

[Transcript] Conversations / How Stephen sang himself to life

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Stephen Smith got his first proper job as a teenager,
working in the food hall at David Jones.
Having this job was a big deal because it meant that Stephen didn't need
to live in a squat or in his car anymore.
Stephen had had an unstable childhood,
shifting from home to foster home.
But the job that DJs gave him his first steady income.
And from the food hall, Stephen Smith made the next obvious move,
which was to become an opera singer.
Everything changed for Stephen after a colleague overheard him
singing during a shift.
Alongside his beautiful voice, Stephen was able to bring a whole world
of love and loss and longing to his roles on stage.
After a life stranded on the margins, not quite knowing where he fit in,
it must have been exhilarating to be sent a stage
and to give voice to all that feeling in song.
After some stops and starts, Stephen ended up as a principal artist
for Opera Australia before swapping the stage for the auctioneer's gavel.
Hi, Stephen. Hi, Richard.
Stephen, let's start right at the beginning.
You're born in Auckland.
What do you know of how your parents met each other?
So my father was he would have been 57 at the time,
Western District boy from Victoria.
And mum was a 22 year old Samoan girl.
And they met through through letters.
I don't quite know how the letters came about,
but they got communicating through that method.
And my father ended up proposing through letters they'd never met.
And mum coming from I think Samo at the time
was probably more or less a third world country.
And her father was very keen for her to take up this proposition
from this Australian man who would obviously provide a better life.
So she accepted and dad flew across to Samoa and got off the plane
and mum burst into tears.
And the reason was she described it that while he was in his fifties,
but he described himself that he was in his forties
and sent a photo of himself in his thirties and didn't quite line up.
So obviously, you know, that wasn't quite what she expected,
but followed through the wedding took place
and in the week that they were together in Samoa, she got pregnant.

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And he flew home to Australia and she stopped off in New Zealand
as was the way you had to do it at the time
to get your papers to come to Australia.
And that was it for the two of them.
And lucky me managed to find my way to life
in that brief week they spent together.
Is that how long the marriage lasted, a week?
Yeah, yeah. I daresay it wasn't a happy week.
It was probably happy for dad, but not so much for mum.
So what happened after you were born then, Steve?
Well, mum thought there'd be a better life for me with my father here in Australia.
And she was quite isolated.
She was staying with a family.
She was away from her family, didn't have people.
And obviously the marriage wasn't something she wanted to continue with.
And 22, 23 year, you've got your whole life in front of you.
So I can see how one might be in a different world
and need to preserve that.
So when I was only a few months old,
she put me on a plane and brought me across to Australia
and gave me to my father.
Now, I think he expected that there might have been some reconciliation.
That much I recall, but that wasn't to be.
She handed me over and flew back to New Zealand.
And dad was standing there holding a three month old and trying to work out
how as a single man in his late 50s, he would make it all work.
Did she ever talk to you about what it was like to hand you over at that stage?
Yeah, look, I didn't meet mum till later,
but I've had the stories come through later in life and she's full of regret.
There's no question about that, the sadness around doing that.
And people inherently make the best decisions in the circumstances
they find themselves with, the tools they have at their disposal.
So I can imagine for her at the time that was what she needed to do for her.
But of course, as we get older and our perspectives change
and we see the way the consequences of our actions roll out,
it's not difficult to be filled with regret.
And that's certainly where she has found herself.
So there you are as a small baby in the hands of your father,
who has got a photo of himself in his 30s.
He's tender profile as him in his 40s and in fact, he is in his mid 50s.
Did he end up looking after you as a baby then?
No, he wasn't in a position to do so whilst he had the firm desire to do so.
He neither had the family support, the time available to him nor the income
to make those things happen and had to explore other options.

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So I think I stayed with some family for a very short period of time while other arrangements were made and then found my way into, I believe the next step was the Anglican baby's home, which I don't even think it exists anymore.

But I had a memory of this grand staircase with those horses that you used to get outside the supermarkets or the shopping centres. They're probably still there.

You put 20 cents in and they, yeah.

So I had a recollection of this horse at the top of this staircase and I was told that that was from this baby's home.

But Dad always kept in touch.

So from the baby's home, I was then put into some short term foster care.

I'm not sure how many families I found my way through, but I had my main recollection is of two, two families.

And the second one was the Meg's family.

And I, I stayed with them for about eight years in the end with differing levels of contact with my father along the way.

They were the closest thing you had to a mum and dad in that period?

Oh, for me, that that was mum and dad.

And that's what they were called.

And I remember it must have been five or six being asked if I wanted to perhaps change my surname, you know, and really be part of the family.

And that was something I, I grabbed on to.

And it's interesting the way perspectives differ, because to me that was mum and dad.

I had my older brother who was five years older than me and then my younger sister who was, I think, five years younger.

