

Great Scotts!

Two brothers, same profession, different directions.
John Shand explores

music

Two hours with the Scott brothers is like laughter therapy. Phil Scott (BA Hons Mus '74) makes a living from being funny. If his brother Craig (GradCert HE '00) leans on his wit professionally, it would be to put fellow band-members and nervous students at ease. A leading bass player, he is Chair of Jazz Studies at the Sydney Conservatorium. Phil's writing, acting, composing, singing and piano playing, meanwhile, have enlivened stages and TVs for three decades in everything from *The Gillies Report* to *Priscilla Queen of the Desert: The Musical*, via annual editions of *The Wharf Revue*.

Having risen to the top of quite different trees, the brothers remain remarkably alike, sharing not only a sense of humour, but also an innate humbleness and an easy friendship.

Their childhood home was not especially musical. Their father, Bruce, (who also studied at Sydney University) was an arts administrator and their mother, Janet, played a little on the household piano. Phil was tinkling on this before Craig (four years younger) was born, showing sufficient promise to have lessons. Craig also learned piano, but apparently lacked Phil's flair. "And of course," he says, "I had the typical small child's approach to practising – which I've managed to retain!"

They went to Balgowlah Boys High, a school which also produced shock-jock Stan Zemanek and One Nation founder David Oldfield. There Phil participated in Gilbert and Sullivan and occasionally performed classical piano, although the music dearest to his heart was Broadway.

Craig took up bass when he was 15, and a big influence on both brothers was hearing the Jacques Loussier Trio 40 years ago in the Town Hall, which encouraged Phil to try his hand at jazzing up the classics for piano and bass. If Craig's bass teacher despaired that his aversion to practice meant he would never amount to anything, this intensive playing with Phil compensated.

In 1971 Phil went straight from school to the University to study

musicology. "I should have done composition," he says. "Maybe I was late, and the composition classes were full." His already broad knowledge of music was further expanded by a course ranging across Indonesian gamelan to modern Polish music, with Ross Edwards and Peter Sculthorpe among his tutors.

Asked what impact the degree had on his subsequent career, he replies he would have said "none" until recently. "But now I write classical CD reviews for *Fanfare* magazine, and I need to know what I'm talking about technically, so I guess I must have learned something and remembered it."

Phil's thesis (1st class Honours) on Benjamin Britten prompted an unexpected response. "I have a framed letter from him, praising the work and telling me to come to his Aldeburgh Festival some time. I never did and he died in 1976."

Perhaps oddly, he never involved himself in student theatrics or music. "I was a bit reticent, really," he says. "Hard to imagine!" He laughs, but you sense that subterranean layer of shyness that often lurks beneath those who strut our stages. He emerged clutching a BA with Music Honours. He then bounced from being Sculthorpe's PA to 2MBS's first program manager, and on to being Marian Street Theatre's musical director, where he used Craig on bass "until he became too important and too busy."

"Last week," rejoins Craig.

The latter finished school with no clear career intentions. He tried history at NSW, lasted three months and spent the rest of the year pumping petrol. Next stop was Alexander Mackie College to do music teaching, a course that turned out to contain three times as much physical education as music. "If they'd told me that in advance I would have gone into arc welding," he says. By this time (1975) he and Phil were doing a show at the Music Loft in Manly starring Jill Perryman, and he found himself working six nights a week. "It just seemed like a good idea

to go with the bass," he recalls, "and not go with teaching other people's children to not appreciate music."

In the early 1980s Phil, who'd always wanted to be an actor, veered away from being a musical director towards writing, acting and comedy. "I'd always written stuff," he says, "particularly satire and lyric parodies. I wrote a satirical account of a school excursion to some factory when I was in Year Five, which was confiscated. I had to come up to the headmaster's office, and he said, [adopting stern voice] 'I've read this thing, and it's very amusing, but don't let me catch you doing it again'."

Through his friend Patrick Cook, the cartoonist, he hooked up with comedian and satirist Max Gillies in 1983, when he also began performing one-man cabaret. When ABC TV picked up what became *The Gillies Report*, Phil was "swept along", leading to extensive television work on shows including *Good News Week* and *The Dingo Principle*.

While continuing to work with Phil, Craig attended evening classes at the Conservatorium, and was soon playing in bands with the doyen of local jazz drummers, Alan Turnbull.

"Alan yelled at me from the word go," says Craig. "He never stopped being on to me about playing with him and listening, to the point where sometimes I was almost incapable of playing: I was shaking like a leaf." Turnbull, however, saw the promise, and rightly believed Craig could cop the flak.

Then in 1980 the phone rang. "A voice said, 'This is Don Burrows. Is Craig Scott there?' I thought it was a friend, and I said, 'Yeah, right,' and hung up." Burrows rang back; Craig apologised, and, after an audition, found himself in Burrows' band for more than a decade.

The relationship with Turnbull continued in this band, and it was with Turnbull and pianist Paul McNamara that Craig played one of the most exciting concerts this writer has witnessed: accompanying the great American saxophonist Joe Henderson at the Basement in 1982.

Craig (L) and Phil (R) Scott. Photo by Paul Wright

Craig's ability to perform at such a thrilling level reflected his increased knowledge, artistry and facility. "I'd love to do that gig now, knowing what I know," he says. "Then again, being mystified and excited was good, too."

When Phil encountered actor/writer/comedian Jonathan Biggins on *The Dingo Principle* they struck up an immediate rapport, mounting shows at Woolloomooloo's wonderful Tilbury Hotel, including the venue's biggest hit: *Three Men and a Baby Grand*. Created by Phil, Biggins and Drew Forsythe in 1990, it went to Edinburgh, London, and on to television.

Craig began teaching at the Conservatorium in 1985, bolstering his academic credentials with a Master's degree in the 1990s, and becoming Chair of Jazz Studies in 2004. Although the way he had learnt jazz – on the job – ostensibly seems a world away, he sees parallels: "The way we do business here is still a master/apprentice situation, because we all play with students. We talk about music. We do basically many of the same things that I did sitting in the back of Alan Turnbull's car at the back of the Regent after a gig ... And there is a place in everyone's life for that academic discipline."

It must be true: Phil's daughter, Phoebe, is currently completing her PhD in (Vietnamese) Art at the University, while ex-wife Lorna is a GP and also a Sydney alumna. Having had four novels published, two musicals produced and one CD released under his own name, Phil is constantly busy. "It's actually a very slow process, writing with other people," he observes. "It's better to write quickly, and say, 'What about that?' and people can change it."

Craig, who laments the lack of a dedicated jazz venue in Sydney, still performs, including with his own quintet. Despite all the collaborating, the pair has never played jazz together. "Too busy in the left hand," is Craig's dry assessment of his brother. Yet as they clown around for the camera, you can see why they have always liked to work together. Craig, for instance, did a few spots on *Three Men and a Baby Grand*, including once dressing as an angel to play *Angels from the Realms of Glory*.

"I think some of it's on YouTube," says Phil.

"My kids delighted in telling me that," Craig replies. **SAM**

