

Voices of inspiration: Marie Bashir & Rob Hirst

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The first female Governor of NSW and Midnight Oil's songwriting drummer had some wonderful values in common. Jeff McMullen writes:

Yesterday. A single word sung with feeling carries a world of meaning for all those who share the love of music. This is especially so after great loss.

On the same day we lost Dame Marie Bashir at 95 and Australian songman, Rob Hirst at 70, I thought of their passionate belief in all that can unite our many shades of humanity.

Raised in the Riverina town of Narrandera, the first female Governor of New South Wales might well have become a classical violinist. She studied at the Conservatory of Music, a mere stroll from Government House where later she would rule with grace and gentleness for thirteen and a half years.

Along with the love of music there was an equally powerful tradition in Marie's extended family of Lebanese descent: becoming a doctor allowed one to serve others. That conviction, Marie told me, inspired her academic brilliance, a mastery of psychiatry and the empathy she brought to a life of extraordinary public service.

Marie brought very important change to the New South Wales health system. She helped create a mental health focus on the cross generational traumas experienced by Aboriginal families, particularly after removal of their children into state institutions.

In a soft and soothing voice, she repeated to every one of us with some experience in this field that humans had extraordinary resilience. The key to healing, she insisted, was listening deeply to one another.

It was not merely her scientific knowledge that shaped this faith in people and her eternal optimism. Marie Bashir believed it flowed from her time growing up in an Australian country town. This land held us all. As Aboriginal people understood, we were only here for a short time and it was best to find goodness in others.

Rob Hirst, too, was born with a sense of space and open skies in the southwest Sydney region of Camden.

Like Marie Bashir, Rob had a lifelong affinity with this beautiful land. He loved the stunning coastlines and the silence of the desert. He found a way to express this in words and music. The search for a natural balance was a lifelong pursuit.

Like his first, young musical mates, guitarist Jim Moginie and bass player, Andrew James, Rob grew up listening to the songs and feeling the sense of freedom created by the Beatles.

The high school band, Schwampy Moose, at first covered the Beatles' hits. When the boys became men and headed off to university, they changed the band's name to Farm, an acronym for 'Fucking All Right Mate'. What can I say? Nah, yeah! They liked a good laugh.

Rob's story: In 1975 the band was still searching for another voice, a lead singer to light fires. So, they put an ad in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Peter Garret got the gig and with yet another name change, Midnight Oil was on the road.

From start to finish, Rob's drumming was the powerful, pounding pulse of this very political rock and roll band. Watch the drumsticks flailing. There is the engine room.

The man was ripped. In sweaty sleeveless shirts he knocked out legendary solos, especially one played on the side of a corrugated iron rain tank, right there on centre stage.

These sounds and Garret's manic performances were calculated to connect audiences to serious issues.

If you listen to the lengthy playlist of Midnight Oil's greatest hits, from 13 studio albums across almost half a century, you will see Rob Hirst's treasure of songwriting credits. It is why so many musicians have lauded his writing as well as his playing.

Much later would come Rob's book about the touring life, collaborations with a host of other brilliant musicians and always an equally high-energy commitment to progressive causes.

Rob's interests, like Peter Garret's and others in Midnight Oil, included passionate, informed environmentalism, opposition to destructive mining and the need for reductions in the world's nuclear weapons arsenals.

'Beds are Burning' – the 1987 song that made the band famous internationally – is more than a 'protest song'. There is a stunning sense of urgency in this call for a national reckoning with Australia's treatment of the First Peoples.

Ironically, 'Beds are Burning' helped inform the world about Aboriginal land rights and the removal of children from their families. Yet the call for recognition and genuine listening to Aboriginal people was wretchedly rejected here at home in the Voice referendum.

This sense of injustice dealt out to Aboriginal people was one of Marie Bashir's driving passions both as Chancellor of the University of Sydney and as Governor of NSW.

When a young Aboriginal uni student, Jack Manning Bancroft, was encouraged by his mother, artist Bronwyn Bancroft, to approach the Chancellor for some help on a mentoring scheme to improve Aboriginal education, Marie Bashir opened Sydney University's doors.

Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) allowed thousands of university undergraduates here and in other nations to meet with high school kids and mentor them on campus.

In 2007 Jack Manning Bancroft was so frustrated with battling bureaucracies to assist Aboriginal students that he was close to giving up on this idea before meeting Marie Bashir.

'As I walked in this beautiful lady gave the greatest smile and hug, and said, "Now Jack dear, tell me what you are dreaming up."

'I told her and she said, "well doesn't that seem like a great thing to do." A month or two later we had our first ever university contract – and that grew to a mentoring model across Australia and around the world...'

Jack Manning Bancroft (AIME)

This is not the only act of attentive listening and genuine kindness that demonstrated Marie Bashir's gift of empathy.

In her time occupying Sydney's grand old Government House, her chauffeurs told many delightful stories. This Governor would ask them to stop the car, pull over and tend to a feller passed out drunk by the gutter. Her trusted aides on many occasions watched her hug strangers in the shelters for the homeless. I saw her kiss the cheeks of military veterans, including those of now forgotten frontier wars.

When then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the National Apology to the Stolen Generations at Federal Parliament in Canberra on February 13, 2008, Governor Bashir chose to sit quietly with Aboriginal mob in Redfern.

The survivors of the Stolen Generations began to organise annual commemorations on the anniversary of the National Apology. They wanted to remind Australia that despite all the promises, Aboriginal children were being removed from their families now at a faster rate than during the historic Stolen Generations.

MCing these Aboriginal events each year, I witnessed Marie Bashir's natural warmth to men and women literally trembling with emotion.

Many of them told stories that were heart-breaking. Marie had a special talent, partly from her vast experience and training as a psychiatrist, but also from her own human values. Her gentle voice and intelligent choice of words had an observable healing power.

Marie Bashir and Rob Hirst also shared the love of extraordinary partners in their lives, delighted in their large extended families and held so many long-lasting friendships. Both burbled with pride in their children.

The joy they found in music provided just the right score for these two admirable lives.

In the end, Marie played her violin until she could no longer. Rob sold off a much-loved drum kit to benefit musicians in the Northern Territory and roadies who were ill or fallen on hard times.

Such generous kindred spirits, they were united not by age but by endless belief in what is best in all of us.