And we were the three in there who were either adopted or fostered.

And then they had five children of their own who were, who were older.

They would have been teenagers by this stage or teenagers or older.

You mentioned you had an older foster brother there.

What was your relationship like with him?

We were very close.

He was my, he was my idol, but we were also very competitive.

And he was bigger.

He was older.

I was more intelligent, if I can, if I can just call it as it is.

So when it came to games and those sorts of things, it was pretty close.

But he would always do the older brother thing and change the rules, shift the goalposts and all of that to ensure that ensure that he would win.

You know, it's like, oh, no, it's it's it's six.

If it's over the fence, unless it goes over the gate, that doesn't count.

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That's that's just a straight out classic, classic.

Yeah, exactly.

So that was my relationship with him as a as a child.

And and as as I got older, he was I think it's probably fair to say

he lacked a conscience and where people were things if they served his purpose.

And were you in that world then, Stephen?

Oh, I was his pet.

I think it's probably what it was.

I was the person that gave him a sense of identity,
a sense of of worth.

I looked up to him and I think he needed he needed that.

And I was gullible for many, many years with him,

probably until I was around 18 or so.

So he was indulging in borderline or actual criminal behaviour.

Did he bring you in on that as well?

Oh, yeah, he taught.

I think at maybe the age of five or six, he taught me how to shoplift

and teach me how to hide it in the palm of your hand or shove it in your pocket.

And and then as as we got older, after I'd further down the track,

he would steal cars and take me for rides.

And he was in and out of prison constantly and not not a smart criminal.

He just didn't really consider the obvious consequences of his actions.

So you went back to live with your dad for a while in Port Ferry.

And then that didn't work out.

Did you want to go back and live again with the mixed family?

And what happened when you tried to go back and live with the mixed family?

As a child in foster care or adoption, you're always

you dream of going to live with your real mum or your real dad.

And that opportunity came to me and it was amazing.

It was like the dream come true all of a sudden,

expecting that the weekend dad would be the full time dad.

And that's how things would be.

It'll be Rosie. And nonetheless, it's it's not how it played out.

And he was older and more like a grandfather.

And I was young and headstrong and ran circles around him and really had no boundaries.

And as a you know, as a young teenager or in your your tweens,

I certainly needed that.

And without those boundaries, I completely ran off the rails and and I was lonely

and I was miserable and I missed the having people around.

And I didn't have anyone to help me through the challenges of puberty and such

and all the changes that are going on and the social changes.

And so I reached out by the social workers to to go back up.

It's like, well, this isn't working. I want to go. I want to go home.

And conversations were had.

And the phrase that sticks out for me that came back to me was that
Stephen has changed.
We have changed.
We don't believe it would work.
And if it didn't work, then he'd be left with with no one.
And it's funny, the things that stick
or that actually have a much bigger impact down the track.
And I think, you know, that thing that we have changed, he has changed
has really I think it struck me through the years as I I took on board,
I guess, a certain level of responsibility that, oh, I've done
I've done something wrong.
I can't go home because because I've I've done done something wrong.
Did you take it to mean that you're a bad person and did you take that to heart?
I don't know that I I was conscious of it at the time.
And, you know, memories being what they are, I I couldn't recall that.
But I know it's impacted my relationships with people, my fear.
I have this this this this deep seated fear now that if I haven't
spoken to someone for a while, I find it incredibly difficult to reach out.
And and on a very subconscious level, we've worked out that
because on various times in my life, that being one of them,
I've suffered this rejection for things that I've not actually done
or that other people might have done and such that that when I go to reach out
to someone I've not spoken to for a while, there's this fear that
something might have happened.
And now I'm I'm in trouble that that just a couple of words
to change the meaning can can really affect someone.
And fair enough, situations had changed at my own.
There's there's no doubt about it.
And they would never have known that the impact that that might have had.
So where did you go then?
What happened was that they then said, well, let's do the occasional visit.
So that's sort of where we went.
It was more like a reverse foster care arrangement.
I would go and visit them maybe once a month, popped down for a weekend or something.
I don't it might have only been a couple of visits.
And I remember it's funny.
Shame's a funny thing, because I go to tell the story now.
The shame wells up in me.
But we move past that.
I remember as a yeah, I would have been 12 or 13 when I was visiting them
using some computer programs and and and and grabbing the discs
and shoving them in my bag to take home when I left because I wanted those
and stealing them.
Let's let's let's call it what is a stalls and stall some computer discs

