemed pretty straightforward, even for an accident-prone individual like me.

My training for the position was minimal, but I was instructed that when rolling the steel onto the cradle, under no circumstances was I to try to prevent the contraption from falling on its side if it tipped over, as this was a situation only strongman Don Athaldo could handle. On the Monday of the second week, over it went. I instinctively tried to stop it and found myself pinned to the floor by my little finger, which required five painful stitches. I went onto workers’ compensation and never returned to the Cyclops factory.
My next position was a weekend job at the local fruit shop, owned by Bill Moyes, who went on to pioneer hang-gliding and achieve world fame. My first assignment was dipping apples on a stick into extremely hot melted toffee. I was instructed that under no circumstances was I to splash the liquid, as it would scald anybody within range. Things were going well on my first day until one of the apples fell off its stick and plopped into the molten red toffee. Quick as a flash, I plunged my hand in to save the apple, and let out a scream that could be heard from Bondi to Coogee. Sacked!

I then got another real job as an apprentice glazier with the Goodwin Glass Company in Chippendale. This was a four-year apprenticeship for a trade you could learn in about six months, as putting glass into windowless frames didn’t require a whole lot of brainpower or skill. I enjoyed the work; it mostly involved working outside on building sites or replacing broken glass in homes and factories. Apart from occasional visits from the foreman, we were pretty much on an early version of flexitime, a freedom that allowed more leisurely activities such as drinking beer at the local pub with my workmates, or knocking off early if the surf was up. I was told under no circumstances to ever let go of a pane of glass, but it wasn’t long before I was back on compo after cutting my leg to the bone.

On my return to work, I was sent to Tooth and Co’s brewery on Broadway to replace the glass in banks of small windows running along a wall opposite an assembly
line of bottled beer. The beer was ice-cold, with foam trickling down the outside of the bottles, an irresistible sight for me and my fellow glazier Stefan, a middle-aged Hungarian. With free beer on hand while we were working, we also received a gratis schooner at morning tea, lunch and knock-off time.

After our final schooner, Stefan and I would find our way to the parking lot and board our transport home: my rigid-framed Matchless 350cc single-cylinder motorbike. Half-pissed, and unlicensed to carry a pillion passenger, I continued this daily ritual until one rainy day I got the front wheel caught in the tram tracks on Cleveland Street. We went down on our side and slid into the entrance of the Strawberry Hills post office. Though we survived without a scratch, Stefan refused to remount facing the front, so I drove him home seated backwards.

The apprenticeship lasted two years, and then The Delltones rescued me.