

Taking the Mic

From the Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band to the National Junk Band, from *The Wiggles* to *Badcop Badcop*, from Circus Oz to *David Bowie's China Girl* – his originality and unpredictable exuberance is still as fresh as it was in the '70s, with another 30 years to perfect the capers. The astounding Mic Conway talks with Jackey Coyle.

Ello ello ello! Wot's all this then? The frontman is juggling rubber chickens, a bloke's playing a fiddle with a horn attached, there's a ukulele and a lagerphone and a sousaphone and garbage cans... the song is 'Wangaratta Wahine' and the six people onstage are all dressed in stripes and where do you look 'cause they are all doing crazy stuff now one's dashing off a Hawaiian riff on a National guitar and they've dragged a kitchen sink out to play percussion and what's that she's playing on the ukulele? 'Anarchy in the UK'? you have got to be kidding now they're doing 'Good News Week' and the leader is eating fire... wha?... now he's juggling is that a tuba and is that song really called 'The Story of Cowboy Jesus'? not more Sex Pistols? it's 'God Save the Queen' a medley he's going into a Bing Crosby voice and somehow it all fits oh man, my face aches too much from laughing but please don't stop...

We're jammed in a tent at Woodford Folk Fest for a "funbaret" and it's just another gig for Mic Conway's National Junk Band.. Just another jaunt into a magic world turned upside down, where the norm is the unexpected, where a joyous anarchy is layered with lunacy and a sly sophistication that reaches beyond Monty Python, where the MC has a vaudeville soul and slips as easily into a tap-dancing character out of a '20s sideshow as a big-band crooner or a magician. And the music is great, too!

Later on, at the kids' Stardust Theatre, Mad Professor Mic and his crazy lab assistants fashion instruments out of straws, sticks and various other ingenious noisemakers. Cazzbo Johns forms garden hose into a trumpet. Philthy Dunnyseat crafts a tin can into a banjo. Jeremy Junkyard demos, complete with repartee, the spoons. Mic coaxes eerily beautiful songs from a garden saw. Now a PVC pipe becomes a didge and a tea chest transforms into a bass. For the finale, the stage is crammed with young volunteers making a joyous cacophony that somehow, miraculously, works in spite of the errant kids running backstage.

How do you retain that level of intensity for more than 30 years? I recall the '70s in Melbourne, the days of the Station Hotel and TF Much Ballroom, when the Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band burst onto the scene. There was nothing to compare with their jug-band blues/jazz/swing/cabaret/vaudeville happenings – which took the mickey out of the 'rock star' culture by adding tap dancing, juggling, magic, slapstick, and, later, fire eating – and the excitement generated by the core of the band, the brothers Mic and Jim Conway, then art students. Members of the line-up at various stages were part of bands like the Sports, Mondo Rock, Redgum, Armadillo, the Ferrets, the Pelaco Brothers, the Double Dekker Brothers and Manning. Eric McCusker was a member and Michael Leunig did the artwork for the cover of *Wangaratta Wahine*.

It was a constant battle to survive financially. Ironically, Mic was cleaning a factory in Hawthorn when he first heard 'Wangaratta Wahine' on 3XY when it hit high rotation and thus became a country-wide hit.

Songs from a half-century ago like 'My Canary has Circles Under his Eyes' and 'That Cat is High' hit instantly in head circles, becoming cult-into-mainstream classics for their not-so-subtle dope references. And the irreverence of the original song lyrics struck a chord in a generation rebelling against suburbia. The band's music was an early signifier of the post-modern movement that has now swept all of the arts, appropriating styles of other eras, combining and turning them round to make something new and utterly original, always with an ironic element.

Back home in Melbourne, as I absentmindedly chip the candlewax spots off my copy of Captain Matchbox's third LP *Australia* (1975), the memories will deluge me. My rebellious delight will resurface with 'Out in the Suburbs' – where the cream brick veneers were spreading "cream brick venereal disease" – and the sheer bizarreness of the ode to a girl called Unna (*our love had just begunna*), the cuckoo clock-ornamented 'I Miss My Swiss', the melodramatic 'Sweeney Todd the Barber', the tender 'Forever' (*You can be the paper/I will be the pen*), Noel Coward's classic '20th Century Blues'.

But now, at Woodford, it's a great chance to catch up for a chat – Conway now lives in Sydney, as does Jim, a world-renowned harmonica player who is a member of the Backsliders and has his own swing band, Big Wheel. Their sister Janie Conway-Herron is based farther up the coast, working as an academic and a writer of music and prose at Southern Cross University. She is also a gifted performer

in her own right, with a long singer-songwriter history in Melbourne and Sydney bands that stretches back to the '70s with Jane Clifton in Stiletto.