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and and then getting the message coming through to say that this had happened.
They're aware and my recollection was I was I was cut off top.
No, that's this isn't going to work.
Now, I think it's important to look at from the family's perspective.
They had had the older brother who had mentioned who was stealing from the family,
who was just absolutely wreaking havoc in there.
So it makes sense that one goes, well, hang on, that's happened there.
We see a similar pattern here.
Yeah, no need to protect the family and such.
So completely understand it.
So that left you stranded in.
Well, stranded. Is that the word for import ferry in Western Victoria?
Yeah, well, I was there and such.
But by the time I got to 15, I was bored.
It didn't have the stimulation.
It didn't have the life.
It didn't. I didn't feel at home there.
I was, you know, this young brown child in an environment where I didn't feel part of it.
I didn't feel part of it and I needed excitement.
So I came up to Melbourne for for a wedding and I stayed with my foster brother,
who was I think at the time he was in a halfway house.
He just got out of prison and I went to stay with him.
I think we may have moved in actually with the mexers again.
They said, yes, we can see changes.
Come come and stay.
So moved in there and I had a little job that I was doing.
But then he got arrested and I got a phone call at work to say,
you're just like him or your stuff's out the front.
Yeah, we don't want anything to do with you.
As I was at 15, I didn't have anywhere to stay in Melbourne at the time.
I ended up going into a number of youth refuges from there
and then into a squat and then I got I got the most terrible beating
I've ever had in my life.
How did you get that, Stephen?
Oh, we had some others staying with us and we kicked them out.
And I was there a few days later, just lying on my bed and the door flew open
and three of them came running in while I was on the ground
and just laid their boots in relentlessly.
And I remember afterwards seeing the room just covered in blood.
And when they stopped and they left, I jumped over the fence to the neighbour's
house and I was sitting at the back and they'd called the ambulance.
There was a pool of blood underneath.
And the ambulance took me up to the hospital
and they very quickly moved me on and sent me out out the door.

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And I didn't have anywhere to go.

I remember finding my way to Preston train station
and obviously massively can cast and catching the train down to Clifton Hill
and at Clifton Hill to get onto the Hurst Bridge line, you have to walk under
the tracks and then and then back up the other side.

And I remember just lying on the the bench on the station,
unable to move let alone cross the tracks.

And some some guy came and gave me ten or twenty dollars
and could see my struggles.

And that that hit home that, you know, I'd been having all this great fun here.
I'd I'd been learning to sing and dance with others that I'd met
and that I was staying within the squat.

And that was a really exciting time.

We'd go down to St Kilda Beach and that's where we'd we'd learn our songs.

We were going to be the next big group.

It was going to be shy, color me bad, boys to men and whatever we were going
to call ourselves. And it was wonderful.

But that was really, I think, where the love of music, of singing,
of performing, of being at the Ford, that was really where that came out.

So you were doing all the singing, even though you were living in a squat
in Northgood, but then you got this bad, bad beating.

And was anyone checking in on you, Stephen?

You're 15. I mean, was anyone keeping an eye on you?

No, from from that age, I was very much.

And even before that, I think probably from the age of 12 or 13,

I was I was a master of my movements.

Dad, I think ordinarily, you know, dad would have been the person to do it
in any other family, but dad was in his late 60s.

I actually might have been 70 odd by then and really had no, no oversight.

He's a very gentle man, but would avoid confrontation.

And how about your mum?

Had you been in contact with her throughout this whole period?

I'd had two contacts with mum up to that point.

I remember at the age of six or seven, I was at school

and I had a phone call to come home because my mum was there.

And I went and and there she was.

And I spent this wonderful day with her and I've got a photo of it, actually.

And then and then she was gone.

And what I didn't know was that she'd shown up to take me home.

She'd realized that, no, actually, no, that's my son.

I want my son and come along with a partner and some friends and turned up
on the doorstep of the foster family to say, yep, I'm here to here to take my son.

Where is he? And I mean, you could imagine the turmoil that that would have caused
as they're then on the phone to the social workers and trying to, you know,

rally the forces to assure things up and explain that, well, no, you can't just you can't take him.
You have to go through a process and get to he doesn't know you.
So that was that was a big occasion.
And then there were some letters that went back and forth.
This woman called mum would send me presents every now and then.
And and it wasn't until I'd moved in with my father and I would have been in grade six when I was at a friend's house and I got a call from him to say, you better come home, your mother's here.
And she arrived in Port Ferry with her husband and my two half sisters and was there for sort of three to five days.
And I spent those days with them and it was joyous and it was exciting.
And there were siblings and my mum and all these all these amazing things.
It was like a dream until the day they they had to leave and and they left.
And I remember just the pit in my stomach.
They're just absolutely gutted.
One of the saddest feelings I can remember and the emptiness, that the emptiness and I have a recollection of barely eating for for several weeks afterwards for the that that sense of loss.
They were there and then they were gone.
So then at 15 during this period of homelessness, did you go searching for her again?
Well, after I'd come back to stay with dad again, I'm back in Port Ferry now.
And oh, it was it was boring at that age.
And I've since since discovered that I am I suffer from ADHD.
Well, I suffer and I enjoy or others suffer from ADHD, all of the above.
But it explains a lot about my childhood behaviours and the way things have gone.
But no one had oversight of me to say, well, actually, hang on.
Maybe there's something going on here that we could help with.
You know, my aversion to boredom is extreme.
So to be back in Port Ferry was never going to last, I had to get out of there.
And I looked up, I was looking through the photo album and I found the photo of my sister, Lisa, my half sister from my mother and flipped it over and on the back of a little school photo was a name.
And I thought, oh, I wonder if I can find them.
And I went up to the phone booth at the front of the caravan park that dad and I lived in and flicking through the Sydney phone book and found them and I called the number and this lady answered.
And I've gone mum and she's, oh, no, I think you've got the wrong number.
Sorry. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, it's it's it's Steven.
And she was shocked and amazed and delighted and encouraged me to to come come.
And it was it was late afternoon, I think by this time.
And I thought, OK, I'm going to do this.
So I went back into into the house or the caravan rather.

