

## Jeff Apter @320kbps.mp3

[00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging. Today's conversation will be with Jeff Apter, Jeff is the author of more than 20 music biographies, many of them bestsellers. His subjects include Johnny O'Keefe, Keith Urban, Johnny Farnham, the Bee Gees and AC/DC. Jeff worked with Rolling Stone for many years and has written about music legends Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan and Patti Smith. In 2015, he worked on the Helpmann Award nominated live show A State of Grace, The music of Jeff and Tim Buckley. Today, we speak about his new book, Friday On My Mind, The Life of George Young. This podcast is relevant to the music library, which will open at Ashfield Library in November this year. So, Jeff, can you talk a little about George Young and his early relationship with Harry Vanda while staying at the Villawood migrant hostel?

[00:01:04] George Young and his family. He was one of 10, came to Australia in nineteen sixty three. They were part of what we now know, known as the ten pound POM scheme. And they've been hoping they've been invited basically over to the sunny side of Australia. And they ended up in the Villawood Migrant Hostel, which was not the most hospitable place then or now. But George one day was walking around the hostel and he heard a sound coming from the laundry room. And this is where he met Harry. Vanda Harry was from a Dutch family. He didn't speak much English, but he had played in a band in his native Holland called the Star Fighters. And so while George spoke with a thick Scottish brogue and Harry spoke, as I say, very little English, they connected over music. They also bonded over the simple fact that they were strangers in a strange place. George knew very, very few people there outside of his family. Likewise, Harry. And so there were these two bonds that they had, which in fact united them for the rest of George's life.

At the hostel, George and Harry met other characters who later became involved with the Easybeats.

[00:02:22] Can you talk about Stevie Wright?

[00:02:26] It wasn't just Harry that George met at the hostel, he also met the other members of what would become the Easybeats. Among them was Stevie Wright. Stevie

Wright had spent some time at the hostel, but had settled with his family in a nearby suburb. But like a lot of local kids, he'd spent a bit of time at the hostel because there was a lot of young people there. There were dances held there. There were sporting events. It was a bit of a scene, both in good ways and bad.

[00:02:56] Sometimes the locals, after Friday night down the pub, would sometimes burst into the the hostel and bash up any any new new Australians, as we used to call them, that got in the way. Stevie was a live wire as soon as it proved to be one of its greatest frontmen Australian music has ever produced.

[00:03:15] But he also had a tendency to borrow people's, let's just say, steal people's girlfriends and would often be on the receiving end of a bit of rough justice from the local male population. But George sensed in him something, particularly when he saw him sing because Stevie had some singing performance. He knew he was someone that would be great for the band. And at the same time, they also met Dick Diamond, who was another Dutchman whose family lived nearby, and they sent out a message via some context. And they met Snowy Fleet snow. Snowy was a drummer living with his wife and child. He was a little bit older than the others.

[00:03:52] He was living in the East East Hills Migrant Hostel. So together this was the nucleus of the Easybeats.

[00:03:59] So what was the music industry like before the Easybeats and how did the band change Australian pop music?

[00:04:07] Before then, the Australian music scene was really just the pale imitation of everything from overseas. There wasn't a lot of original local artists. Instead, what we had with people like Johnny O' Keeth, Billy Thorpe, Cole Joy covering hits of the day, having local success with those records. But as far as someone writing and recording their own songs, that was virtually non-existent.

[00:04:33] The Beatles tour of Australia was influential in the creation of the Easybeats in their career. Why was that?

[00:04:40] What happened was the ease with the Beatles toured Australia in nineteen sixty four and George and his brothers, Malcolm and Angus, of course, who went on to form AC/DC, as well as people like the Gibb brothers from the Bee Gees, John Farnham, John English. A whole variety of future music stars saw the Beatles and it changed their lives. The most important thing about the Beatles, beyond the fact that they drew thousands of screaming teenage girls to their shows, was the fact that they wrote and had success with their own songs. This was a real ground breaking thing. Even internationally, it hadn't really been the norm before. The big music markets of America and England were dominated by places like Tin Pan Alley and the Brill Building, which was where songwriters created songs for artists. But the Beatles changed all that. And George in particular saw that and got his head around that and realized if he was going to join, if his band was going to go anywhere, they needed to come up with their own music. At the same time, Ted Albert, now, Ted Albert was the the latest head of a long serving a Sydney family involved in the music industry. They sold sheet music. They sold instruments at very, very successful, very wealthy Sydney family, the Alberts. He was wanting to branch the biz, the family business out into signing and recording original artists. And when he met the Easybeats and heard some of those original songs, he knew that he'd found the band that he wanted.