When we sit down to talk, I find a man who asks more questions than he answers. With a mind as far-ranging as his abilities – his job description also includes acting, composing, singing, magic tricks, "bizarre acts" and even a one-man band – he soaks up information with a childlike curiosity.

I have to ask, how does he still keep that manic performance energy?

"Um... because I enjoy it, I guess. Because there's not much money, is it?" He laughs. "And I've a great love of that vaudeville tradition; it's in my blood from my grandparents, who were vaudeville people.

"So I've always loved it. I did an art course, you know, as I've always loved mixing visuals and music together, so that's been my whole artistic direction since I started and I'm still doing it.

"I'm just developing more skills and I enjoy doing new things. Although last night, 'We Drank the Night Away'... we haven't played that one for quite a few years! I don't deny my past, but I kinda like trying new things. There's a definite kind of area that I like to work in and I find that comfortable, even though you might put a few new patches on, try something else.

"It's great learning to balance. I learnt to balance nine cigar boxes on my chin as a performance piece and I've learnt different new magic tricks recently; I love doing a lot of mixing together."

It was Conway's family history in vaudeville that gave him his love of that wacky brand of showbiz, although he never saw them perform.

"Unfortunately when I was a little kid, I was living in Melbourne and they were living in Sydney, but I used to go up and visit my grandfather in particular. He had a very long career working with [Roy] Mo Rene and George Wallace and all these famous vaudeville people. He was the theatre organist as well as the orchestra conductor for the vaudeville shows, and he ended up as Mr Wurlitzer and Mr State Theatre. He used to appear playing the Wurlitzer organ out of the stage at [Sydney's] State Theatre... he used to play this massive thing.

"The big story was that when it first arrived in Australia, there were no instructions about how to play it, it was all in pieces, and the theatre owner said, 'Look, you get it together, otherwise there's no show, no money.' He was sweating on it and he couldn't work out how it all worked – never seen one in his life – but apparently he had some kind of major revelation and got it together just in time for the show.

"My great aunts, one of who recently just died at the age of 104 [Aunty Lyla] – my parents died; it was a terrible year last year, just had every relative die in the upper-generation, but she was further; she was the next level up – believe it or not, they had champion tap dancers and she was a tap dancer, worked with magicians and chorus lines. Adelaide Montague was her stage name. I was actually born Aarons, Michael Aarons. My father was called Aarons; he changed his name to Conway Aarons. A Jewish name, but I'm not Jewish; my grandfather is the only one who's Jewish... he married a Gypsy, who everyone thought was Aboriginal. A mixed bag [laughing]! Our family's all over the place – on my mother's side they're all opera singers; it's a weird mix. I don't even particularly like opera, but my uncle was a famous opera singer; he was a wonderful guy."

Both of Conway's parents were victims of the Depression and got straight jobs.

"Although my father had a brief radio career," Conway went on. "But there's a great sense of humour and when we would visit our grandparents, they would have this ridiculous patter that was just on all the time, which is where we would have learned it all.

"I grew up collecting old '78s and old mouldy novelty songs, which is what kind of led me into it. My mother and my father loved Fats Waller; that's where I started listening, and then I heard some jug band music when I was at school and decided to start form a jug band [laughing] and haven't stopped since, basically.

"So the theatre thing was always there, and I met all these famous vaudeville stars, but I never actually got to see the real thing, even though I did a documentary on the ABC [*Vaudeville*] eight years ago now, and I got to meet even more old vaudeville stars who knew my grandfather.

"You know, it's a ridiculous situation – vaudeville doesn't exist any more, but people are saying I'm vaudeville, and I'm going, well, you know, I've never even seen it!"

Like the Hawaiian-style music that was wildly popular around that era – most of those musicians had never actually seen a Hawaiian play. "And they've never been to Hawaii," Conway laughs. "In the early days, I met a guy called Les Adams, who taught me uke, he taught me all these different Hawaiian strums. He was just an Australian bloke; had a flat in St Kilda. Did you know him at all?"

Did I know him? The charismatic Les Adams, Australia's "King of the Steel Guitar", was instrumental in spreading the trend throughout the golden age of the Hawaiian music boom from the 1920s to the 1950s, a core teacher at the Hawaiian Clubs in Melbourne and Sydney especially, and an in-demand radio and live performer. I wish I had.