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Well, it was a mobile home, somewhere in between.
I grabbed my bag and I shoved a couple of things in there.
And I don't even know what I said to dad.
If I said anything or I just did as I did and just kept going
and walked out onto the road and put my thumb out and managed to hitchhike
to Melbourne just in time to get the overnight train to Sydney.
I called her from the station to say I'm getting on the train.
Meet me in Sydney in the morning.
And she did. And it was I think the best way I could describe it is
it was like falling in love.
It was this this connection.
And, you know, I'd been searching for for connection.
I'd been searching for for belonging.
And I spent much of my life trying to work out who am I and where do I belong?
And and and here was this moment.
It's like, yeah, here I am.
I'm with my mum and I've got my sisters.
And and she took me straight to meet aunts and uncles and cousins
and more cousins and people who were all just so welcoming
and so so glad to have me there.
I was known.
They knew me. They wanted me there.
It was quite overwhelming.
But what I what I didn't factor was the disruption that, you know,
my presence would have on on mum's marriage.
And I mean, you can imagine having a 15 year old stepson
arriving in your family with all these quirks and getting all the attention
and fresh off the streets and running amok and being treated like royalty.
They put a lot of pressure on them.
And naturally, there was rivalry between him and me.
And and then it got to the point a few months later where I went to I was sent
to Samoa to where did you stay when you went to Samoa?
So my grandparents were living there along with my half brother and again,
cousins, aunts, uncles, more cousins, more cousins, more cousins.
So I went to stay with them and having grown up in various different scenarios
in Melbourne, but essentially, you know, in Australia,
you know, bringing to arrive in a country where the the roads were unpaved.
They were all dirt roads and there were no traffic lights and there was no McDonald's
and the buses were made of wood put on the back of trucks.
And there was no hot water or the all the food got cooked on the fire,
which had to be built outside.
The children obeyed their their parents and grandparents.
There's very much an ageist age of structure.
Church played an enormous role and the food was so different.

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The weather was so different and an insane amount of singing.
Like this extraordinary singing culture there where people sing all the time
and sing together. How did that hit you, Stephen?
It was it was amazing at church.
There's obviously singing, but it wasn't just the that the hymns that are being
sung or they were all being sung in four part harmony.
And then you go to school and school assembly in the morning,
all the songs are sung with these amazing clapping rhythms.
And then, of course, it's there's extended grace that's said before dinner
and songs and hymns again by the whole family in four part harmony.
Does it make life a lot more joyful singing like that?
And why don't we all do this all the time?
What's wrong with us? What's wrong with the rest of us?
Why don't we all like that? I don't I don't get it.
I don't know.
Maybe we don't have permission to do so.
We haven't found the way to do so.
But I've come to realise that singing for me has become or has always been
a key part of how I regulate my nervous system, because I'll sing endlessly
as I as I walk through the supermarket or down the street or wherever I am.
But but also when I need to calm myself down, there are certain things I sing
that just have that effect on my body.
Or if I don't sing, I get sad and depressed and my my energy disappears.
And I know I'm not doing well when I think, wow, I haven't sung for for a while.
There's something very animalistic about the production of sound
and the different sounds we make and the effect they have on our physiology
and the physiology of of others around it.
What happens on a Sunday in Somalia?
And what's your role?
What was your role within the family on that Sunday?
Oh, Sundays, it's very much church and food preparation.
On Sunday, you'd often have an umu is what it's called.
It's like a ground oven where you build a fire and you heat the rocks.
On top of the fire, heat those up.
And then once the fire has gone out, you've got these hot rocks.
You put the food and then rocks and food and rocks
and then cover it all up with banana leaves and palm leaves.
Beautiful. Oh, so good.
So and but there's a huge amount of work that goes into that.
And rather than the system that often takes place here, where it's, you know,
parents serving the children, it's like, no, children do their part.
So it's the children, largely the younger members who do this work.
What was that like for you, given that you'd been such a tear away
to suddenly be in a culture where you do as you're told,

