

# Looking after the music



## Case study

**Who** Paul Williamson  
**What** Musician  
**Where** Maribyrnong, Vic  
**When** 1983  
**Web** facebook.com/paul.williamson.779?fref=ts

How does an independent musician make a living in Australia? Not to mention raise a family, buy a house and put some money aside? Talent alone won't do it – try adding versatility, grit, determination, charisma and sheer hard work.

Most arts couples manage by one person taking on the role of day-job breadwinner, to act as a buffer against the inevitable lean times an artist goes through. Not sax player, composer, singer, arranger, bandleader and teacher Paul Williamson – he is married to Jane Clifton, who also switches roles as an actor, singer, author and marriage celebrant.

Australia doesn't have the population and the scale to enable an artist to traverse the country full-time doing the journeyman thing as they can in the USA. For example, local Louisiana musicians play the New

Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in April/ May then begin the well-worn circuit north to Chicago and back home again. Life on the road has worn out many a musician, though. Here, we also have vast areas to traverse, but fewer medium-to-large cities to break up that vastness.

Melbourne stands out for its vibrant live-music scene with an average of 3000 gigs a week. This volume of live performances is helped along by the efforts of Music Victoria, which is headed up by the exuberant Patrick Donovan, formerly chief music writer at the *Age*. Donovan puts this vibrancy down to the supportive environment of community radio and venue owners. They enable musicians to gain exposure and perform regularly, and they get to showcase their talents at events such as November's Melbourne Music Week.

## Chiselling out a niche

Over the past 32 years Williamson has chiselled out a niche as a multi-talented musician across the live gig and festival scene, in the studio, and on TV and stage.

He's in demand because of his versatility – as a singer and tenor/baritone sax player he works across blues, jazz, rock, and rhythm and blues (R&B) with artists as diverse as Vince Jones, the Black Sorrows, the Jextet, Jane Clifton, the Hidden Charms and the Moovin' and Groovin' Orchestra, as well as international acts including Dire Straits, Cornell Dupree, Jimmy McGriff, Lucky Peterson and Big Jay McNeely.

## Melbourne stands out for its vibrant live-music scene.

'There is a certain element of being a chameleon,' Williamson says. 'I have been accused of that at times but when you've got two kids and a mortgage and you've decided to become a musician, unless you've got your own act that's working

constantly, then you better be able to get on... I've done a lot of things and I always end up sounding like me, I think.'

What about determination?

'I am definitely determined. I work at it. Sometimes I don't and then I work at it hard. Like, I became a single-figure handicap golfer and I've let that slip in the last year, and I'm determined to get it back.'

## Paul Williamson's Hammond Combo

Since its formation in 1991, the Hammond Combo has made five CDs. With long-running residencies at venues like St Kilda's Esplanade Hotel and Fitzroy's Rainbow Hotel, it's still one of the most popular bands on the Melbourne scene with packed crowds grooving to an infectious mix of jazz underpinned by R&B, plus a changing roster of illustrious guests.

'I was still at school when I discovered the music scene,' Williamson says. 'I went out every Friday and Saturday night. I knew all the bands I could sit in with – Tinsley Waterhouse, Hubcats, Honeydrippers, all '40s and '50s R&B bands.

'Then I went overseas in 1981, went to the States for three months, came back to a touring gig with the Dugites, then was offered Jo Jo Zep – it lasted about a year, then I went off and toured with Dire Straits and came home and pretty much played with Vince Jones for more than five years.'

While Paul was gigging away at night, he was working as a technical officer for Telecom Australia during the day and getting three hours sleep. 'It was terrible. (The people were great! I'm going to a reunion next week to catch up with them all.) For the Dugites tour I got leave without pay and then when I got the Jo Jo Zep tour I left. But my boss was a great guy and assured me that he would give me two years and if things didn't work out to give him a call. Then I left and my parents were mortified because I'd had a permanent job, a job for life.

'I never wanted to be that 40-year-old guy standing at the back at gigs and wishing that could've been me.'

### Every week is different

No two weeks are the same. In the previous month, the band had played a week in New Caledonia. When they flew back Williamson played a school concert on Wednesday, the Brunswick Green on Thursday with singer Michelle Nicole, and two gigs on Saturday at Melbourne's Paris Cat with singer Heather Stewart.

A special gig was the New Orleans-style funeral of jazz drummer and composer Alan Browne, who formed the Red Onion Jazz Band around 1960. 'It was an honour to play,' Paul said. 'My father took me in 1967 to a Red Onions gig, a farewell concert before they went to Europe.'

### Teaching & mentoring

Paul has taught music for up to three and a half days a week. He tried it full-time for a bit, but it was 'not for me'.

'I can write things for them easily,' he says, 'I can make things sound easy for them – it's just a skill from running lots of bands: you can harmonise things, get people up and running, and give them ideas. A lot of kids have no idea how to solo, so you give them a couple of notes, a limited vocabulary, and say, "hammer on those and you'll get through that." And I can do that quick – if a kid has got a solo, sometimes they'll give them very difficult chord changes, so I'll give them a road map through there within their expertise that'll sound good.'

The sax-playing lessons Paul posted on the Digital Pill website have half a million hits, fully half the total traffic for the website.

Paul has also had his own mentors. 'You see people doing gigs, someone like Wilbur [Wilde], he's always a really great player, can do that rock 'n' roll thing and play jazz; he's a larger-than-life character. Camilleri was a great saxophonist, the only saxophone player I'd ever heard of in Oz was Joe Camilleri.'

He also had a lesson from Lenny Pickett, the tenor saxophonist who leads the Saturday Night Live band and was a long-time leader in the 1970s to mid-'80s of the Tower of Power horn section.

### Marketing & branding

'Marketing has never been one of my strongpoints,' Williamson admits.

'Marketing for me is just keep doing it. Stay at it, say yes... There's a video of Michael Brecker giving a talk to kids at Berklee College of Music saying that when he got to New York he took every gig he could – because you never know where that gig will lead you.'

'And always do a good job.'

### Turn up on time and look good.

'When I worked with Allan Browne, drummer with Vince Jones at the time, Allan'd say, "Turn up on time and look good." As naff as that may sound, there's a lot of people who do not heed that and consequently fall foul of something along the way.'

Facebook is Williamson's preferred publicity channel – he's gathered 1100 Facebook friends. 'Facebook is a good tool to find out what's going on and to let people know what's going on,' he says. 'I haven't got a website – I've been meaning to, it's just one of those things I haven't got around to doing.'

### Managing the money

Williamson has renovated two houses in the last couple of years. 'It's kept me very busy. Now I've just gone through a fire and we've got to move out soon and it's a real pain.'

Rather than depending on an accountant, Williamson is constantly aware of cashflow. 'My secret to staying above water is just to keep saying yes,' he says.



'I come from a fairly frugal family and that's been instilled into me – if you can't afford it you don't buy it – so I've always been very frugal, salted money away and bought a house young. If you decide to have children then the concept of being turfed out ... I just couldn't think of it. So I bought a house and then I bought another house and I've managed to make it work.'

### Paul's tips for success

'Just take it seriously, do the best job you can and don't piss people around,' Williamson says.

'If you keep performing at a good level people are going to enjoy it and everything will work. You get much more out of music than you put in.'

'I've toured a lot with people. You've gotta be resourceful, know how to get things done, don't lose it and get along with people.' Paul explains that sometimes the money's not so good and you can't make the best travel arrangements. 'There's a lot of people I've seen who don't travel well,' he adds.

'It's just that thing of being frugal and working and looking after the music. If you play good, you're gonna work.'

**Jackey Coyle**