

Growing up in New Zealand, did you come from a family of musicians?

Yes I was born in Auckland and called New Zealand home for 29 years. There everyone sings a bit, so I didn't see it as exceptional to be a singer. In our family music was important and I loved singing whenever I could. My father Max is now 92 and can produce music on many instruments. Although he never performed out, he filled our home with music by playing piano, banjo, guitar, ukulele and piano accordion in particular. He still writes poetry and songs. My four older brothers only played records and we had a diverse collection based on their individual tastes. As the lounge shared a wall with my bedroom, it pulsated into the night with Led Zep, the Beatles and other 70's rock and pop music. And of course, Māori culture and its music were formative influences.

Did you travel as children?

Most weekends and summer holidays we spent at our 'bach', the NZ word for shack. About 80 miles north of Auckland in a surfing town, the basic fibro provided a place of respite for the family. One of my brothers had a serious pushbike accident and required years of rehab and hospital visits, so the bach was a great place for our whole family to relax at the beach.

How important was music in your school years?

It takes one teacher to change a life they say, and Brian Hirst was that teacher for me. When I auditioned for a school folk choir, Mr Hirst insisted I take a solo role. In spite of my shyness, he urged me to perform in front of people. He also steered some students into a choir which sang on a television program after school. It was terrific training. During school years I also joined the West Auckland Country Music Club and performed in folk clubs. We were taught presentation, how to hold and use a microphone, and prepare for performance. Knowing professional techniques and practising them over and over gave us confidence and eliminated nerves.

After school years, did you have a day job as well as music gigs?

Yes, I knew we had no money for me to go to university, so in 1984 I left school early and worked in a bank, in time becoming a trainer and travelled NZ opening up new branches.

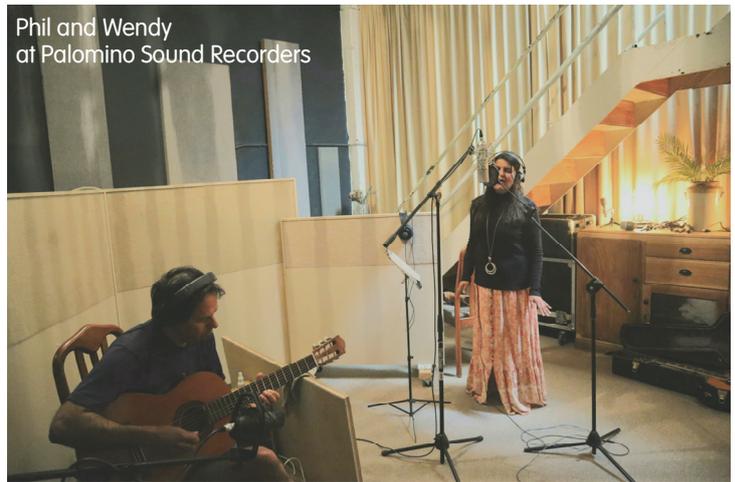
All the while I was singing on the side in rock bands and performing in pubs and night clubs. I was careful to select the right jobs and loved the live music scene. In 1996 however, aged 29, I left employment and went travelling in Europe with a friend on a 42-day Contiki tour. Early in the trip I met an Aussie, Mick. He was due to return to Australia before my trip ended so I continued travelling but love won the day and eventually led me to Australia.



Wendy with her painting of Normanville Jetty

How did you let go of NZ?

The roots were deep, and I cherished visits home. I missed family and the green NZ landscape. Mick and I lived for 12 years in Tea Tree Gully, and the first time we drove to this area, and I saw the hills and rolling country, it resonated with me and felt like home. I became an Australian citizen in 2000, the year we married, and I am happy and contented here.



Phil and Wendy at Palomino Sound Recorders

And you worked and sang in those Adelaide days?

Yes. The Commonwealth Employment Service in the city offered me a job when I walked in off the street to seek advice. It was a stroke of luck and I worked in their offices for ten years.

Music continued outside work hours of course. I took some formal training in jazz, my love for it born out of a childhood listening to Billie Holliday and later, Ella Fitzgerald. Opportunities came as I made contacts with other musicians, saxophonist Kym Mitchell through my course, and double bass player Geoff Miller who was also working in employment services. For ten years I sang with the Adelaide Jazz Trio, performing many concerts with Geoff Miller, pianist Peter Merchant and drummer Rob Mastropolito.

Yes we remember the wonderful concert of you singing with that trio during the 2013 Leafy Sea Dragon Festival. Many subsequent concerts followed. How have you changed since coming to Australia?

Motherhood made a huge difference of course. As a first-time mum at 42, and grateful for the love showered on me in my own childhood, I embraced this role wholeheartedly. When my son, Max was still a baby I took up oil painting as a hobby. My jetty painting reminds me of the hours I spent with him at Normanville beach when he was little. Max is now twelve years old, and Mick has his own business here so we all very much belong. I love my library job at Yankalilla Area School where Max is a student. As a book lover, putting books into the hands of children is the perfect job for me.

Musically I'm right where I want to be. I'm learning how to play ukulele and I'm a member of the local group, the Yankaleles. I'm more comfortable with my song choices and am less influenced by others' opinions. The songs of the 60s and 70s that I grew up listening to are now finding their place in the repertoire.

Locals have taken Wendy McPhee to their hearts, and you obviously love performing. In what directions are you going now?

Covid restrictions have squeezed music venues, so I have been following my urge to write and record my own songs with Phil Noel. Phil creates the musical ideas, and I add the lyrics. We are currently recording at 'Palomino Sound Recorders' which is the recording studio of Tristen Bird in Myponga. I'm loving it and the creative challenges and freedoms the creative process brings.

There are opportunities to build a following and release our songs online under the banner of 'Phil and Wendy' later this year. I have recently joined a workshop with an online songwriters group which stimulates my creativity as we critique each other's efforts.

But when venues can accommodate bigger crowds and the hospitality industry gets back on its feet, I'll be excited to perform out again. I love to share music.

1/16p

STOP PRESS:
 Just announced, Phil and Wendy will be playing at Smiling Samoyed Brewery at Myponga on Mothers' Day on 8th May.