OUR NEW GOVERNOR

Alumna Professor Kate Warner, AC, makes history
Music topples barriers

As a student, Andrew Legg loved music and football but his father gave him a choice: he opted for macho football over being bullied as the boy who played classical piano. Wrong choice, his father declared. Today, the founder of the Southern Gospel Choir counts Stevie Wonder as one of his friends

By Jodi De Cesare

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upid boy": The two words repeatedly used by a piano teacher to label a young and impressionable student by the name of Andrew Legg (BMus 1986, PhD 2008). 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 — 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 personal friends certainly proved he wasn't stupid, and that his talent and drive wouldn't be dimmed.

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? On the eve of the tour, Associate Professor Legg reflects on the origins of his passion, recalling sitting 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," Associate Professor Legg says. "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."

With an Anglican priest father, Associate Professor Legg was also exposed to "essentially whitened up versions" of African-American gospel music as a "little tacker" in church. "For me, the wiring is there to understand it in a fairly profound way. From the first record I heard I sought out everything in my funny little head that sounded like that."

As a sensitive artistic boy growing up in the '70s, did he feel compelled to hide his interest in jazz, soul and gospel during his teenage years? "No, I tried to hide the fact that I was being trained as a classical piano player, which in my day was the only available formal training," he says. "You can imagine the names other
young men would call the son of a priest who played classical piano. As my way of combatting this oppressive or bullying behaviour, I tried to play as much modern music as I could, because it made me cool in the eyes of everybody else, and I played football all my life. It made me look tough and like everybody else and at that stage I didn’t like to stand out too much from the crowd.”

In fact, Associate Professor Legg’s musical career nearly fell victim to football. “At one point my father gave me the option of pursuing one of my two loves. I chose football and he said wrong choice! It was the best decision my father ever made on my behalf.”

Although his father saw his talent, Associate Professor Legg himself hadn’t realised his full potential, even when he started at “The Con” to study a Bachelor of Music.

“I was still finding myself as a player,” he says. “I was very musical but my technical development compared to other classical piano players was years behind. I almost gave up three or four times. I struggled with (classical) music that I didn’t understand and didn’t have much connection with the music I knew and loved.

“Looking back, the lessons I learned at the Con, about the way you play music and opening up ears, has made me the kind of contemporary player that I am.

Imagine the names other young men would call the son of a priest who played classical piano Andrew Legg

“It helps me to stand a little bit apart from the average and gives me a bit of a signature sound. I can see the influence of that training really strongly, even though it was in a genre and a style and at a time that was not easy for me, it’s quite profound the way it’s affected my playing even today.”

Now, as head of the Conservatorium, his student experience impacts his leadership style.

“I have a connection with students, because I also see through them little people, like I was, who sometimes get hurt very easily by comments from outside that are unhelpful. Even when they’re true, they’re put so bluntly that it can be off-putting to students.

‘I’m oversensitive to students’ sensitivities, to be perfectly honest. I want the students here to have a positive experience and so I will seek out with all of my energy, everything that is good about the player and I will tell them that’s what is good about them. Once you’ve won their trust, then you can sit beside them and talk about things to fix. You have to win their confidence first or you’ll never see the real student. That is absolutely fundamental to my teaching pedagogy.

‘Tender students can sometimes get missed along the way. Mistakes in a performance can be misinterpreted as a lack of ability, when that’s far from the...
truth. Once you can get past nerves or a lack of confidence you can see in the core of the person something that's true and honourable and genuinely musical. If you can honour that in the student you will go a long way to creating the confidence they need to realise what they truly are.

"If anything underpins the way I am, if I have one redeeming feature, it's that I want to go to the heart of people and find the musician that cries at the middle to try and get out."

A huge turning point in his career came in 1994 when he met Anthony Campbell, an African-American pastor preacher and theologian from Boston University. So impressed was Campbell with Associate Professor Legg’s "little white choir led by a white man born at Rosebery" that he invited Associate Professor Legg to the United States to introduce him to his friends. Those friends were none other than Aretha Franklin, Kirk Franklin, Lionel Richie and Stevie Wonder. Associate Professor Legg stayed in their homes and was invited to perform as a "Premier Artist" at the Gospel Music Workshop of America in Cincinnati where he was the only white man among a sea of 60,000 African-American faces.

Not bad for someone who'd played football all his life to blend in.

"I was nervous beyond belief," he laughs. "The roar of the audience was similar to that at the MCG. My naivety really helped because I didn't know just how ridiculous it might have gone across."

He recalls hearing some gasps but much applause as he walked to join Stevie Wonder onstage.

"It was a gigantic thing for me," he says. "Through my head ran a billion thoughts. I'd grown up playing Stevie Wonder stuff, I could do every Stevie Wonder lick. I thought what am I going to do now? The guy I've been copying all my life is standing about 15 feet from me – which lick do I rip off? Then, a little voice in the back of my head said, 'Don't. If they want to hear Stevie Wonder play piano, he's there, he can do it. So just do what you do'. It's a really complex thought but it happened in milliseconds and I launched into the Andrew Legg version – come hell or high water, let them judge me for who I am."

"If they don't like me they'll tell me but at least it will be for what I am rather than what I'm pretending to be. Be who you are. And they might just love you."

Love him they did. 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.

"Again, I was green enough not to listen to anybody else on the outside," Associate Professor Legg says. "The reaction was loud and wonderful and confused at the same time."

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."

It was enough to impress the late Dr Horace Boyer, the grandfather of gospel music who also supervised Associate Professor Legg's PhD.

"He couldn't believe my little choir," he says. "They get quite surprised to see someone or a choir doing their thing as authentically as we do. Authentic is a key word. There's an intent in the way we perform that's very attractive to people like Horace Boyer."

"The music is wonderful. It touches something in us all which is essentially human, it's the earthiness part of being human that binds us all together, religious or otherwise. The choir is not a religious choir, it's a University choir based on the love of singing gospel music. That can be a challenge to African-American churches who would see it as being religious music but thus far nobody has a problem with this funny white choir doing their music and they all want to hear what we're about and how we do it."

Myron Butler and 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-cultural 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 says.

"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."