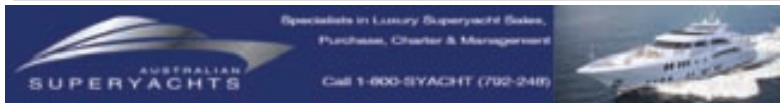




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Singing his own tune

Have you heard the story about the Adelaide mechanic who created two huge finance industry companies, became a professional jazz singer, befriended The Hoff, got into resort development and supervised the rebirth of one of Australia's most stunning superyachts? No? Well, pay attention as Greg Meyer grants a rare interview.

Text Nigel Bowen

Greg Meyer's extraordinary life had an ordinary beginning. The son of a shearer and secretary, Meyer grew up in working class neighbourhoods in the western suburbs of Adelaide. While Meyer remembers it as a happy childhood and points out he did well enough at school while he was there, it's unlikely anyone would have been predicting big things for the kid who dropped out at 15 to become an apprentice mechanic and devote more time to racing motorbikes.

SHIFTING PASSIONS

"I got an apprenticeship with the Adelaide Steamship Company; despite the name I spent most of my time working on cars and trucks," says Meyer.

"My family were into motorbike racing, so becoming a mechanic was a logical day job for someone wanting to pursue a career in racing, as I did at the time." Showing the drive that would characterise many of his later endeavours, Meyer resolved to move to the UK once he turned 16 to pursue racing seriously before realising that despite being good at it, he didn't particularly enjoy it.

"I was doing well and think I would have made a success of things had I gone to England but I realised it wasn't something I was passionate about. My grandfather, who was heavily involved in the sport, was devastated, but I decided to give it away."



Meyer is an accomplished jazz singer and has performed professionally at many iconic venues.

THE DETOUR OF SALESMAN

Not too long after he finished his apprenticeship, one of Meyer's friends, who was working as a life insurance salesman, suggested he should also give it a go. He turned out to be a natural but discovered he didn't have a passion for selling insurance products either.

"I started at AMP when I was 19 and looked about 12. I invested in a couple of suits, got through the job interview and did pretty well for a few years. The money was great and I was getting sales awards, but I decided there were other things I could be doing."

As you do, Meyer started his own company, The Rental Management Group, aged 22. It was the middle of the go-go 1980s and things were moving fast. "I started out leasing farm machinery, then began leasing office equipment. After three years I brought my brother into the business," he says. "We became the Australian agent for a US company then landed a deal with a UK company that gave us the backing to start financing our own leases. My company wasn't known by anyone outside the industry but it was a significant player within it; we were doing the finance for corporations such as Motorola, NEC, Toshiba and Panasonic. By the time I sold out in 2004, we had 23,000 clients, offices in every state and were turning over hundreds of millions a year."

Meyer had plenty of passion to continuing growing his business but got an offer too good to refuse from prominent businessman and boatie David Coe, one of the owners of Allco Finance Group. "I wasn't looking to sell but I suppose everyone eventually has a number," notes Meyer.

Before selling out, Meyer had noted many of the salary packaging companies he was facilitating vehicle financing for as a sideline were always late on their payments. "I'd identified an opportunity to get into that market by building better systems to manage the salary packaging process," he says. "So after taking a holiday, I rented an office, recruited some of the old employees the new buyer didn't want, and launched EPAC Salary Solutions. It took around 18 months to sort out the systems but once that was done we picked up 400 charity clients within three years and were soon the third biggest player in that space."

Once again, Meyer was approached to sell and this time he didn't agonise over walking away. "One organisation showed an interest, then others started making offers," he says. "I'd decided Kevin Rudd was a loose canon who was likely to change the rules around salary packaging, which is exactly what happened, though those changes were later reversed. I can still remember getting a phone call from someone after I'd sold out to [Victorian motor vehicle insurer] RACV while I was on an Indonesian island I part-owned. The caller told me, 'Rudd's just changed the rules on novated leases.' I thought to myself, 'Thank God, I got out.'"



Meyer's friend David Hasselhoff, also an accomplished singer, is trying to talk Meyer into doing a concert with him in Europe.

ALL THAT JAZZ

One might assume a high-school dropout with no formal business training running complex, rapidly expanding businesses wouldn't have time to moonlight. But Meyer decided in his late twenties he wanted to be a jazz singer. A professional one who scored prestigious gigs on the basis of his vocal talents rather than by waving his chequebook around.

"My father's aunt was principal violinist in the London orchestra and later, the Adelaide orchestra, and my parents were music lovers. So I suppose you could say I came from a musical family and I thought I had potential as a singer. I got the chance to sing with a professional – Dennis Sheridan, the father of the actor Hugh Sheridan – who encouraged me to get singing lessons with a teacher in Adelaide called Wally Carr. Within six months of starting lessons I was getting gigs at places such as the casino and Hilton in Adelaide and it went from there. Over the last couple of decades I've become friends with and worked with big-name singers such as Mark Murphy, of *'That Old Black Magic'* fame, was the opening act for George Benson and performed at jazz festivals in France and iconic venues such as The Basement in Sydney."

Meyer still performs regularly and is now trying his hand at songwriting. While he concedes there aren't too many entrepreneur-jazz singers, he doesn't see his artistic and commercial pursuits as being at odds. "I'm half a businessman, half a musician. I'm not great at either but I think they complement each other. They're both about creativity, about coming up with interesting ideas, whether it's about salary packaging or phrasing a song. And it's not a completely unheard of combination. Richard Pratt started out as an actor. I'm told he always used to get up and sing at the Visy Christmas parties. For the record, I've never subjected my staff to that."



Meyer is currently building a five-star resort in Bali called BASK Gili Meno.