that you listen to your elders and you obey without question?
Yeah. Well, I think what I said was that the children do as they're told
and they obey and and without question and such.
I was never very good at those things.
And and and I was a little bit on the edge,
but certainly my half brother, Tavi, or David in English,
he was the one who would do all those things.
And I would I would float around the edges and and help out.
But I never really integrated properly.
I was always my own person and my grandfather.
People couldn't believe that he would let me he'd let me have drinks
and he'd buy me cigarettes.
And that was that was unheard of because he was such a street.
He was a hard man.
But somehow I was the I was the golden child,
the special one who'd get away with whatever.
So my experience was a little different.
But but seeing the work that went in from from others there was
it was it was really eye opening because I was the sort of person
who I couldn't do anything unless I I was really interested in it
or wanted to do it. Otherwise, just forget it.
There's no way school forget it.
Boring, not going to do it. That that work not not going to do it.
I'd rather just do whatever else.
It was so different to what I knew.
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So how long did you stick it out for in summer?
Well, I was sent sent back to school because I dropped out at year nine.
I was totally disinterested in school.
I was sent to school and it's like, OK, I'll do that.
And my grandmother made my uniform.
And so I went for the just one term of school.
And again, I don't know that I was a very good student.
And and by the end of the year,
which was only about four months in total that I was there,
I was I was a bit bored and I was a bit unsettled
and I wanted to come home.
And so that's that's what I did.
I called my father and I said, oh, I want to come home.
Can you pay for my airfare?
But what was home in Australia?
Ah, great question.

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So I flew back and Sydney, Sydney wasn't home with mom and the family.
That that didn't feel like where I I felt most myself.
Port Ferry with dad, that that that wasn't it.
For me, home was coming back to find the guys that I was with
in the squats and the youth refuges in Melbourne.
Home was homelessness in a way.
Yeah, yeah, I'd managed to convince my father
when I got back to Sydney from Samoa to buy me a car.
And I'd pay it back, of course, and I never did.
And I got this car and I was seven seventeen at the time, almost seventeen.
So I drove from Sydney down to Melbourne in this in this car.
And I remember being pulled over by the police along the way
and they're like, can we see your license?
And now and I've turned around to them and said, oh, jeez, bro.
Shit, I haven't got my license.
I forgot it. I left it behind.
I've I've got a New Zealand license.
And and we're in the middle of nowhere here.
And the policeman is I think he's just rolled his eyes.
And he said, look, I'm going to write you a fine for the right.
You're fine for the speeding.
So here it is.
I'm just going to go back to my car now.
I've got some paperwork to do.
If you just happened to drive off, I probably wouldn't notice to it.
So he was obviously a pragmatic gentleman and I was very grateful for it.
But I got back to Melbourne and I drove to I drove to Northgate Bowl,
which is where we go on occasion with my guys from Melbourne, Samoa
and George and Rob.
And I rocked up at Northgate Bowl just on the off chance that they might be there.
And Samoa was there and it was on for young and old.
And I don't even know where he was staying at the time.
But within a very short period that two of us were just living out of my car.
Again, these things sound awful, living in a squat.
Yeah, I think I've spent all of in my whole life.
I think I've spent all of one night sleeping in a car and it wasn't great.
It wasn't great, Stephen.
I just don't know what that's like to live day after day in your car.
Yeah, well, I think for many people, it would be challenging.
I think if that was the only option available to you, I mean, that's that's
that's devastating.
And as an adult now looking back at 16 year old me as if he's someone else,
I feel very sad for that boy.
But for me as the 16 year old, I was I was where I wanted to be.

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I didn't want to be in these other places.
I wanted to be where the people who understood me or got me or took me
as I was were I wanted to be singing and dancing.
I wanted to be in Melbourne where there was excitement.
I didn't have any money.
I didn't have anywhere to stay, but I had a friend.
I had understanding and I had music and that was that was all I needed.
So whilst a lot of the people I knew were getting into drugs and things
that have very negative life outcomes for me, it was we were singing.
We had we had dreams that I don't think we were ever going to achieve.
But we didn't know that we had this joyous ignorance and this love of what we were doing.
So you got this job at David Jones in the food hall.
What was the work like?
Oh, it was good, actually.
I quite like repetitive labor.
I find it really great fun.
I used to pick flowers and such.
And again, it was just a race.
It's like you do the same thing.
How can I refine the technique?
How can I do this quicker?
And it was the same with setting up fruit stands and those sorts of things.
But what I used to do in the morning, so you'd arrive at six o'clock
and the shop wouldn't open till nine.
You got three hours to get the displays all set up before people arrive.
And you've got the truck comes to unload the truck, you put it upstairs,
you bring the stock down, rotate it through.
And so we'd have the radio playing or the CD player playing with people
like Dean Martin or Frank Sinatra or Tony Bennett, these crooners.
And I love that that type of music.
And as that's playing in the food hall, which echoes beautifully,
I'd be singing along.
And one day, a young lady who worked with me there by the name of Leanne.
Leanne said to me, she said, Stephen, you've got a good voice.
You should go and get lessons.
Go and see my teacher.
And what did you think of that suggestion?
Oh, yeah, it's good.
No, I'm not doing much else.
Why not?
Yep. So I had no idea.
So I went along and I met her teacher, Natalia.
And Natalia asked me, have you done any singing before?
I said, oh, yeah, I've been singing R&B and hip hop.

