

### Have you always called South Australia home?

No, I was born in Boyup Brook in the south west of Western Australia, the youngest of four girls with a brother coming later. Our mixed farm of 1100 acres, rescued from the devastation of rabbits, carried sheep and cattle and grew wheat and flax. Clear memories of stooks of hay and the apple orchard remain. Although only 5½ years old when the family shifted to Adelaide, I remember farm life positively and have always gravitated to country.

### Was music in your life from those early years?

Always. Sitting in the back of the Peugeot station wagon Jenny, Susan, Elizabeth and I would belt out songs such as "The Quartermaster's Store" and "Ten Green Bottles". Our mother, whose family had gathered around the piano to sing, infected us with her pleasure in music. We were always singing, listening to records and radio, and also dancing.

Jenny, my eldest sister, would listen to music all day if she could. Her influence rubbed off on her younger siblings as we heard Dusty Springfield, Beatles, Col Joye, The Seekers and Ray Charles amongst others. As well I played my own four albums over and over, singing along to *Sound of Music*, Roberta Flack, Olivia Newton-John and Nana Mouskouri.

Performing for my sisters, I blew them away when I harmonised to Flack's singing. Although I thought initially that the Mouskouri album my mother bought me was just for oldies, I learned heaps harmonising with her songs. My sisters remember me practising, working hard at my craft. But love of music was my driving force, not self-discipline. Having a guitar from the age of 13 allowed me to sing independently and opened up opportunities to perform.

### Did you have formal music training?

Six months of singing lessons with a baritone in my teens gave me the basics and engendered my love for singing and performing. In my late twenties I took lessons in Victor Harbor with soprano Carol Kohler. My skills in breathing, diction and projection grew with her more formal approach.

### When did you really know you had a voice?

After early days singing freely I had an awful experience with stage fright in grade six and lost my confidence to sing in public. For years I'd mostly sung informally or with family, but when I was eighteen a friend, Greg Champion, successful singer and songwriter, helped me push through my nerves and forced me to sing with him. We performed duos together and recorded with backing bands. Thereafter I knew I could sing and loved being on stage. I happily took the mic, and still find pleasure infusing others with the joy of music.

### After becoming a registered nurse, you still performed?

Yes I was in bands and singing advertising jingles. I worked for several companies but particularly Street Remley with whom I'd recorded in *The Bank of France* band.

I also wrote and performed *Flim Flam Singing Telegrams* for events such as weddings, retirement parties and other celebrations, once interrupting a professor's university lecture to the amazement of his students since it was the early days of such telegrams. At one function I even surprised actor and comedian Gary McDonald alias Norman Gunston.



Margie turns the tables on Norman Gunston

All the while I was singing and playing in city venues with Greg, John Mulholland and others.

### When did you abandon city life for a seaside and rural one?

In 1980 I moved with John Mulholland to Victor Harbor and was soon nursing, managing a hostel in Pt Elliot and playing music and tennis. As part of *Cool Change* we played at The Crown and other pubs, local venues and events. Then I was part of *Maggies Farm* with John and Mark Rivett, and in other Victor bands too. John and I married, and in 1981 started a family. A daughter, son, and another daughter slowed performing, but I continued playing, even with little children. In the mid-eighties John and I played many gigs in the rock band, *Route 66*.

### After you split from John, the music went on?

John set me up with a good guitar and sound system as we parted, and I began playing solo from 1990. It was hectic co-parenting and performing gigs, but the love of music and compulsion to sing to an audience never waned. In the 1990s I was part of *Cactus* with songwriter Karen Plisko and others. Then Katrina Carpenter, Karen and I headed the group *Brill* and played with various backing bands at The Anchorage in Victor Harbor and several Adelaide venues.

I sang at many music festivals across Australia including Pt Fairy, the Gympie Muster, Woodforde and others. At least six times I performed at Tamworth where I met inspiring celebrities such as Ted Egan, John Williamson, Slim Dusty and Joy McKean, Anne Kirkpatrick and Eric Bogle. It was stimulating to share fellowship and laughter with them, as well as music. Beccy Cole invited me to sing backing harmonies for all her Tamworth performances

one year. I did backing for recordings too, and Greg Champion, Beccy and I also did a SA country tour together.

In the early 2000s, on request, I set up an open mic at the Royal Family Hotel in Pt Elliot and hosted it for ten years. Many young musos launched successfully into the music world from that experience. I also played in a duo with well-known Adelaide harpist Moira Lawry. The music never stopped.

### Your photos validate your rich musical experiences through the nineties and 2000s. And then you came to live in the Yankalilla District.

Yes, I'd been regularly performing on the Fleurieu, and recommenced playing with John. The years of politeness and respectful co-parenting paid off as our musical careers sometimes overlapped, and still do. The call of country life continued. In 2009, Jen and I found a wonderful property on Tonto Road, Hay Flat, our "happy place" of eighty green acres, with abundant native trees, birds and wild life. There, as we run cattle and horses, we can also follow our passions. I have a busy musical life and Jen participates in the equestrian world. Now in semi-retirement from nursing, life is good, a balance of music, farm and extended family.

### Where to next?

I sang solo to a warm reception at Bungala House when Jill and Mark Pearse opened their home for soirees in the 2013 Festival Fleurieu. When my sisters joined me for the finale, the audience was rapt.

Elizabeth and I had sung together when younger, and later the joy of singing with her got us both through tough times. Now with older sisters Jenny and Susan, we began singing together even more, and built up a repertoire. Since 2017, we've performed regularly across the Fleurieu as *The Russell Sisters*, with John joining us on guitar.

I sing less on my own now, as my greatest love is singing with my sisters, friends and family, and where there is an inclusive sense of musical enjoyment. I like to make people comfortable to join in and be part of the experience.



The Russell Sisters:  
Jenny, Margie, Susan and Elizabeth

Thank you for sharing your story, Margie. I am sure many readers will flock to hear

The Russell Sisters at the  
Yankalilla Show,  
Saturday 3 October.

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