

A Tribute to John Buckley – “Mr Barbershop”

By Ken Shields

We are here to “Celebrate” the life of John Buckley - Mr Barbershop to many. We all knew this day was coming but no matter how prepared we think we are – we are never quite ready.

John was prepared – he had been for quite a long time and while we grieve his death we are here to “celebrate” his life.

About 12 months ago in the kitchen at the Brake Street Hall John was helping me organise the supper for the Plainsmen. As men of our age are inclined to do we were reminiscing and then – when things were organised John said he thought he would head home – he wasn’t feeling too good. I said good night – take care – and watched him head out the door.

A few minutes later he returned and said “can I ask you a favour?” “Will you speak at my celebration service”. I was a bit taken aback and it took a few seconds for me to realise what he was asking. “Of course I said I would be honoured but I also said that Shona and I were facing a busy and stressful year so could he please make it a long time in the future”.

He smiled and said he would do his best and then said “you will do a good job”. So here I am – trying my best to do a good job.

Most of us know John through singing and particularly Barbershop singing but I first met John and Carol in the 1960s when we were members of the Christchurch Harmonic Society and I remember John as the rugged looking farmer from Darfield with the big smile and infectious personality. He was a second bass and I was a first bass so we although we didn’t stand close together I was aware of his beautiful deep bass voice and the joy that emanated from John when we sang those big choral works. The Messiah, Verdis Requiem and Bachs Mass in B Minor were just a few. As far away from barbershop as you could get. John enjoyed swapping his gumboots and farm clothes for a dinner suit and black bow tie whenever we were performing and he and Carol made a stunning couple in their “good gear”.

We parted company for a while when I left the Harmonic and then reconnected when our mutual friend – Graeme Frew – approached me to join the Canterbury Plainsmen in the mid-1990s. I must say I took a bit of persuading. I was still thinking in terms of Choral Music and barbershop was well outside my comfort zone. At the beginning of 1999 I finally ran out of excuses and came to a Plainsmens open night and one of the first people I met

was John. As with everyone he met, John welcomed me with open arms and I can truly say that that night changed my life - for the better of course.

So what about John Buckley – Mr Barbershop. What a history!

We have received a message of condolence from Derek Cosburn who currently lives in Australia and who introduced John to barbershop singing back in 1987. This year would have been Johns 30th anniversary in Barbershop and Derek is sorry that he can't be here today but wishes to be remembered as a long-time friend of John and Carol.

All of us here will have our own special memories of John and if you have had the privilege of singing in a quartet with John or standing on the risers and blending with his marvellous voice you will have felt the joy that he had in just singing and singing well.

John is probably the most medalled Barbershopper in New Zealand and possibly the world! I know he sang in at least 5 multiple Gold medal winning quartets – Avon City Four, Garden City Sound, Pheonix Rising, Pastime and Men Aloud and of course John was there in Rotorua in 1999 when the Canterbury Plainsmen won gold in the chorus competition. The celebrations afterward in the motel pool are the stuff of legends and if you want to know any more ask one of the Plainsmen who were there!

The medals were of all colours and I don't think any were more important than the others. It was the singing that mattered most to John and the friendships that he made along the way. In 2012 at the convention in Auckland John won his last gold medal in the Seniors Competition with Men Aloud. Someone asked him "how many medals do you have now John"? And with typical humility he said "I don't know – just a few". He was pleased to win of course but John was happiest at conventions when he could sing with the Champions. Always one of the first to sign up he would find a song he thought he knew and then away he would go singing with the best quartets in the world. I reminded him once that he was also a gold medal champion and people should be lining up to sing with him but he just laughed it off and went to find someone else to sing with. Afterglows were always a special and exhausting time to be in his company.

Barbershop singing took John around the world and where ever he went he made lifelong friends. His last trip to America was early in 2014 when Men aloud went to sing in the International Seniors Competition and after the convention John travelled to catch up with old friends in the barbershop community. He always knew someone somewhere to sing with.

If he was Mr Barbershopper then Carol was Mrs Barbershopper. What a pair, what a team they made. Carol supporting John at the Mens Conventions – dabbing makeup on the receding hair lines of nervous men and giving words of calm encouragement - and John supporting Carol at the Ladies Conventions and concerts - urging the men to attend and offering all the ladies best wishes and telling them to “sing well”. They were a barbershop “power couple” and so it was no surprise when they combined their voices with Robin and Graeme Frew to sing first as a mixed quartet and then inviting others to join them in Accord.

In 2000 I was both surprised and delighted to be invited by John and Graeme to join Accord and I quickly found the pleasure of singing in mixed a’ cappella harmony. A long way from the sound of a big choir with a symphony orchestra to accompany you – just your voice blending in harmony with others and nowhere to hide if you haven’t learnt your notes and words. For the first few years I stood alongside John and we sang the same Bass part and then, to his concern, I would occasionally wonder away to join the leads. On one occasion he muttered to me “once a bass always a bass” and several times he would semi-grumpily ask “which part are you singing in this song” but he always welcomed me back to his side whenever I returned to the bass fold.

He was an organiser and leader in both the Plainsmen and the NZ Barbershop organisations serving as President of both groups at different times – but I will remember him as the person who called the Praise Be programme to ask if Accord could record for them and then liaised with them to make it happen on 3 different occasions. He was also the driving force behind the production of the Plainsmens one and only CD and I’m not sure about Phoenix Risings CD but I suspect that he was involved in that as well.

The last twelve months had been difficult for John as we watched him struggle with living day by day. When I visited him last year in the Nurse Maude Hospice I thought it was to say goodbye but he surprised us by bouncing back and singing again. In August Accord sang at a church service and although John appeared frail he sang well and enjoyed being there and then who can forget John in the Plainsmen Concert in December. Many thought he wouldn’t last the concert and several asked me to get him to at least sit out the second half. Not John. He struggled to get back up on the risers so instead he sang sitting on a chair at the front and then, when it came time for him to do the reading, he struggled to his feet and read in his clear beautiful bass voice without hesitation or any indication of what he was going through. Robin took him home after the concert and as she got him into his apartment he said “what about the party – you know the afterglow - aren’t we going?” John was not ready to stop singing and he didn’t.

Last month John came to the first Accord rehearsal for the year and we spent time as a group telling him what he had meant to us – sharing stories and reminiscing about years gone by. It was a very special time and wonderful to be able to tell someone in person what they meant to you and the impact they had made in your life.

And so we are here to celebrate his life – and what a life it has been. A life of joys and sorrows, of many, many musical highs and no doubt some lows but a life lived to the full. A life to be envied and a life to be emulated. Someone asked me recently if I knew what kept John going and I said “faith and singing”. But I was only half right – I’m sure that what kept John Buckley going when others would have long given up were – family, friends, faith and singing.

It’s been a privilege to give this tribute and a privilege to call John Buckley my friend. We will all miss him – and always remember him.