

PERFORMANCE

Strange moments on the way to a promising career. Fourteen-year-old Angus Brill Reed standing on Goolwa Beach at sunset, miming, as his mum films him on her phone. But as Angus's song *Small Stuff* explains, "Don't worry if it's not the way you imagined, brush the small stuff away." The song pounding, leaving its melody in your head, as Angus records his entry for *Eurovision: Australia Decides*.

Cut to suburban Dulwich, a cold July night, easy listening soundtrack, two types of soup and three types of cheese. Six months has passed since Goolwa and I meet Angus, star of opera and musical theatre, pianist, guitarist, songwriter, producer, a sort of Mark Ronson of the inner suburbs, the Avicii of Greenhill Rd. Just a kid, surely? Talented, admittedly, but at 15? I'd recently seen Angus carry a whole opera and was expecting a mini Pavarotti, although I found something very different.

Firstly, kids like Angus always turn me green. As one who (like most of us) has made an art form of ordinariness, a simple childhood in front of the telly, average at school, here comes a kid who, at 12½ years of age, had the lead role in a new Australian opera (Adam Goodburn's and Anne Cawse's *Innocence*). Who's gone on to star in *Oliver!* and *Into the Woods*, straight plays such as *Judging Oscar*, singing with the State Opera, performing with symphony orchestras, arena spectaculars.

But instead of grinding my teeth I decide to try and understand where talent comes from, how it grows, and whether creativity is rewarded in a culture that puts money and muscle first.

Angus started early. Piano and guitar lessons then, when the operatic world beckoned, a few singing lessons with the equally versatile singer/songwriter/actor Michaela Burger. While other kids were playing video games, Angus was teaching himself *GarageBand* on his dad's (Andrew's) iPad. Here's a kid alight with possibilities, with a love of learning, and music.

"If I started now it'd be too late," he tells me. "There's so much to learn. People like Shawn Mendes and Justin Bieber made it early (not saying I want to be like them)."

The key to the education of young Angus. Solo and chorus roles in a range of musicals with Adelaide's Pelican Productions, Shane Davidson Presents and Adelaide Youth Theatre – culminating in the lead roles of Marty (*Madagascar*) and, as a Year 7, the titular role in the Princes' Players *Oliver!* Prince Alfred College, where the now Year 9 Angus stood up in front of the whole school to sing *Where is Love?* Angus's mum, Naomi, saying, "We were terrified [of the thought of it going wrong]. I had sleepless nights for a week." Andrew explaining, "The Year 12s in the front row stood up and the whole audience gave him a standing ovation ... high fives at his locker."

Returning to Angus at primary school where, one day, a relief teacher approached Naomi to discuss her son. Mum thinking, 'Here we go, what's he done?' "She said, 'I'm a music teacher ... and I want to let you know that Angus is musically talented.'" Followed by an audition at Elder Conservatorium, after which, according to Naomi, "they rang and said we'd like to offer Angus a junior scholarship" (a James and Diana Ramsay Foundation Scholarship).

After starting guitar lessons with Muhidin Durmanovic, Angus saw music as a possible future for his Future Me (more on that later): "That's when I started to take music more seriously."

Angus is fully aware of the music industry, its machination, its pitfalls. "Things

He plays, sings and acts and is a regular finalist in top songwriting competitions – so what's next for 15-year-old Angus Brill Reed?

WORDS STEPHEN ORR PHOTOGRAPH MATT LOXTON

WORDS AND MUSIC

like royalties are so different now. You have to make your money from performing." But, conversely, "independent artists can make it now." He has a carefully-curated set of role models, starting with the late Avicii, including Guy Sebastian ("He's not trying to be a star. He's just trying to make music that he loves"), Tim Minchin and Ben Folds. People keep telling him he should perform on *Australia's Got Talent*, but he knows the simple path is seldom the best.

Next, an audition for musical theatre camp, where Angus came to the attention of local singer, producer and all-round opera guy Adam Goodburn. Three singing lessons, two auditions and a few sleepless nights later he was offered the role of Henry in the opera *Innocence*.

"It was overwhelming. I remember getting out of class at the end of school and Mum having this huge yellow package [with the score]. I started flicking through and thought, 'That's me. That's me. That's me'. Just seeing this amount of content was crazy. I'd never listened to music like this, because it was modern opera."

Naomi explaining that "he always had it playing in the house". And Andrew: "He never got scared of the whole thing."

Angus took it all in his stride. "The people were great. It wasn't like it was do or die. You were allowed to stuff up. I don't ever remember thinking, 'God, this is my first show, I'm gonna cry'."

And later, at the premiere of the full workshop production: "There were lots of important people [such as Neil Armfield and Rachel Healey] but at the time I didn't know who they were."

According to Andrew, "We were all stunned. We were in shock thinking he has no training to do this. Part of it is that he seems hardwired to perform when it counts. I've got no idea where it comes from."

I know. Gilles Plains High, 1983. It wasn't just me – we were all green with envy. David Evans had been chosen to perform in *The Sound of Music* at the Festival Theatre. Real stuff, professional. Maybe, perhaps, we lesser mortals mumbled a few words (after all, he'd been interviewed on Channel 7 by Lionel Williams).

So I come clean. I ask Angus if he's had to deal with the likes of (a younger) me. "Not any more. In primary school it hit me hard.