"He had these really tacky recordings of Les Adams & the Hawaiians playing all these Hawaiian things. He recorded on one of our albums, *Slightly Troppo* [1978]. He played pedal steel on it. I've still got that recording, but he died a long time ago. He showed me lots of odd strums and told me lots of good stories about George Formby and Spike Jones and all that sort of stuff. He was a lovely guy. I don't know much about him except that I used to go regularly for lessons with him, just as a friend; he didn't charge me."

One of Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band's most famous songs (also an album) was 'Wangaratta Wahine', inspired by finding "these wacky old magazines from the Hawaiian Club of Australia, and one of the magazines had a picture of the blonde sheila wearing a grass skirt and it said, the Wangaratta Wahine. I thought, that's great. That's where it came from. The roadhouse story didn't exist, and everybody kind of made up the rest."

Conway has been eating fire ever since he co-founded Circus Oz. "I learnt that and a lot of juggling and circus techniques. Most people didn't realise that, but I was a performer with Jane Clifton and many other people. Soapbox Circus gradually formed, the plan was to form into Circus Oz. So I picked up a lot of skills there and I worked with magicians – they taught me magic – and they taught me tap dance, so I got all these different things that I just love doing. I'm just like a big kid in a lolly shop – 'I'd love to learn how to do that' so I go and learn it.

"It's good because people show me things because they know who I am. They're generous. I met an old magician on a film set and he worked with my grandfather in vaudeville and so he taught me magic. I said, 'I'd love to learn some of that stuff that you do,' because he was literally the hands on the film *The Sting* with Paul Newman – this guy was the hands for all the card dealing. He's still a very good friend. He's very old now, but I still see him."

Conway's worked on nine films as diverse as *The Coca-Cola Kid*, *The Wiggles Movie*, *Dimboola*, *Stork* and *Jim Conway's Blues* and on TV, when not hosting shows like *Vaudeville* and *House of Fun*, music productions like *David Bowie's China Girl* and *Long Way to the Top*. Apart from theatre shows like Sydney Theatre Company's *The Threepenny Opera*, and Nimrod Theatre's *Vaudevillains*, going back further there was Melbourne's Pram Factory, Soapbox Circus and Circus Oz. Ringmaster, musician, juggler or acrobat, take your pick. And then there's the music the NJB did for the *Badcop*, *Badcop* series shown recently on ABC-TV. That was a retro feel, '60s surf music elements but also with, unusually, grunge.

"Yeah. Well, the best thing about my career is that I haven't had to take a job as a waiter or as a taxi driver," Conway grins. He is now married to textile designer Ro Cook, and has two young sons. "I started late. I had the mid-life crisis – instead of running off with the 19-year-old secretary in the red sports car, I met Ro and then we had children and then we got married. We had the mortgage in Sydney, the full catastrophe. So I've gone straight, haven't smoked dope for 15 years, you know."

That's scary, I comment.

"That's terrible," he laughs. "Don't hardly drink. And I'm not even a Christian."

Now that he has a captive audience, does Conway workshop his stuff on his kids?

"They seen, they've sung, they've stayed, they've learnt some of the tricks. Funnily enough, yesterday at the children's tent we had the great debate about, is magic real. Me and Jean Paul Bell and my kids formed part of the debate team and they took the magic is real side – which I was very glad about because if they took the side that magic wasn't real they'd be able to expose Daddy altogether, you know? [Laughs.] For the sham that he is!

"But fortunately they weren't able to do that 'cause they were taking the pro side. Yeah, the kids love it. A lot of little kids know me now in particular as I appear regularly on Humphrey Bear as Humphrey's imaginary friend Magic Mic. My kids aren't familiar with that, but they grew up when I did a lot of ABC for kids, *Playschool* and that. They got to meet Bananas in Pyjamas and Playschool people and Mr Squizzle.

"My career kicked off again in the kids area. I think – my brother said this to me – that Captain Matchbox was always a kids' band, but we just didn't know it. Except for Smoking Dave and things like that, being outrageous, but it was essentially a kids' band."

The National Junk Band would seem to be a 21st-century version of Captain Matchbox.

"It's just an extension," Conway says. "The jug band is really the band I wanted Captain Matchbox to be. Captain Matchbox went in this direction... we came into Circus Oz, but the people in the band, including my brother, wanted to go contemporary and more modern and more rocky and less funny and less novelty. I didn't really want to go in that direction, but because everybody else was, I went with it. I was never happy with it; I was never confident. The direction I wanted to go in was much more the garbage bin, recycle, playing whistles and getting into all that stuff."