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And yeah, but have you had any lessons?

No. Did you do it at school?

No. OK, so you've not done any singing.

I'm like, oh, OK.

And she had been doing some scales and such.

And that was that was interesting as I because I quite like technical things and trying to work out how how my voice worked once I was given a challenge here like this. It's like, oh, should be easy.

But that's that's interesting.

How does this work?

But the the kicker was she played me some music.

She introduced me to Pavarotti singing Nessun Dorma.

She showed me the operas of Puccini,

Lubbawem and Manon Lesko and these these stories.

So the two things I was struck by was first these voices, these voices like they were like huge engines that the just roared and it was amazing, the power and control that came out.

And then, oh, my God, these stories, these stories that would just break your heart and and leave you just devastated.

And the combination of those two things just the special interest was born and this became my obsession for the next the next 20 years.

And the other thing that was so important for me was

I had someone in front of me who was saying, you can do this.

I see something in you, something valuable, something special, something that most people don't have.

And you're a tenor.

Now, that's so important because tenors in opera, you're not there as the father or the old tenor.

Tenors are the heroes, tenors are the lovers and you're a tall tenor.

So you're a tall tenor with a gorgeous voice.

We just got to teach you how to use it.

And I left school at year nine, but she told me, you know what, you can you should audition for the Victorian College of the Arts because there you don't need to have your your VCE.

It doesn't matter about schooling, it's entirely audition based.

I go, OK, so so I did that, had the audition and just sort of scraped through with a little bit of assistance on the the music theory side of it to be accepted.

But then even being accepted to the VCA,

I had to go through summer school of music theory.

But and then when I when I was at uni, the the singing part, the performance part, that's always something that's come come quite naturally to me as long as I don't get into my head.

And there was a period where I did that.

But the technical side, the music theory side, I always struggled with.

So what was it like for you then to reach a certain level of training to start making those heroic noises of a great tenor to feel that voice starting somewhere in your diaphragm and sort of come up out of you into the world?

Yeah, and it came it came gradually because part of the thing is you don't quite know how to make the the healthy big, big noise.

And you've got to be brave enough to make a right royal mess of it out loud in front of everyone and make mistakes, but make them big.

And I was always taught, yeah, if you're going to make a mistake, make an effect of it, don't hide away from it, just go with it.

If you're going to crack, cracked living the Jesus out of it.

And that's become a fundamental part of my my performance psychology over time.

But it gives you permission to to be brave and do the things you need to do.

So so in terms of that feeling of singing and you talk about,

you know, it coming up from the diaphragm, but it it starts lower than that.

It's it's really it's your entire being right from the tips of your toes.

You think about when someone's in in pain or in agony

and the the screams that they make or the or or the the

roars that people will make in in a situation where they're, you know,

in a violent situation and need to defend and all that adrenaline comes on.

It's it's full bodied.

Now, as an opera singer, you learn to control it so that it's done healthily.

But yeah, that that that feeling, that sensation,

there is nothing like it in the world.

Does it reveal something of you to yourself when you hear yourself informed

by all that feeling, feeling that you'd experienced all that frustration

and that sense of not belonging, that loneliness and alienation.

And then you you add that into that beautiful, large, amazing voice.

With the times when that noise came out of you and you went,

wow, did I really make that noise?

There's certainly been times when something technical is clicked

and all of a sudden you're capable of doing something you couldn't do before.

All of a sudden the voice has a shine, has a brilliance, has an ease,

finds its way into a register in a way you hadn't done before.

And you go, wow, and you start to compare it against, you know,

those those masters that you've you've you've heard through the recordings

or if you're lucky enough live.

And that that really is quite profound to find for me.

Where I had a I just I had a belief system around myself

that I was never going to be anything couldn't do anything.

I was trouble.

I was just going to end up in jail or in the gutter or I wasn't valuable to people.