GETTING INTO PROPERTY

Nowadays, when he's not crooning up a storm, Meyer spends much of his time pursuing two more recent passions – boats and property development. He's currently building a five-star resort in Bali called BASK Gili Meno, drawing on the talents of a star-studded team who share his love of elegant design.

"The resort's architect is Gary Fell, who's won awards for designing the best resort in the world and the best house in the world. He's a crazy but great guy and his designs are fantastic. I've also got the fashion designer George Gorrow, who co-founded Ksubi, acting as creative director. A lot of so-called Bali architecture looks like someone's covered a project home with grass. We're aiming for mid-century modern, style-infused with a tropical island feel."

If you click on the BASK Gili Meno website, you'll see David Hasselhoff providing a testimonial. The Hoff, who while best known as an actor, has also had a successful singing career, has been mates with Meyer since a mutual friend introduced them a number of years ago.

"He's buying a villa on Gili Meno, he's been out on my boat, and we've become good friends," explains Meyer. "He's trying to talk me into doing a concert with him somewhere in Europe. It's amazing when you go out with him how many people want his autograph. He's a cult figure, particularly with young people, oddly enough."



BASK Gili Meno will have a mid-century modern style with a tropical island feel.

YET MORE PASSION PROJECTS

While he's now thrown himself into it with his characteristic enthusiasm, Meyer was a slow convert to the joys of boating.

"I grew up around the water in Adelaide and my brother was always a keen fisherman but I only started going out on the water 15 years ago. My first boat was a little tinnie my brother and I used for fishing and I wasn't overly taken with it. After I sold my first company, my brother encouraged me to splash out on something bigger. After getting the cold shoulder at the Sydney boat show from people who might have at the time thought I looked too young to be able to afford a big boat, I ended up buying a 45 Princess from a dealer. I enjoyed that boat and learnt to drive it but eventually decided to get something bigger and sportier and bought a Princess V58 in Hong Kong.

"After that, it was on to a Monte Fino 88 before buying *Eenderacht* (now *Sahana*) in 2013. Oceanfast had built it for someone with basic tastes who had it set up for diving. I'd been looking for a long-range vessel and although the interior wasn't to my taste I could see the potential there.

"This was another project I got George Gorrow to pitch in on and together we worked out how to remodel it. The refit ended up taking 14 months and costing twice as much as budgeted for. Most businessmen wouldn't spend over a year of their lives micro-managing a boat refit but, well, I'm that sort of person – a bit mad.

"We ripped out a lot of stuff that was still in pristine condition, discovered a lot of wasted space that we used to make larger crew quarters, put in a bow lounge, full-beam saloon and flybridge bar with sundeck lounges, as well as ripping out a big, ugly spa on the top deck. We created a modern interior with Minotti and B&B furnishings, as well as Danish carpets. We installed lots of extra refrigeration and gyroscopic stabilisation. When the resort is completed in a couple of years I'll be sailing *Sahana* up to Bali for a stint – it's got a 3,000-mile range – and I'd like to move it to the Med at some point. I don't think I'll go any bigger than 120-feet, once you pass that mark, you need lots of staff and there begins to be issues around being close to marine parks, berthing and other things. This boat is just the right size and is smooth and quiet."

AN ENCORE PERFORMANCE

Meyer is still a relatively young man and it's entirely possible he'll make his mark in several other fields in the years to come. The self-deprecating mechanic from Adelaide isn't one to hold himself up as a role model to others but when pressed about the secrets of his frequent successes he offers the following observation: "I think doing something you enjoy is the main thing. Of course, it helps if you're good at it but if you're not passionate about it then it's unlikely you'll succeed. If you are passionate, you've got a great chance of making it."



He has recently remodeled *Sahana* built by Oceanfast.

GREG'S TOP 10 POSSESSIONS:

1. I've got a modest holiday shack at Black Point on the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia. It's small enough that it is easy to keep tidy but big enough that I can invite friends and family members down to go fishing, have a barbeque and sink a few ales.
2. My grand piano, which I've had for 20 years now.
3. My collection of vinyl records. There are lots of jazz artists but I've got eclectic musical tastes so you can also find stuff from bands like the Doobie Brothers and AC/DC, as well as Motown in there.
4. I've had flashier cars but the first upmarket one I bought was a Jaguar XK8. I got it in my 30s when my business started to take off and I was in a position to start splashing out on a boy's toy. Nowadays, it just sits in the shed, but I could never bring myself to sell it.
5. A framed, black and white photo of Frank Sinatra and Joey Bishop walking together outside the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami in 1966. I was brought up listening to Sinatra, my mother used to play his records all the time, so that image, signed by the photographer, is dear to my heart.
6. At my shack I've got a lot of my parent's old furniture from the late 1960s and early-1970s. I like the way it looks and it makes me feel like I'm a kid again whenever I'm around it.
7. I've also got a holiday house in the hills of Jimbaran Bay in Bali. Unlike my Australian getaway, it's got the Balinese design, with lots of impressive stonework, and you can go for a swim year-round. I always feel relaxed when I'm staying there.
8. I've got two chairs from *2001: Space Odyssey*. Not copies, the actual ones from the film. I bought them at auction for around \$20,000 ages ago, shortly after I saw the movie for the first time. They look great but are a bit low to the ground when you're getting in and out of them, so I treat them more as works of art than furniture.
9. Given this is *Ocean* magazine, I've got to mention my charter boat. I've got a passion for design and was obviously pleased with the way the *Sahana* turned out, especially given the investment of time and energy I made in the refit.
10. I've still got my old toolbox from when I was a mechanic. It also contains some of the tools I inherited from my great great grandfather, who was a staircase builder. It's been at least a decade since I've used anything in it but the toolbox still represents an important part of my life and I won't let anyone else touch it.

For information about chartering *Sahana* visit:

www.braymanagement.com.au

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