

MIKE BRADY AM

The Music in a Newsboy

If Mike Brady had never been a newsboy, Australian Rules Football might still be searching for its anthem.

The lyricist and singer of *Up There Cazaly* says there were two things about being a newsboy that set him on his trajectory. For one, the money he saved from his stand outside the Melbourne Town Hall gave him the pocket money to buy his first guitar. And second, endless Saturdays selling the pink Sporting Globe provided his first inkling – ‘understanding’ would be exactly the wrong word – of what footy means to Melbourne.

“One of the first things I remember as a kid, the son of Irish migrants” he says, “is being fascinated at how fascinated people were with Aussie Rules. I couldn’t understand the total obsession.

“But, in the end, I think it meant I was able to write *Up There Cazaly* without falling for all the crap clichés, because I was able to look at it from the outside.”

Mike had arrived in Melbourne as an 11-year-old in 1959 – at 2.43 pm on Sunday July 5, to be exact – and his family found itself at the Fisherman’s Bend migrant hostel with thousands of other ‘New Australians’. His father got a job on the roads but soon after badly injured his back.

“During that time we were pretty poor,” Mike remembers. “We lived on at the hostel, but we got a bit of a handout from the local priest. And so I worked selling newspapers.

“A couple of the kids were newsboys so I went with them to Darragh and Sons, a newsagency in Chinatown. I was 12 so it would have been 1960. They started me off with a small stand on the Foys’ corner at Bourke and Swanston Streets, the store where they used to have a giant Father Christmas every year.

“Then they upgraded me and I got what became my main stand for a couple of years, outside the Town Hall. I’ve reminded many a Lord Mayor that I used to sell papers on their corner.”

Mike sold Heralds five nights a week after school and worked every Saturday, from 6am to 6pm, selling the Age, Sun News-Pictorial, Herald and Sporting Globe.

“There were a lot of Macedonian kids selling papers around about me. They were pretty tough but lovely kids. They used to wear those grey dustcoats for some reason and they had great calls: ‘HAIRR-ARRRLD! GETCHA HAIRR-ARRRLD PAYPAH!’

“We used to sell hundreds of papers on those corners but I think the highest I ever earned was three quid, most nights you’d earn about 10 or 15 shillings. Then you had to haul back your remainders to the shop, count out your pennies, because that’s mainly what you got paid in. I’d always be so hungry by the time I had to get the bus back to Lorimer Street that I’d stop and buy myself a big bottle of Coke and two big chicken rolls or hamburgers – such a delicacy in those days.”

Mike might have saved some money with the cheap dinners provided at the City Newsboys Club, where he was a member and did a bit of boxing. But he was keen to get back to the hostel where there was another activity he was more interested in.

“There were a couple of kids in the hostel who had guitars and we used to sing in the wash-houses where it used to echo nicely. We’d stand around and the girls would sing a song and then the boys would have a turn. I learned harmonies and it was just a wonderful thing to do.”

Even after the nightly chicken rolls and Cokes, Mike put away enough money to go toward his first guitar. “It was four pound, seventeen shillings and sixpence and I got it at Maples the furniture store in Bourke Street, which might say a bit about the quality of the guitar,” he laughs.

His father drove him back into the city to take it back, but the store wouldn’t give him a refund other than in exchange for something else: “I went back out to Dad, trying to keep the smile off my face and told him they wouldn’t give me my money back. Who knows where I’d be if they did.”

By 15, Mike was making a living singing and playing in bands. He joined the Phantoms, who had toured Australia with the Beatles and later formed MPD Ltd., which had mid-sixties pop hits with “Little Boy Sad” and “Lonely Boy” and eventually became the country’s premier jingle writer.

“Being a newsboy was a tough life sometimes, but we didn’t see it that way. Strangely enough, the paper kids was the first fraternity that I was ever involved in.

“When I started I was unbelievably and painfully shy, a very self conscious and introverted little boy. Being a newsboy gave me confidence and it taught me to look people in the eye. It taught me to be independent and I doubt I would have played music because I may never have been able to buy that first guitar without the couple of quid I’d saved.

“Because the guitar and music turned out to be my magic carpet ride.”