And it's taken a long time to recognise that I've I've spent my life

hedging my bets around having people around me
because there has been that fundamental belief at a core level that
yeah, people people are going to move on.
Well, there was obviously something wrong with me
because my mum gave me up, my dad gave me up.
My foster parents let me go and then rejected me when I wanted to come back.
Dad wasn't around, got rejected again.
First marriage broke up.
Second marriage, like all these things where it's like,
obviously, people don't hang around.
People are temporary in our lives, doesn't matter who they are.
And I didn't have a model to tell me otherwise.
So people are always going to going to go.
So what was your stage debut then as a tenor?
In my my honours year at VCA, I had auditioned for for the role
of Redolfo with Eastern Metropolitan Opera, which doesn't exist anymore.
And much to my amazement, I was I was given the role.
This is Labo M, isn't it?
Labo M, that's right.
And oh, Redolfo and Labo M was was my dream role at the time.
And he's me as a twenty three year old.
I think I would have been making my making my debut in the opera as a as in my dream role.
And and I remember doing that production.
And at the time my my marriage was was was almost done.
I had we had a child.
So we met at the age of 17, a couple of young kids with no idea
of who we were, and then I've gone on this musical journey.
And I've been growing at a rapid rate in a direction that was not the same
direction that that she was growing in.
And and I think, you know, a lot of psychological traumas and such that I'd
had played out in ways that weren't healthy within our relationship.
So we were on the rocks and and I had this had this this dream role that I was doing.
And we'd come to the point where I was given a choice within my marriage of well,
it's it's it's us, including my my my youngest son that's well,
my only son at the time, it's us or it's it's opera.
You make the choice.
And and I chose family, of course, that's that's what we do, isn't it?
You you sacrifice, you give up, you give up things and you do the family thing.
That's I know it wasn't done for me, but that that's what that's what we do.
That's you've only just got started.
Yeah, I've only got started. I barely got started.
I've just done three years, three and a half years of study,
and I'm about to do my my first role.
So we'd agreed that I'd finished this opera and and that that'd be it.

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So my first opera was also my my last opera at the time.
And and and I remember, you know, I remember falling in love there as you do,
like Redolpher falls in love with with Mimi.
And of course, there's a certain amount of projection, you know,
you don't just see the character when you're at that stage, you know,
that early young young age, it's all brought to life.
And, you know, you get crushes and I had a stage crush and I had that going on.
And then my my marriage breaking down and this was my first show and my last show.
So it was there was so much emotion, so much invested in these these
these small number of performances.
And I remember taking my curtain call on the the final night,
feeling like this was the last time I would ever ever be on stage.
It was it was so joyful and devastating.
And and all the things at once, it was such a huge moment in time.
And and that was it. I walked away from the stage.
So after that, you left opera for a while and then the marriage broke up.
And once that had happened, how quickly did you want to return to singing?
Oh, the following day, that was it.
I moved into my place, my first my first place just of my own.
Through all all of this time, I'd never never had a place that was
that was mine that I had control of.
And I walked in and the first thing I did was jump on the phone
to my my friends from VCA, who I'd not spoken to since.
And my teacher, Natalia, who who really was the one who started the journey
and immediately went back to lessons and auditioned for things.
And I reached out to the director who directed Lubbawem.
It was Caroline Stacey, whose work I absolutely adored and and very quickly
within a within a matter of of months, I'd left the courier driving,
which I was doing and little computer business that I was trying to get going
and and such. And and I was a full time singer within just a matter of months.
It was it was amazing.
And where did that take you, Stephen?
So that was 2002.
I did an opera up in Canberra.
And then by 2003, Melbourne Opera had just splintered off
from Melbourne City Opera at the time and was about to launch into their first season.
And I was lucky enough to have landed the lead tenor roles
in all three of the productions in the inaugural year.
I think that year I did eight, eight different operas for various various companies
and then auditioned for Opera Australia.
And I was given roles in the touring production of of Cardamon as Don José,
which I absolutely loved.
And I was just living this wonderful life as a singer.
I was a singer. That's what I did to I was.

And I was going through this period of growth of exploring
and really finding myself on so many levels.
Well, it wasn't boys to men, but it wasn't it wasn't a bad second best result, I'd say.
So that was a touring the world as an opera singer.
No, not at all. And, you know, as a child, it was a loved young talent time.
And then and then it was, yeah, boy, it was R&B.
And then we had church and such in Samoa.
And then, yeah, opera, that's that's where it landed.
And the thing I've really loved about opera over the years is
and the theatre in general, and I don't I don't care if I'm on stage
or I'm in the auditorium, it doesn't matter that there's this magical place
where the world disappears and new lives are born in front of us.
And you can you can explore these journeys.
And I love it as a performer to be able to wear someone else's life, dig through it,
find what's there and and share that with the audience,
find their joy, find their trauma, find their challenges,
connect that with the things that have happened in in your own life
or the things that one would hope would never happen in your life
and be able to explore all this and share it and go on a journey with everyone.
And then at the end of the show, you you leave the space and life is fine.
Life is what it was before you walked in.
You didn't actually kill anyone.
You didn't actually have any affairs.
But you get to explore these spaces and and be someone else.
And the thing I love about opera about singing is not only
do you explore the lives of these people that you're portraying,
but you portray it in, you know, with this full bodied voice,
your body, your whole body from head to toe.
If you if your soul is crying, it is crying at one hundred and five
decibels shaking the air in front of you.
And that air then shakes the ears, the people in front of you.
You're physically affecting people.
You can the ability to uncover what's happening and reduce,
reduce yourself and reduce the audience to tears in a matter of seconds
to be able to share that emotion,
share that thing that's happening to you with other people is
is something really, really magical.
So Steven, you were able to fulfill all that promise.
It's an extraordinary story.
And then you gave it away.
Why did you want to give it away?
The opera industry was changing in the early 2010s,
such that there, you know, the money wasn't there.
There were a lot of foreign artists coming in as there still are.

