

# Spinning MOMENTS

From the pop world of New Zealand to Kerry Packer's boardroom, singer, songwriter and music industrialist Gene Pierson has many stories to tell, and as he embarks on a new era of his life in the misty mountains of Bellenden Kerr, just south of Cairns, he opens up to **TANYA BIRD** about his past and what he describes as "spinning moments". Photography by Brad Newton. ▶

Gene's life is best described as a series of spinning moments. He has embarked on a journey that has seen many highs and many lows. One could almost say it has been a career of second chances, with Gene reinventing himself at each turn to come back bigger, stronger and more successful than ever. However, for a man who has toured with The Rolling Stones, Dusty Springfield and The Four Tops and haggled with the best of them in the business boardroom he owns a certain modesty and down to earth appeal that belies his success in the cut-throat world of the music industry.

It is clear from the outset that Gene was always destined for the musical spotlight, however it's the people he's met and the experiences he's had along the way that have been wholly unpredictable. In the mid 60s Gene was enjoying new found success with the rock and roll band Sebastian Hardie when, due to the then government's policy of compulsory conscription, he was confronted with the prospect of a tour of duty in Vietnam. "I was a conscientious objector to a war that had nothing to do with Australia, and for that the punishment was immediate drafting to the frontline in Vietnam," he explains. "So I had the choice to either fight or flee and in my wisdom I chose the latter and fled to New Zealand."

This decision was to prove fruitful for Gene, who found his feet with the band La De Da's before launching a solo career in 1966. With hits such as *Love Love Love*, *Celeste*, *You Got Me* and *Rainy Day in June*, Gene's

career was on the up, until three years later when he received a call from his mother in Sydney informing him his father had passed away. "We were a very close family and my mother wasn't coping too well, so I dropped everything and returned home to start all over again."

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For Gene, this was one of the hardest transitions of his life – from the highs of being a successful and well-known recording artist, to a life of relative anonymity working as a building laborer. "It was a life-altering decision that gave me more passion and motivation to succeed. If you risk nothing, then you risk everything."

But it seemed it was a risk worth taking. Not one to dwell on setbacks, Gene laughs about those early days and his driving ambition to get back in the spotlight. "As soon as I had saved enough to purchase a car, I drove myself to Festival Records and straight into a recording contract," he goes on to explain. "From there, I became quite well known and I was lucky enough to

score a number one hit in New South Wales." But his success was short-lived, as Gene faced yet another spinning moment. "It was known as the day the music died. My music was never really heard in other states, as tensions between ARIA and the radio stations intensified over the payment of royalties. It all came to a brutal stop. I was married at this stage with my first child, and I just knew it was time to change."

When asked if he was ever seduced by the glamour of the music industry, he admits it was hard not to buy into the whole sex, drugs and rock and roll of that era. "It really was in the whole scheme of things a conservative time, and probably more about the sex rather than the drugs. When you are talking about stars such as Mick Jagger there would be dozens of fans who would be prepared to do absolutely anything beyond just sex. The girls would line up and pray that the rock star would pick them. It didn't matter how many girls had been before them. The star would pick two or three girls, and when he would run out of steam he would pass them on to the next band member and so on."

Using his experiences as a recording artist, Gene transitioned into the "administrative" side of the business to become a booking agent. During this time, he established a name for himself as the original manager and founder of AC/DC, while also enjoying regular stints on Channel 7's *Today Show*, as well as becoming a columnist for the legendary *Go Set* magazine. It was also during this time the general manager of Channel 9, George Chapman, approached

him to spearhead a new recording and publishing company, Living Sound. "For the first time in my life I found myself working nine to five, but it was a role I slotted into well, drawing on my experiences on both sides of the spectrum."

As managing director of Living Sound Gene soon established a firm friendship with media tycoon Kerry Packer. "I remember the first time I met Kerry, I arrived at the Park Street office dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that brandished the word's 'Stuff Art Let's Rock', and walked into the boardroom of suits with Harry the Hatchet, Lynton Taylor, who was the executive chief at the time, George and of course Kerry. A real quiet descended on the room when I entered, I think they were all a little in shock," he chuckles. "Kerry in his booming voice, said, 'what's this bloke doing here?', to which, George replied, 'that's Gene, who has been employed to run the publishing and record company'. After a bit of a tussle about my lack of formality, Kerry calmly informed the board that 'I could stay'. I was a little nervous, but one thing I have learnt is to be true to myself, and that was exactly what I was doing."

For the next two years, Gene established the recording company's foothold in the industry, achieving success with *E Street* actress Melissa Tkautz and her number one hit songs *Read My Lips* and *Sexy Is The Word*, while also recording and producing albums for Brooke Shields, Torville & Dean, Kerrie-Anne Kennerley, Stevie Wright, Del Shannon and Peaches. But in 1988 he was ready for his next

challenge. Opting to purchase the recording company from Australian Consolidated Press, Gene soon found himself at the helm of his own independent recording company, rebranded as Laser Records.

Despite his success, in the early 90s Gene started feeling slightly disillusioned by the daily grind. He sought refuge in an unlikely place – the tropical north. With his interests still going strong in Sydney Gene found his next challenge, which came in the form of real estate. The purchase of two stunning properties at Bellenden Kerr and Bedarra Island followed – he has since transformed them into exclusive retreats for the rich and famous. Celebrity weddings are not uncommon, although for privacy reasons he can't divulge the names of his well-known guests.

Despite his success in the business world, both in music and property, Gene believes his greatest achievement has been meeting his wife Sharon, who works alongside him managing their business interests, and his two beautiful children, Aria and Sorayah. "We met over 10 years ago in what could only be described as love by moonlight. I saw the moon shine across her face and thought she was most beautiful woman I have ever seen, I knew then and there we would be together forever."

As Gene reflects on his past achievements, he remains somewhat melancholic about his life's successes. When asked whether he misses his former lifestyle, he shakes his head and says definitely not. "I recently

returned to New Zealand for a reunion-type concert with Ray Columbus – it was great fun and I felt like a king for a day, but the reality is I am not getting any younger and nor are my fans, so I look out on stage at a sea of grey haired women and it just isn't the same."

And while he admits he may be getting older, his ideas and entrepreneurial spirit hasn't dimmed. He has still managed to find the time to record over 100 albums in Cairns for artists including David Hudson, Tjapukai, Ash Dargan and Wayne McIntosh, while also looking after his globally distributed interactive media stations with lifestyle, motivational and music programmes. He has also been the brains behind some more unusual and very successful projects such as gemstone dispensers, interactive cooking guides and children's music.

When asked what makes him tick, he says, "it is in the blood. I have a hypoactive personality and I try to do something different every day." Of his next project, Gene says, "I am moving onto the next phase in my life, which will be to write an epic novel following the life of a migrant to Australia in the 50s – so just watch this space, I can't sit still for long." CL

Gene's limited edition compilation CD *Spinning The Moments*, featuring his hits from the late 60s and early 70s, has just been released in Australia and New Zealand. For more information, go to [www.genepierson.com.au](http://www.genepierson.com.au)



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