

Bill Burton

Bill Burton was born in Glasgow in 1952, one of six children (as a child he was called Billy). When his parents moved to England, he was raised by his grandparents – his disabled grandfather needed Billy to push him by wheelbarrow to and from the pub where he played the violin - until dead drunk.

In 1964 Billy's parents assembled the children and sailed to Australia as Ten Pound Poms. Billy was not pleased: he ran away in Port Said, Bombay and Perth, but was caught each time and returned to the family, who settled in Tasmania.

A year and a half later Billy ran away again, this time to the Kimberleys where (inflating his age) he worked as a jackaroo. When his employer dumped him and his supplies in the bush, he camped in an inviting rock shelter overlooking a billabong. Fortunately, an Aboriginal man appeared, told him to move away, and reinforced the suggestion by throwing a rock at a crocodile waiting to enter the water... The mob returned soon after and began to teach him how to live with them, and how to live in the country.

Later Bill worked on a prawn fishing boat for six months, earning enough (£17,000) to buy a motor cycle and set off around Australia – Broome, Perth and Adelaide to Sydney. Being under age, he had no licence so he drove by night and slept by day. In Sydney he joined the cast of *Hair* and was the first actor to swing naked on a trapeze. Later he continued his odyssey to Brisbane, Cairns and Darwin.

In 1972 he returned to Sydney and lived in the squatter community centred on cottages in Scott Street. Communal life taught him new skills. His companions drew electricity directly from the mains, repaired toilets (which DMR officials smashed to make the cottages uninhabitable), and enforced bans on heavy drugs. In these ways the squatters managed tensions without calling on the police, who largely left them alone. Debates among the socialists, anarchists, communists and visionaries offered a political education, preparing themselves to join anti-apartheid protests and all other progressive causes.

At the same time his musical talents were cultivated in bands such as *Beer+Vomit+Regurgitation*, *Chainsaw Rock* (Bill played the chainsaw), and *Foghorn Leghorn*. They attracted to Pyrmont, and played with, every rock group that visited Sydney. Meanwhile other members of the collective wrote prose and poetry, and created a feature film. Depending on the season, they commuted to North Coast communes. For the next 17 years Billy was a roadie with rock bands, doing odd jobs and (once, unhappily) was a shearer. He later summed it up as “a life of free sex and mung beans ...”

Reflecting on these years, Bill regrets that authorities no longer allow homeless people to form the kind of self-sustaining community that supported and educated him. Seen

as anti-social or dangerous, they are now dispersed as widely as possible, isolated, unheard and preferably unseen.

From the Pymont squat he moved to a Housing Commission flat in Waterloo for 14 years, then – in 1992 – back to Ways Terrace where he still lives. Here he became a prominent activist in (for example) creating and defending Interim Park from development. By then he was sole parent of Billy Joe, born in 1990 – BJ's mother having decamped. One day in 1994 his son asked him to read a story. Bill explained that he was illiterate. That astonished BJ, as Bill was a member of a Book Club (which he finessed by asking other members for their views of the next book, then blending their opinions into his own critique).

Embarrassed by this revelation, Bill enrolled in TAFE, became literate, and worked in the map department of the State Library: he impressed the library with the technical skills he developed as a roadie, and became expert in cataloguing maps and drawings: he helped David Attenborough find and study Joseph Banks's original drawings. Another treasure that he catalogued was the many boxes of papers describing Houdini's magic tricks: these were devised by an Australian, whose widow gave them to the State Library. More predictably, he organised the first band performance on the Mitchell Library roof.

Bill's daughter Angelique was born in 2002. By 2007 she needed full-time parenting. Her mother was earning much more than Bill so, much as he relished the State Library, he resigned to be Angel's carer. During these years his many skills helped him supplement his income: he took BJ on the road, for example, and bought old rural properties, which they renovated and sold.

The arc of Bill's career, from rebellion and squats to responsibility and Ways Terrace, may be unique in Pymont. He reckons that 80% of his old colleagues are now dead, and most of the others live in the affluent Eastern suburbs, having cashed in on the skills they learned as squatters.

Bill claims that he devotes his life to "leisure, pleasure, and helping other people" but this overlooks a great deal. He was devastated when Angel died in 2015, avoidably, and yet his many friends are infected by his optimism. Among those he encourages are young musicians, who showcase their talents at Christmas in Pymont and other local stages. He is now a stalwart of Pymont Cares, and in 2017 he was recognised as Pymont Cares's Volunteer of the Year.

When he was a child in Glasgow, a gypsy read his fortune, and predicted that he would die at 87, in bed with a princess. She should be born any day now.

From a conversation with Donald Denoon