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cairns eye

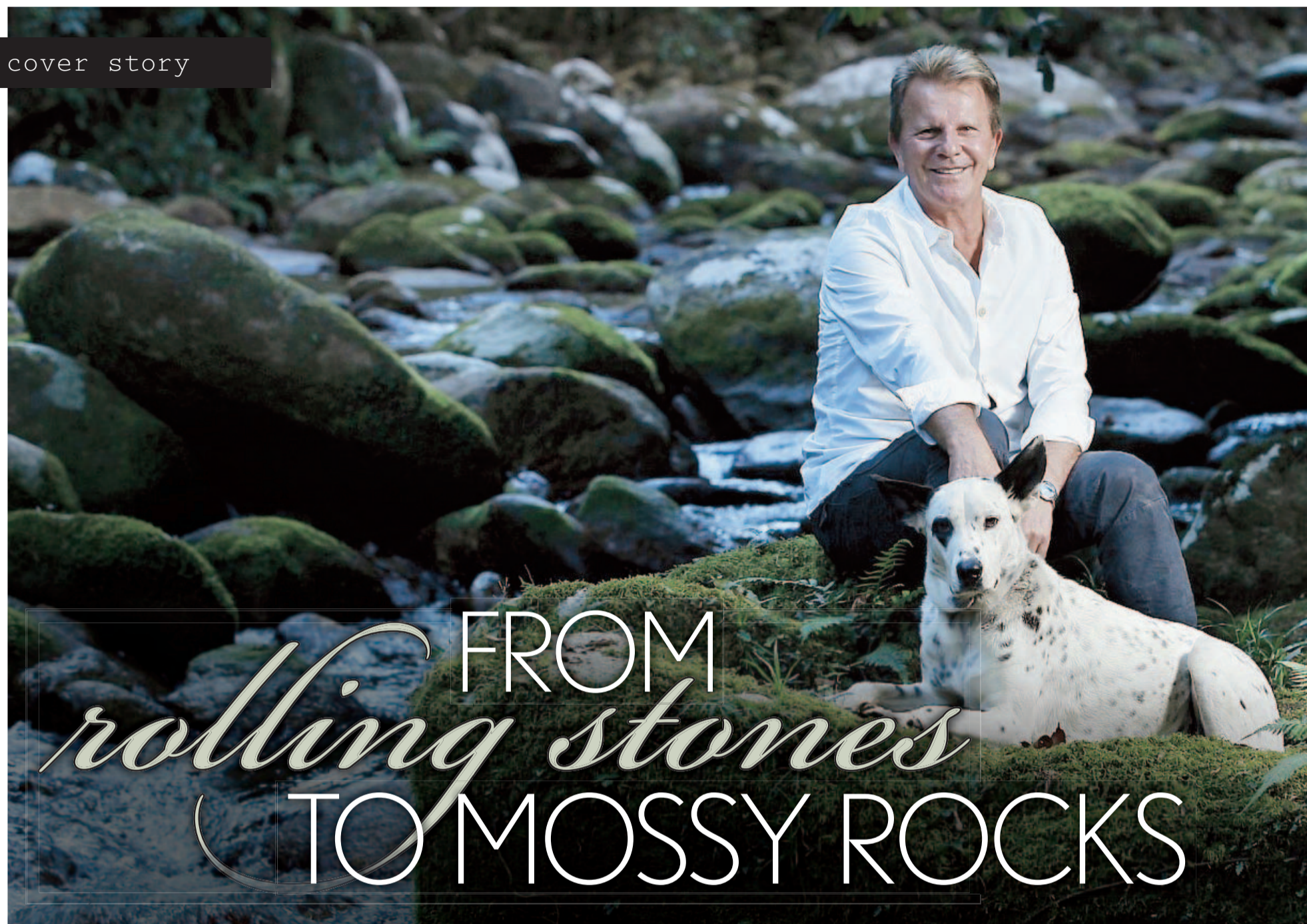
THE *quieter* LIFE

FOR MUSIC
PRODUCER GENE
PIERSON, WHO
DISCOVERED SOME
OF AUSTRALIA'S
BIGGEST BANDS

ARE WE QUEENSLAND'S
BEST DRESSED?

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FROM *rolling stones* TO MOSSY ROCKS

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GENE PIERSON COULD LIVE THE LIFE OF A TYCOON, BUT THE MAN WHO HELPED LAUNCH INXS AND AC/DC CHOOSES A DOWN-TO-EARTH EXISTENCE HERE IN THE FAR NORTH, WRITES DENISE CARTER

Gene Pierson, born Giancarlo Salvestrin, has experienced much of life: the trappings of fame and fortune; the price to be paid for standing on principles; and two sides of the music industry.

He's met the stars of yesterday and today, still works in the music industry, and seems to have led many, many more lives than his 63 years should allow.

Today, in his property in Bellenden Ker, which is also the location for his Misty Mountains Retreat resort, it seems he has found a little piece of paradise, both in the physical and spiritual sense.

His wife, Sharon, a marriage celebrant, greets me with Gene's dog Raj – a dog he rescued from the pound despite being warned off buying because of its aggressive temperament.

Now, shown the right amount of love, the dog is placid and gentle, running behind Gene as he weaves through the stunning 80-hectare property in his golf cart.

And, for all his spectacular career in the music industry from pop star to music producer, Gene is not particularly keen to talk about music.