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And there's there's arguments to and for that.
But ultimately, I was on there are a number of us on full time contracts
as principal artists with Opera Australia.
Then we had some some some surety.
You'd know that after 12 months, you get another 12 months work.
And we weren't on great money, but it was secure.
And you'd given up a lot of other relationships, if you like,
with the other companies, because the company more or less owned you.
But those days were coming to an end.
You could see the writing written on the wall.
And I thought, well, I'm about to have another family.
My my my older boys back in Melbourne,
they're they're getting older, they're going to be grown up soon.
And I haven't spent anywhere near as much time with them
as I thought I would in my naivety, thinking,
yeah, I can live in Sydney and spend lots of time in Melbourne
and still tour and travel and such.
And I thought, well, no, it's time. It's time to go.
It's time to exit. Go back to Melbourne.
Eleanor and I had spoken about me joining her in real estate
when I retire from the stage.
It's like, well, let's let's do that.
Let's go back to Melbourne and and put it all together.
And that's that's what we did.
And that was twenty twenty thirteen made the shift to Melbourne,
made the obvious shift from opera to real estate.
The next obvious rung on the ladder.
Absolutely. From homelessness to DJ's Food Hall,
to International Opera Star, to to real estate.
So so now you're a real estate auctioneer and that I'm sure gives you a
you know, a bit of fun. There's a bit of performance there.
There's a lot of voice projection and a fair bit of excitement involved in all that.
But looking at looking back now, looking back now on that that boy that you were,
can you stand back and look at him and and how do you feel about him?
Yeah, that it's it's really interesting
because I do spend a lot of time reflecting now.
And I'm I'm studying psychology at Monash as well now.
So I have this this whole set of tools
and different lenses to to reflect with.
And I'd always had this really positive story about my my childhood.
You know, I was lucky enough to have this independence
and to be able to forge my own path and do things the way I wanted to do it.
And and it was the only life I ever knew and it was great.
I loved my time on the streets and living in cars.

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It was exciting.
I didn't have to do things I didn't want to.
And I got to, you know, I've lived this wonderful, wonderful journey.
And and that's, I think, been a very functional,
a functional story or a functional telling of some of the facts that were there.
But but now I look back on it and as I've,
you know, come to a period in life
where there have been significant challenges
and I've had to work my way through that and find out what's what's led to that
and and and actually realize the trauma that was there and and and see
that the very the challenges I had to me growing up in foster care
and not meeting my mum until 15 and living on on the streets.
And and that that that that was just normal.
That's that's it's a normal life living in a caravan park and such
and and realizing, no, that's that's not the common story.
And I can still have compassion for the adults in my life,
but actually look at myself and go, that was really hard.
I feel really sad for that boy and what he went through
and the loneliness that that he had and and that sense of rejection
and the lack of a real home, of a real base,
of a real community that watched over him and looked after him
and guided him and supported him or or who were at least there
so that in his mind he he knew he had somewhere to go.
And it makes me really sad when I look at my children
and they are the absolute light of my life and and I look at what they have
and that they've got the benefit of everything that I and his parents have learned.
And then I look back at myself as a child and.
It's it's quite devastating, it's quite devastating.
And that's one of the reasons I've I've gone into this course of study
because I want to understand myself.
I want to be able to help my children.
I want to be able to help the people who who come to me looking for help.
And, you know, I mentioned I've I've got ADHD
and that that's raw havoc throughout my life for me and the the people around me.
But now I have some insight and I know how to work with it.
I don't like wearing my mask anymore.
I don't like having to be anyone.
I'm I'm not I I like who I am, I accept who I am.
So I share who I am.
Stephen, thank you so much for sharing your beautiful story.
Absolute pleasure.
Thank you for thanks for the opportunity to do so.
You've been listening to a podcast of conversations with Richard Fidler.
For more conversations, interviews, please go to the website, [abc.net.au slash conversations](http://abc.net.au/slash/conversations).