

Ode to the gorgeous guitar

A passion for this beautiful instrument compelled Chris Johnson to look into its history in our country, **John McNamara** writes

It's not a song that sings from Bob Hawke to "his Bobness", but it is a segue from the strident, even discordant, music of daily politics to the eternal rhythms of the guitar, and it's something Canberra press gallery reporter and music aficionado Chris Johnson was compelled to do. The result is a book on the history of that instrument with a peculiarly Australian twist. And, inevitably, a custom-made guitar for Johnson.

It speaks to a singular obsession when our guitar hero decides it would be a great idea to buy tickets to a Bob Dylan concert in Perth in the early 1990s for his wife's birthday. His wife hates Dylan.

But Johnson holds firm: "My wife didn't want to stay to the end of the main show [let alone the encores]. But I insisted. It was her birthday after all."

"Gorgeous" is a word that crops up often in conversation with him. Australians make "gorgeous" guitars – and this is the story of the journey of the Australian guitar, the makers, and the people who play them.

"I've always loved guitars," Johnson says. "I had my first guitar when I was 10 and I've had a romance with it ever since. I've read a number of books about the history of guitars [that] focus on the European beginnings, and then the Americanisation of it, and how America is basically the home of the guitar. They've built beautiful guitars – the Gibsons, the Martins – [but] there's been nothing about the Australian journey with the guitar."

The story Johnson tells is a very Australian one – of locals starved of culture and music, of embracing overseas trends and giving them a distinctly local flavour – the journey of the guitar since it hit antipodean shores.

"It's unique in that it's obviously very influenced by its European beginnings and the Americanisation of it – Australia as a young country was caught up in all the different music phases . . . the early Hawaiian craze and going in to the folk revivals and the pop music. Australia has always been part of that but musically – and also the way we make guitars – we had our own touch to it . . .

"We had the early pop bands of Australia, like the Easybeats. Sure they were riding on the British beat, the popularity of the Beatles and such, but they had their very own unique sound – it was an Australian sound and that's the way it's always been.

"The tyranny of distance applied equally to the guitar. We heard the Yanks and the Poms playing



Journalist Chris Johnson got his first guitar at 10.

guitar, we wanted those guitars. But we couldn't afford them, or they just weren't being imported. So we started making our own."

At first we weren't so good at it, but like most pioneers, we got better. Take the Maton company which started in the late '40s, making guitars that initially looked much like the American Gibsons, but even then they had Australian tweaks.

"That's what Australians are good at – being inventive, being creative and maybe taking something that's there and taking it in a different direction."

Hence the cover image on *Guitar: the Australian Journey*.

"It's a 1969 Maton Sapphire that looks very much like a Gibson ES335 . . . It looks like an American guitar yet, if you look closely, there are uniquely Australian things on there. There's a different kind of headstock, a different tailpiece . . .

"In the early days of rock 'n' roll, even back in the jazz boom, they couldn't get the American guitars here in Australia without selling one of their kids or something, they were that expensive and that hard to come by."

And so we began to make our own. Maton, which has been an incredible success story both locally and internationally – George Harrison played Matons – but Johnson reminds us it's not the whole journey.

This book delves into what makes a guitar work and how to approach it scientifically, and goes into the timbers and the physics. It's way above my head but

that's how advanced guitar-making has become. Mind you, not everyone's doing that; a lot of these cottage craft industries are just beautiful craftsmen making gorgeous instruments.

These instruments – for which there is worldwide demand – reflect the personalities of the makers, Johnson says, the luthiers who press on in their small workshops creating things of beauty that also sound, well, gorgeous.

Without going into the whys and wherefores and tremendous debates about whether Australian timber is any good for guitars, the fact is the diversity of guitar-making philosophies is another signpost on this journey. While Australian makers generally aren't making fortunes, making guitars can pay its way.

"A lot of the guys I spoke to have been selling into America for quite a while, some into Europe. Most of the guitars they sell for between the \$3000 and \$7000 mark. But we've got some luthiers here, and there's one I talk about in particular – Jim Redgate making classical guitars – \$15,000, he sells his guitars for in America, so that's how much regard they are held in."

Which brings us to what Johnson calls the "skeleton" of the book. Johnson commissions Victorian luthier Jack Spira to make the author his own "baby", after meeting him at the instrument-makers pavilion at the National Folk Festival. The result was a good few trips to Spira's cottage in the Dandenongs, and the luxury of having a big input into the design of his new love, which has every state represented with native timbers. While *Guitar: the Australian Journey* is as well written as you would expect from an author of Johnson's quality, he decided to give many of the people he spoke to their own voice, quoting directly their stories and experiences. It takes some getting used to, but in the end it works. So why did Johnson decide to proceed in this manner?

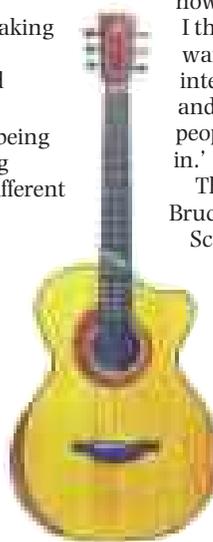
"There were a couple of reasons. Particularly with Linda Kitchen, who's the daughter of the founder of Maton. I had a great day there at Maton and she gave me a lot of time . . . She told this beautiful story about how it all began and when I listened to it on the tape I thought that she explained it so well that I just wanted her to speak for herself . . . Then when I interviewed a bunch of guitar-makers and players and thought, 'well, isn't [it] the best way to let these people have their say without me throwing their bit in.'"

The book comes with a CD with artists including Bruce Mathiske, George Golla, Fiona Boyes, Karin Schaupp and Phil Emmanuel.

Back to Johnson's long-suffering wife who, having sat through one Bob Dylan concert too many, has since had to put up with Johnson's passion for the "gorgeous" – something that's known as "guitar acquisition syndrome".

"It is the beauty of the things. They all have different looks and shapes and you think you've got enough 'til you see another one. I think the basic shape is appealing to a guy – it's got the curves and that. But there's also the feel – they feel differently, they sound differently. In the end no one does need more than one or two guitars, but it is a disease that we can't get on top of."

• *Guitar: the Australian Journey* will be launched by Fiona Boyes on Friday, November 18, at Beyond Q bookshop cafe in Curtin at 6.30pm. There's also a lunchtime function at Bungendore Guitars to promote the book on the following day. For more information visit: guitartheaustralianjourney.com



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