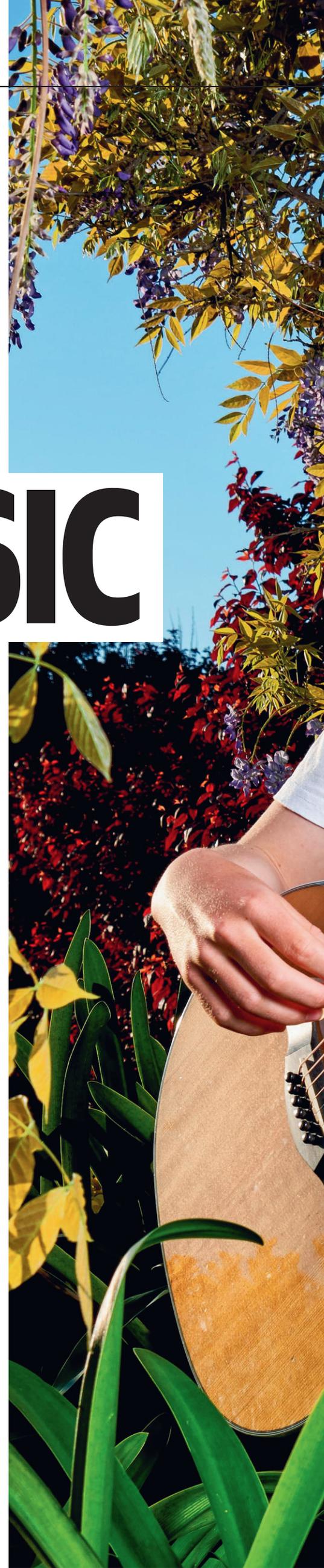
At that time I didn't know how to deal with people talking about that. I was doing all these things and kids didn't like that."

Naomi explains that this jealousy bordered on bullying. "But he had a great teacher who was helping guide him through it. She was reading on social media what a great job he was doing ... she was dealing with the negative implications of that at school. He had to miss soccer training and the coach made fun of him in front of all the other boys for missing training for a rehearsal. Angus got in the car and he was inconsolable."

Asked what keeps him going in the face of this, Angus explains: "I've always been very competitive and I like to win." And where does this come from? "Dad. The winning thing. I would cry when I lost a soccer match but people would say it's only a game." And when facing disappointment: "I just keep going. [After the opera] I went for an audition for *The Sound of Music* and I just didn't get it. I'd done the professional show with no build-up and then I did months of preparation for this show and didn't get past the first round."

Angus is a modern Robert Helpmann (another PAC boy who, according to his biographer, was an "uninterested and recalcitrant scholar"). Both the eldest of three children, the son of passionate parents. Stagestruck at a young age, listless, always testing new possibilities, although, in Angus's case, theatre is giving way to songwriting and producing. Starting with music software program *GarageBand*, graduating from his dad's iPad, to a laptop, to Logic Pro. "I got obsessed with it and learnt everything on it. I was listening to a lot of Avicii and Calvin Harris, electronic dance music (EDM) musicians who play at festivals. EDM has grown because there's so much musical integrity in it now."

“I started with singing and acting. I never felt like I was the best





Angus Brill Reed, 15, in Dulwich

His love of producing and writing music has grown at the same time. “I learned all this [EDM] while I was doing opera and musical theatre. Whilst I would love nothing more than to sit in a room and have amazing artists allow me to help turn their ideas into something awesome, I definitely want to be an artist too.”

It’s in this sphere that Angus sees his future. *Small Stuff* just missed the top 10 for *Eurovision: Australia Decides* (SBS), *Future Me* was runner-up in the 2019 Commonwealth Songwriting Competition, *Be You* a semi-finalist in the 2018 International Songwriting Competition, *Fit In* a finalist in the 2018 Australian Songwriting Awards, and *Gone* was a finalist in 2019. These small, well-crafted songs revealing the journey Angus, and other creative kids are on:

*This music in my body, I got to let it out,
I’m gonna tell my story, I’ve travelled past my doubt ...*

So what’s so special about Angus? How is he different from the hundreds of thousands of young people in this state, planning their futures, dreaming big, learning the knowledge and skills it’ll take to get ahead?

This is what I saw during the 2017 production of *Innocence*. The potential for something great to come from the next generation of creative kids. “When I was young I’d do two hours of [guitar and piano] practice every day. That was part of me. I’d get up at six every morning and that gave me time to relax after school.”

A giddy determination that gets results. “I’m still trying to get somewhere at the moment because when it gets to Year 11 and 12 I still want to do well at school. I have less and less time to do more and more.” But more than this: a young person’s take on the immediacy of life, its adventures and possibilities, Avicii reminding him (and all of us) to “carve your name into those shining stars”.

So can this 15-year-old offer any advice to young creatives? Firstly, perseverance. “Just do it and do it and do it.” Secondly, learn to read and write music. “I had read music before, so that helped so much. I saw the notes and thought, ‘I get that’.” Then rehearse: “We sat down at a lot of rehearsals [to *Innocence*] just singing through the score.” The stress. “Because of exams [guitar] I got used to it. Every time before a performance it just hit me. It happens every time.” Most importantly, continue to learn. “I started with singing and acting [in amateur theatre]. I never felt like I was the best. I was surrounded by people who were and are awesome.”

Perhaps we admire the qualities in others that we find missing in ourselves. Not so much jealousy, as respect for a kid full of the sort of enthusiasm that seems to be draining from all of us. “I’ve had people tell me I’m too young to be pushing so hard on my songwriting. But other people say this is when you can make it,” Angus says.

Whether roaming the stage of the Festival Theatre as the shepherd boy in Puccini’s *Tosca*, or performing at the Wheatsheaf to raise funds for a hospital in Zambia, or just mucking around with his brother, Henry, in his backyard, Angus is an original. But “I still socialise in school. I’m not just there with my head down all the time.”

The education of young Angus has been about hard work, and realising a passion that many don’t find until later in life, if at all. As the residents of Goolwa, out for their evening walks, heard from *Small Stuff* – *Good things will come so don’t you try to fight the wait*. As I discovered small stuff can come with big talent.