

## **Val Pyers** by Mike Hamilton YHS 1960

'Val Pyers has died', said my wife, 'wasn't he your music teacher at Yallourn High?' She was reading the obituaries in *The Melbourne Age*, (something people over 50 do) calling him my music teacher, is like calling the MSO a band. Sure 44 years ago, he was my music teacher, and yet his influence and passion stayed with me. Like many of us, I was stunned, we had seen him at the YHS reunion in March 2006, and he looked great. He and Jim Dooley dropped in to say Gday and became guests of honour.

Even after we left Yallourn High, we still remember him. Some didn't like him, many admired him....but they never forgot him. I admired him deeply. For many of us, he was an inspiration, a man who kick-started us into to a world that expected our best.

If you met Val for the first time, you thought - here's a silvertail, charmed background, private school. Not so. Born in the dust covered Wimmera town of Minyip on 14th October 1931, his family were farmers. Minyip was nothing more than a railhead and wheat silo.

He started school when he was four, trying to keep up with his brothers as they ran and played across the paddocks and down the dusty tracks to the State School several kilometres away. Drought forced the family to walk away from the farm and his father got a war time job in the Ballarat 'munitions factory.

The country hicks from Minyip were targets for the school bullies, especially the red headed kid, and with the name of Valentine, you'd better talk your way out of trouble or swing those fists. He did both.



In 1948, he arrived at Ballarat Teachers' College to train as a primary teacher. Naturally he excelled and was asked to continue through to his Bachelor of Arts.

Valentine James Pyers BA (Fine Arts, English, History) arrived at Yallourn High in 1956. Jim Dooley in 1958, he can still remember the coal dust eddies rolling along the streets, the spewing chimneys and thought; where the hell am I?

Jim says he checked into the Yallourn Guest House, walked into the dining room and met a dapper young red head, debonair, man of the world, who assured him the place wasn't as bad as it looked. A couple of smooth operators who soon charmed their way into the social scene.

Val married Anne Crook, Jim married her sister Beth, and Val and Jim became brothers-in-law and good mates.

For Val, Yallourn was a challenge, he cut his teeth on choral productions when he created the Yallourn Madrigal Singers, a small choir that made a big noise in Melbourne and has always been highly regarded.

At Yallourn High he took us as blank canvasses, dusted off the coal dust, scattered words from great writers across us, took us down the corridors of great events, and splashed colours and music notes that stuck for life.

He believed in bringing out the best in people; arrogant? – I don't think so. He had a gift. He pushed, shouted, cajoled and turned a motley crowd of mostly working class kids into a leading choir. They make movies about that kind of thing. The coal town school choir that makes it big.

He left Yallourn in 1964 for Korumburra, stayed a year and headed for Melbourne. Like a brooding volcano, he needed an outlet for his creativity, and in 1973, launched the Melbourne Chorale. He drove them hard and they became the best.

I remember a rehearsal I was filming, where he boomed, 'this is a Negro slave song and you're sounding like a bunch of middle class white people from Balwyn!' The fact they were volunteers meant nothing, if you wanted to do something, then you gave it your best!

A music critic wrote in 1975, 'Why not come out and say it; The Melbourne Chorale.. is at present the best in Australia.'

But once ABC bureaucrats started putting their own agenda on the Chorale's program, Val, like any creative person worth their salt, rebelled. As we all know, you didn't tell Val Pyers what to do....and of course, it became the old case of - who pays the fiddler calls the tune. And Val left. There was a public and unceremonial split. As Jim Dooley said, most of us would have crawled

*into a corner.....but before you could whistle 'there's no business like show business', Val was holding auditions for the Victoria Chorale; he was out to show 'the others', who was best. He was proudly Australian, commissioning several local composers for choral pieces, and took his choirs to anywhere and anybody who wanted to hear.*

*The world needs men like Val Pyers. They are eccentric; up one moment, down the next. Shouting and whispering at the same time, insulting and apologising in the same breath. The creative flame drives a powerhouse that only exhaustion can stop....which is why he needed Anne. His rock, his confidant, best friend, soothing voice and comforting hands. He was always a loving, almost Victorian father.*

*Cancer slammed on his brakes last year. Friends and former students arrived from everywhere. The choir sang outside his window at the small Daylesford Hospital.*

*And would you believe, the Melbourne Chorale acknowledged him as their founder, and made him a life long member. Jim Dooley said; 'you were nice to them!'. Val, always the gentleman, replied, 'I suppose I had to be.'*

*Close friend, Rev John Cleghorn wrote; 'his story began with hearing music from the throats of magpies and blackbirds, but he grew to colour the Australian bush with the thrilling and glorious sound of the human voice'.*

*Val Pyers gave us 'consilio et animis' in every letter of the motto*