[00:06:17] So it was something of a perfect storm.

[00:06:20] Friday on My Mind was a song that made the Easybeats a sensation overnight, but it also confirmed a partnership between Young and Vanda. Why do you think that was?

[00:06:32] After all their success in Australia, particularly around nineteen sixty five, the Easybeats went to the UK in nineteen sixty six, it was a rite of passage for not just musicians then but Australian writers, thinkers and actors, you name it, film directors, they were all gravitating to London in particular because London in nineteen sixty six, you couldn't imagine a better place to be. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, The Who, the Small Faces The Kinks. All these bands were really starting to blossom. And as well you had Carnaby Street, you had great things happening on the West End with people like Joe Orton. It was just this amazing time in London's history, it was swinging London. The Easybeats went there. They released a couple of songs that they'd had success within Australia, and it failed. They failed. This is when they came up with

Friday on My Mind, a working class anthem, basically drawing on a lot of the experiences all of them had had being the children of working class families. Friday being that one night of the week when you can put all the hassles of the week behind you and just let your hair down. At the time, originally, George had been writing with Stevie Wright, but he was now writing with Harry Vanda. There was a couple of factors behind that.

[00:07:49] The Easybeats tour of the UK proved challenging. What were the major factors that finally led them back to Australia?

[00:07:57] Harry's English had improved for one thing and also, Steve Wright when they got to the UK, as his biographer told me, quite candidly, he said Stevie was more interested in chasing supermodels and smoking pot.

[00:08:11] He felt that he'd achieved what he could and just didn't have the same ambition as a musician that George and Harry Vanda shared in the wake of that success.

[00:08:21] And now we're moving in nineteen sixty six into nineteen sixty seven. They had a lot of problems. George and Harry struggled to find a song that could come, that could match Friday on my mind. And you have to remember, this is a period the Beatles had released Revolver. They'd released Rubber Soul. They were working on Sergeant Pepper's, great albums, not just great songs. Everybody seemed to be coming out the best with the best work of their career. But George and Harry struggled to find another song that really matched that success, despite spending months and months and months inside studios at some great expense. George later realised, and this was long after the band was done, that they were trying too hard to be too many things, trying to be too eclectic, too diverse.

[00:09:04] Ultimately, he said, we should have gone back to being what we were in the start, which was a good Little Rock and roll band. But that didn't happen. That was that was only with the advantage of hindsight.

[00:09:15] Ted Albert was instrumental in producing Young and Vanda to pursue a career in songwriting. How did that come about?

[00:09:24] All the time, even after the end of the Easybeats in nineteen sixty-nine, Ted Albert, who's back in Sydney, had been keeping in touch with George and Harry in particular. He wanted to build a music empire in Sydney that operated that not just released, recorded and released music, but had their own studio.

[00:09:42] And he wanted George and Harry to be his in-house producers.

[00:09:46] But before they could do that, they served what George later called their four year binge, an apprenticeship, essentially where they based themselves in London, operated out of a small studio and recorded anyone who walked through the doors with enough money to pay for a recording. They recorded dozens of different acts during that time. Quite often it was George, Harry, George's brother Alex and a few other regular musicians just moonlighting under different band names. None of the songs were particularly big hits. However, it gave them a great solid grounding in how the studio worked. Eventually, when George when Ted Albert told them that he'd finished, the studio was almost ready and he wanted them to come back, he actually set them up. George and Harry, up with houses in Sydney, resettled their families. And this is what was known as the House of Hits. The Albert studio in Sydney began. Ted had always been on the radar of George and Harry, even during that four year period, so he could see and also he understood that the local music scene was developing. There was a lot of great acts and George and Harry might be able to capture a bit of that magic that they had with the Easybeats and replicate it with a number of other bands, those bands that they worked with in those early period of Alberts,

[00:11:05] This is nineteen seventy - four leading into nineteen seventy - five included AC/ DC, John Paul Young, William Shakespeare, Ted Mulry, Rose Tattoo, The Angels.