The National Junk Band was originally called the much more cumbersome National Jug & Junk Band. The original idea was to have everyone playing National guitars.

"About five or six years ago, Phil the guitarist had just come back from Fiji and asked me whether I wanted to do a band. I hadn't done a band for quite a few years at that point, and I said, 'Oh, yeah, I'll have a bit of fun.' I didn't think I'd take it seriously. The next thing, we were recording and the next thing, people were booking it, and we've survived ever since.

It was Phil who did that lovely steel break in 'Wangaratta Wahine'. "Yeah, Phil Donnison is his real name, but it's Filthy Dunnyseat on the stage," Conway laughs. "He chose the name!

"And Cazzbo Johns, she's a brilliant musician – people don't realise that the sousaphone player is the principal tuba player in the Australian Ballet & Opera Orchestra. This is the first time she's been able to do Woodford. We've done it about three or four times, and she's never been able to do it because she's always been booked for the opera. She's an incredible player and she loves performing. Like, when Bob Brozman comes out to Australia, he loves to play with her. He doesn't have to rehearse with her, she just follows him and he knows that she'll be there."

Brozman is a regular visitor. "Well, I see him pretty much, yeah. One of my Christmas presents was a Bob Brozman record playing with a traditional Hawaiian band – he's right up my alley. It's a gorgeous album; sounds fantastic. He's such a good player." We muse admiringly about Brozman's myriad collaborations. "Yeah, he sits back a bit. Sometimes when he's on his own, I can't keep up my brain; it's saturated and I get exhausted by the end of it. He played on the recent album, plus we did *Tim Can Alley*, so did Lucky Oceans and so did Del Rey [US blueswoman].

"There's this very obscure singer called Emmett Miller. There's a fantastic book about him called *Dead Voices*. I got an Emmett Miller record in the '70s, this vinyl thing. I knew nothing; it was a green cover with black writing; it had no description about who this person was. It was extraordinary.

"With Captain Matchbox, we did 'Lovesick Blues' à la Emmett Miller, and recently on the *Tim Can Alley* record, we did another song, 'Take Your Tomorrow'; I did that as a duet with Del Rey. She knew Emmett Miller, so we decided to do that song together."

Recalling the gig the night before, I have to ask, who else would think of doing Sex Pistols and Bing Crosby in one verse?

"I don't know," Conway laughs. 'Somebody! I remember in the '70s when the whole new wave thing came out, and the Sex Pistols. We'd put out this single as Matchbox, exactly the opposite. We did this lullaby, of course it died in the bum, but it was called 'Sleep'. Meanwhile the thrash thing was happening.

"I love a thing with that kind of a political edge and also sense of humour, and the Sex Pistols had both. I quite liked them, even though they were out of tune and loud and dirty and all that. It's great. I like doing 'God Save the Queen' myself. It's a good song; it's got good lyrics." He laughs.

The violin/horn instrument is known as a Strohviol, a turn-of-the-century contraption built by Augustus Stroh (1828–1914) to give volume for the recording horn. A diaphragm is mounted at the side of the bridge, with a straight metal horn attached. "He'd built various instruments, there's a Strohcello, too. Peter Grayling the cello player has got one. Yeah, it's an amazing sound, like a wind-up record player; that's why I like it. I hassled Marcus to buy it," Conway chuckles.

When we speak again in May, Conway is on his way to Stratford in eastern Victoria to do a couple of one-man dinner shows at a Shakespeare Festival. The NJB has been busy at festivals across the country in April, and "absolutely nailed it" at the National Folk Festival, Conway said happily.

Conway is slightly bemused at an invitation to play at Gympie Country Music Muster in August. "I have a horror of the country music scene," he confides. "We do a piss-take of it in one of our songs."

He is writing a film script about life in Soapbox Circus, and is excited about a new show the band will start rehearsing in July to September called Folies Berzerk. The show is transportable and will play in theatres like the Spiegeltent. The NJB is the core and special artists will be added as the occasion demands. In the style of vaudeville, each performer will have several names for their different acts.

“Oh crikey,” he exclaims at one point, as we attempt to run briefly through all his current projects.

It is far too simplistic to dismiss the work of Mic Conway because he is the ultimate entertainer, because he has *so* many skills and is *so* funny and clever and modest. And perhaps we are not ready to acknowledge the open-heartedness this entails, and the mirror he holds up to Australian culture.

