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UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA

EDITION 20 | DECEMBER 2014

Two little words fired up Andrew to take on the world

BY JODI DE CESARE

'Stupid boy': The two words repeatedly used by a piano teacher to label a young and impressionable student by the name of Andrew Legg. The world of gospel music both here and far, far abroad owes that seemingly harsh teacher a debt of gratitude. For it pushed Legg – now an Associate Professor, the Director of the Conservatorium of Music and founder of the Southern Gospel Choir, which toured the US for the first time last month – to strive even harder.

"If you want to know what's at the heart of Andrew Legg, it's to literally push back against that kind of attitude," he says. "I felt ignorant, like I didn't know anything and that I never would, and that's the killer."

The man who has Stevie Wonder's number in his phone contacts and regards other Grammy Award winners as friends certainly proved he wasn't stupid, and that his talent and drive wouldn't be dimmed.

'Again, I was green enough not to listen to anybody else ... the reaction was loud and wonderful and confused at the same time'

So how does a boy born on the West Coast of Tasmania come to lead an all-white choir on a tour to the very heart of African-American gospel music? Associate Professor Legg recalls sifting through his father's record collection as an eight-year-old and listening to Ray Charles for the first time. The song was a live version of *What'd I Say*.

"I put it on the player and for whatever reason I adored it," says Legg. "The music owns the musician, it's part of your wiring. That was the music that I was drawn to. The needle literally wore through the record."

From an early age, it struck Associate Professor Legg that all contemporary music originated from this single point.

"Contemporary popular music, whether it's country or hip hop or jazz or whatever, doesn't exist without African-American slavery and gospel music. That's where it starts. It's the secular and the sacred part of African-American musical expression and community, more importantly. They don't separate various forms of music and art ... it's a single expression of a feeling or emotion. It owns them like it owns us."

Associate Professor Legg has established himself as one of the leading gospel pianists working in the US and Australia today. He collaborates with Grammy Award-winning artists Kirk Franklin and Myron Butler. Their songwriting needed a local outlet and, in 2000, the Southern Gospel Choir was born.

The choir has grown from 40 singers and musicians to about 140. All are enrolled in ensemble units at the Conservatorium, as part of the University's commitment to applied research.

"They're studying gospel music as

they're singing it," Associate Professor Legg says. "It's not just by doing, it's by story, by connection, by listening ... it's a whole process where they learn how to sing this music in what has become an African-American Tasmanian authentic style."

In a coals-to-Newcastle story, the choir kicked off its US tour with a performance in Dallas that was broadcast coast-to-coast. Further national exposure came when Associate Professor Legg was interviewed by both the NBC and CBS networks.

Butler and former Harlem Gospel Choir musical director Eric Dozier have signed up to the Conservatorium's PhD program as internationals, bringing enormous reputation.

"Hopefully we can create a centre for research into trans-culturalisation issues around music – how does music swap cultures, how important is it to island cultures, and what are we creating within Tasmania that makes us distinctive?" Associate Professor Legg asks.

"There is something distinctive about being Tasmanian in the most positive sense and when that's brought to the fore we can begin to make a real international impact; in other words, be international but don't forget we are Tasmanian.

"There's a beauty in the marriage of those two things and that's what the gospel choir sits right in the heart of, as I believe does the University as a whole."

Keys to success: Andrew Legg turned an insult into inspiration to master music and discover its vital role in shaping cultures around the world.

Photo: Michael Rayner