[00:11:20] Evie, a song which lasts 11 minutes, is the longest song that Young and Vanda wrote for Steve Wright. It's an epic which topped the charts for twenty six weeks and was the first number since Friday On My Mind and firsts as Alberts' in-house songwriters and producers. Why was his song so popular?

[00:11:41] Was it the lyrics, the music, the singer?

They wanted to write a song for Steve Wright, the former lead singer of the Easybeats who'd fallen on pretty hard times due to drug issues and the simple fact that he had trouble because he wasn't writing music anymore. He had trouble generating material for his own solo career, which was really just stumbling along. So George and Harry sat down and wrote a bespoke piece and it was called Evie. And it wasn't just some three-minute pop song. It was a three-part, 11 minute rock and roll opus. Malcolm Young, George's brother, played on it. Harry Vanda played on it. They basically drew all the best musicians that they could play on this record. And Stevie Wright delivered the best vocal of his life. And the song is, I think, justifiably the best song that George and Harry ever created in their very, very lengthy career. The song was a huge hit. It was the longest running song to ever be a number one hit anywhere in the world at 11 minutes. It was a good five minutes longer than even Bohemian Rhapsody. It was a huge success and it achieved everything that George and Harry set out to do with Stevie Wright, which was to come up with a song that got him back on the charts.

[00:12:58] In the 70s, Stevie performed spasmodically, but there is one performance at the Sydney Opera House, which is readily available online, which probably captures him at his best. The backing band on that day included Cheetah, who were a two-piece female band signed to Alberts, recorded with George and Harry, Tony Mitchell from Sherbet, Warren Morgan, a guy who played in the Albert studio band, all the Cream of Sydney musicians, and they were playing. Stevie was only doing one song on the show, which was one of those daylong performances that featured a number of bands like a mini festival. He pulled off Evie, essentially the 11 minute long epic song and again, just performed brilliantly. And his physical performance was amazing. But that was really the last great performance of his life. Although Stevie lived another 30 odd years, he tended to be get more attention from his crimes and misdemeanours than he did from his musical career, which was one of the great tragedies of George Young's career, is that he was never really able to help Stevie beyond writing this great song for him and working on a couple of albums, Stevie still had a tendency to shoot himself in the foot.

[00:14:14] AC/DC became huge in Australia again due to Young and Vanda. One of George and Harry's main acts to work with at Alberts. And this is again the mid 70s with AC/DC, AC/DC and most importantly, featured George's younger brothers, Malcolm and Angus. When George was with the Easybeats, Malcolm and Angus were overwhelmed, just completely blown away by their big brother's success. They would

walk around the streets of Burwood, introducing themselves as Malcolm and Angus, brother of George Young from the Easybeats. They were just absolutely inspired by him formed their own band and George very astutely decided to not just produce their records, but to mentor the band. One writer very wisely said that AC/DC was George Young's revenge, and what he meant was that all the mistakes made by the Easybeats, creative mistakes and business mistakes would not be replicated in AC/DC. So George had a very broad role with his brothers to help them find their sound very early on. In fact, Malcolm and Angus, during the early days of AC/DC said to George, should we be more eclectic? Should we try different genres? And he said, no, you're one of the lucky bands that's found your sound immediately. And that sound was what we now call Oz Rock, the sound you heard in in pubs in Sydney and Melbourne and Brisbane and pretty much all across the country. That was incredibly popular at that time. And also helped the music bands like Rose Tattoo and The Angels. So, Harry, George's role was more than a brother, more than a producer. It was a mentor, sort of Yoda to AC/DC and so much of their eventual success. And then the six, I think they rated number six, rock and roll band of all time behind, just behind the Beatles, the Stones, Pink Floyd and I think the Eagles and one other. He he really guided them through the early stages of their career, right up to the point where they made the record Highway to Hell and ultimately to the death of Bon Scott.

[00:16:25] ABC's Countdown was one of Australia's first music TV show, which featured pop and rock music. This show was one of the main ways Australian audiences could hear and see upcoming bands such as John Paul Young, the Ted Mulry Gang, Rose Tattoo and AC/DC. How important was Countdown?