Rather, he is interested in showing me the tropical escape he has called home for 10 years; the crocodile tree, the chocolate fruit, the strangler fig, banana trees, the red passion flowers and ballerina slippers.

"I love it," Gene says. "I've even built my own cemetery."

In the cemetery lies a favourite dog that died from tick paralysis and Gene plans that one day he too will be buried there.

Sitting on his veranda with his young children – whom he is teaching to play piano and speak different languages, including, of course, Italian – or feeding his animals (a cow, chickens, a goat and deer), he looks like he could play the suave romantic lead in the musical *South Pacific*; an *Emile de Becque* in an escapist fantasy.

It's quite a change of pace, which Gene seems to appreciate in every moment.

"I hate cities," he says. "We lived in Sydney, but it's tick tock, until one day it all stops dead."

"I'm a philosopher. I want my children to know how to grow things. To me, my only religion is nature."

With that in mind, he is restoring the property to its former glory as a nursery, although it already boasts more than 1000 varieties of plant.



The original members of INXS.

The property is also off the public electricity grid, all part of the getting-away-from-it-all philosophy that Gene avows.

Gene now gets up at about 5.30 each morning, the time when as a pop star and high-flying city-living music producer, at which he used to go to bed.

The only telltale signs of his former life visible at his resort are a private nightclub – complete with disco ball, dance pole and bar – and a helicopter pad to which the very rich and famous, who also want to be very private, arrive.

He has a small office down by the river, which he calls his "think tank".

You might imagine he comes to play his

music or hatch big business plans here, but more often than not, he says, he goes there just to immerse himself in the sounds of nature.

"What a 360-degree turn," he says. "I am now almost a health fanatic."

Gene was never destined to be a person who followed the crowd.

In school, he was bullied, according to *Spinning the Moments: The Gene Pierson Saga*, the booklet attached to his *Spinning the Moments* CD, but it didn't deter him from what he wanted to do.

"Mum always said what people think of you is none of your business," Gene says.

"Be sure to be yourself and be entirely uniquely different. Maybe at school they



Australian rock legends AC/DC, the band Gene helped launch.



Below and below left: Gene Pierson in his heyday.



Gene Pierson at his Misty Mountains Retreat resort.
photo // Stewart Mclean



don't like you so much but it's great to be different. Embrace not being like a sheep."

Gene had a great desire to be a singer and entered his first talent quest in Sydney in 1963, singing *Mashed Potato*, and winning the competition and a gig for the year.

He then joined a band, The Inturns, and played around Sydney's suburbs.

In 1965 he was conscripted into the army and escaped to New Zealand rather than go to Vietnam, a decision that made it difficult for him to come back to Australia.

When his dad died in 1969, he returned for the funeral and had to be helped in and out by friends, to avoid waiting police.

Gene's career in New Zealand had truly taken off by 1967 when he had his first number one in the Radio Hauraki charts, and he went on to a successful music career throughout the '70s on his return to Australia, with hits including a 1970 version of The Four Tops' *Reach Out; Love, Love, Love; You Got to Me* (written by Neil Diamond), and *Toyland*.

After his recording career, Gene became a music producer and is best known for helping to launch AC/DC, for signing

INXS, and running Kerry Packer's label Living Sound.

He is full of interesting stories about meeting prominent people but Gene stayed true to himself at all times.

"I remember when meeting Kerry Packer they told me how to dress for him, to wear a business suit," he says.

He didn't wear a suit, which impressed Packer, and he got the job. Gene went on to produce '70s all-girl group Peaches and actress-turned-singer Melissa Tkautz.

In recent years, Gene has changed course once again, although music is still very much a part of his life.

He has produced a double CD of poetry read by well-known Aussies like Barry Humphries, Dame Joan Sutherland and Rolf Harris, and produced music by indigenous artists at his label Indigenous Australia.

"I've gone more from the pop side to the cultural side," Gene explains.

With his local record label Lifestyle Music, he has had great successes.

In 2011 *Angel Without Wings*, recorded at Pegasus Studios in Cairns with Cam Henderson of *Australia's Got Talent*, was on

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ARIA's top 20 album charts and top eight downloads charts.

This year he co-produced *Do You Still Remember* with Rolf Harris and Cam Henderson, which is being distributed in the UK.

Alston Koch's debut album *Don't Funk With Me* is another success for Gene, as it went to number two on the ARIA dance charts in July and number five on the Australian charts.

He is bringing music from the peaceful tropics to the rest of the world.

Looking back, Gene acknowledges touring with The Rolling Stones as one of his career highlights but says even Mick Jagger now goes to bed around 9pm.

The hectic life is not a life he would ever like to reclaim.

"The lowlight really was four years ago, going on a New Zealand tour," he says.

"I was seen as the king of psychedelia but I left the tour after one day because it was full of drug addicts who were having the same conversations they were having in the '60s."

An intolerable situation for Gene who, apart from having evolved beyond his old life, says he gets bored within seconds.

"There is a lot more to understand," he says, returning to philosopher mode. "Life is like a train; some people stay with you for the entire journey, some drop off."

What Gene needs most it seems, and what is the most consistent part of his life as he morphs into different roles, is the desire to create and to keep on creating.

"I create everything I do," he says. "We are our own creation."

"You can be anyone you want to be."

■ To read more about Gene Pierson, or to hear some of his music, visit his website www.genepierson.com.au.