“Mic Conway is a true legend, rarely seen today,” Bob Brozman says. “I know what it is to work and sweat onstage to give the people everything you've got, and this guy has been doing this his whole life, with a joy and intensity that I really respect. We have shared several musical evenings together over the last five years. In an increasingly plastic entertainment world, Mic is the real thing, and link to a type of performance style that is fast disappearing. He is a National treasure.”

NATIONAL JUNK BAND

MARCUS HOLDEN

Aka Marcus Email Holden

Vocals, strohviol, mandolin, National guitar.

A stalwart of the Australian country, jazz and rock scenes for many years. With over 300 album credits including Jimmy Barnes and Diesel, he has also appeared as a soloist with orchestras performing his own works. He is also gifted arranger, producer and conductor. He co-ordinates and musically directs the Fiddlers Festival as well as running Bloody Dog Studios

PHIL DONNISON

Aka Phil Harmonic, Phileas McBlurt, Blind Lemon Peel!

Vocals, National guitar, National steel guitar, National ukulele, kazoo, nose flute.

Phil started listening and playing along to blues performers and Django Reinhardt in the early '60s, discovering George Formby's uke as well. He then started his own jug band – Phileas McBlurt & the Emancipated Rampart Footwarmers Jug Band. From there he went on to the Stovepipe Spasm Band. Six years in Papua New Guinea led to the Phil Harmonic Footwarmers jazz band. In Australia in 1976 Phil formed another jazz outfit called the Gladesville Shieks. But he tired of jazz bands so it was back into jug band music when he teamed up with the Original Sweaty Palms Orchestra in the early '80s. He moved to Fiji in the early '90s and when he returned in 1996 he contacted Mic Conway about a new band and the NJB was on its way.

The highlight of his career was perhaps playing lagerphone with Tiny Tim for a TV special in Australia in 1970.

Donnison is just back from recording a PNG trip for 2005 CD/DVD release with his old friend and fellow lap player Bob Brozman.

JUDY BACKHOUSE

Ukulele Lola

Vocals, ukulele, piano accordion, piano.

Judy had been singing in acapella choirs and quartets for years, as well as performing in her quirky ukulele duo the Tea Ladies, when she first saw Mic Conway's National Junk Band by chance, at an outdoor gig in Darling Harbour, on my birthday. “I knew immediately that I belonged in the band,” she says. “That night I telephoned Mic and asked to join the band. He thanked me very politely for my interest, but advised me that there was neither the room nor the money for an extra person. The rest is history.”

CAZZBO JOHNS

Carolyn Cazzbo Johns

Sousaphone, jug, electric bass, swanee whistle, soprano vacuum cleaner tube, hosepipe trumpet, vocals

At 16 Cazzbo tried the tuba in the school brass band for a joke, later obtaining a degree at the VCA while improvising around the Melbourne jazz scene. In 1987 Cazzbo became Principal Tuba in the Australian Opera & Ballet Orchestra (Opera Australia); she has numerous Aussie film and commercial soundtracks to her credit. Sandy Evans, Bob Brozman, Dame Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti are just a few of the performers who have played with Cazzbo.

“The rarest of the rare, a fully-trained virtuoso classical musician, yet one who is blessed with the will and sense of absolute freedom to improvise brilliantly. We have played and recorded together a lot, and she represents pure love of music and adventure, pushing the limits of her enormous talent always.” – Bob Brozman

SELECTED ALBUM DISCOGRAPHY

CAPTAIN MATCHBOX WHOOPEE BAND

1973 *Smoke Dreams*

1974 *Wangaratta Wahine*

1975 *Australia*

1976 *Making Whoopee* (compilation of first two; reissued 1996 on CD)

SOAPBOX CIRCUS

1976 *The Great Stumble Forward*

MATCHBOX

1979 *Slightly Troppo*

NATIONAL JUNK BAND

1998 *Kitchen Sink Music*

2000 *21st Century Sink*

2004 *Tin Can Alley*

LINKS

www.micconway.com

www.backsliders.com.au

www.nationaljunkband.com

www.jimconway.sydney.net

www.milesago.com/Artists/matchbox.htm

www.fiddlersfestival.com

www.jugband.org

www.nationalguitars.com

CAPTAIN MATCHBOX WHOOPEE BAND

1969–80

Original members

Jim Conway (harmonica, kazoo, vocals, recorder)

Mic Conway (vocals, washboard, ukulele, spoons)

Dave Hubbard (guitar)

Peter Inglis (guitar, vocals)

Peter Scott (tea-chest bass)

Mick Fleming (banjo, mandolin, guitar, vocals)

Jim Niven (piano, pedal organ)

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