[00:16:47] Countdown was a really huge factor, particularly in breaking AC/DC, but also all the bands that George and Harry worked with at Alberts, John Paul Young Ted Mulry, Rose Tattoo and so on. Countdown was the first really the first Australian produced pop show to have a national audience, and that was incredibly important because really through the 60s and into the early 70s, you could be a big star in Sydney. You could be a big star in Brisbane. You could be a big star in Melbourne, but not necessarily across the country. I was told a really good story by Herman Kovac, who was a member of the Ted Murray Gang, who was one of the bands that really benefited from Countdown. He and the band were touring the top end the first time they'd ever

been there. In fact, one of the first times a Sydney based rock and roll band toured the top end.

[00:17:38] And when they set up to play at a settlement, he was amazed to see so many people turn up and he started speaking to the locals and he said, how do you know about us? And they looked at him and said, we have Countdown. He.

[00:17:50] That's how big Countdown's reach was, it got to little settlements at the top end as much as it got to Hobart and Perth and some of the more far flung capital cities in Australia. It also meant that these bands, when they went to tour those places, were not unknown's. They didn't have to play third on the bill to nobody. They could do headline shows. It was absolutely paramount in unifying Australian music and really promoting Australian music across the country and also led to the success internationally of such bands as AC/DC.

[00:18:21] Love is in the Air by John Paul Young gained international recognition and was the biggest single that Young and Vanda wrote. What made this song so popular?

[00:18:31] While working with John Paul Young, George and Harry became interested in working in a number of different formats, John was essentially a pop singer. He'd had success with songs like Pasadena and I Hate The Music and Yesterday's Hero. But George and Harry were very interested in working with the technology in the studio, working with things called tape loops. George didn't like drummers apparently, he wasn't that fond of drummers and he'd much rather get something on tape that you can then repeat in a tape loop and it'd give you the perfect percussion sound that he was after with songs. And that eventually led to the recording of Love is in the Air. The song had a very not just an interesting genesis because it came out of this experimental efforts that George and Harry were undertaking inside out of the studio. But it also had a couple of different lives. It was a hit in the late 70s when it was first released on an international hit. But then in the early 90s, when it was featured prominently on the film Strictly Ballroom, which was produced by the Alberts company. Unfortunately, Ted Albert died before the film was released, but it became a huge hit all over again and has since become an absolute signature song not just for John Paul Young, but for Australian music of that era. It's remarkable how broad a reach that song has and how



it's been a hit. I think now, counting three times in separate decades, it's got remarkable staying power.

[00:20:00] Working in the library I need to ask you one last question. What are you reading, watching or listening in this extraordinary time?

[00:20:10] Firstly, I have to say, as a writer, my life hasn't changed substantially with COVID because I always work in isolation anyway. The only key difference is during that peak period in New South Wales around March and April, my kids were at home with me. But as far as reading. I've just finished reading *The Kennedys Curse* by James Patterson, which is, I think, a really fascinating, tragic read, *Utopia Avenue* by David Mitchell, which I think along with *Daisy Jones and The Six*, which is another book I'd recommend, is that comes close to capturing the real essence, even though it's fiction, the real essence of what can happen inside a rock and roll band? Watching I've been enjoying streaming show called *Loudermilk*, which is about a former 90s rock critic based in Seattle who's now moving into his forties and is a drug and alcohol counselor. It has a touch of *High Fidelity* about it.

[00:21:12] And I really enjoyed those Nick Hornby books that really reminded me of that. Listening to, I struggled to listen to a lot of new music because every time I ask my kids, who are 13 and 15 about what they're listening to, they play me an even more obscure hip hop track, which I just can't connect to at all. I like Tame Impala of Contemporary Acts. I think they're a great band, but I still find myself being drawn back to bands that I sort of might go to records of people like Radiohead and Wilco and even U2 recently I've been listening to a lot, but I was raised on a diet of Dylan, David Bowie, Lou Reed, Neil Young who to me, the greats, Joni Mitchell as well, and more recently, Lucinda Williams. These are people that I'll be listening to regularly. And of course, the material that when I'm writing about AC/DC, The Easybeats, all these people that's on high rotation in my household because it's part of the experience of writing about them.

[00:22:11] Jeff, thank you so much for your time today for our wonderful chat. We wish you all the best for your new book, *Friday On My Mind*. *Friday On My mind* is available at the library, but also for purchase at any bookshop. We also have several other publications, by Jeff online throughout our e-books. Thank you for listening and look out

for upcoming digital content through the Inner West's Library's Watson and social media channels. Thank you.