

# freelance success...

... articles and profiles.



**This month, we feature a profile of musician Rick Brewster. An original member of the band *The Angels*, Rick has been a professional musician for most of his life. He chats to Monica Davidson.**

I travel well beyond my usual urban comfort zone to meet with Rick Brewster, and he offers to pick me up from the train. Despite disembarking into a worrisome natural world full of trees and silence, I feel instantly at ease once collected in the Brewster family station wagon. Rick is a softly-spoken man, somewhere in his 50s, and we chat pleasantly about our kids (he has five, aged between 22 and 2) while we drive to his humble home.

It is extremely difficult to equate my mild-mannered host with his professional image. He is a founding member (with his brother John) of *The Angels*, one of Australia's biggest rock bands in the 1970s and 80s. He is also a member of the Brewster Brothers, again with John, and moonlights occasionally in both a jug band and a kid's band.

Rick and John's father and grandfather were both classical musicians, so it was perhaps inevitable that the boys would become musicians and composers also. Their father was a performer, but took a job at the ABC to support his family, and worked up the ranks there for most of his adult life. "He ended up hiring and firing members of the orchestra, which he hated," says Rick. "He went for early retirement. I think underneath it all he was a frustrated performer."

John and Rick had a part-time band while Rick was studying Agricultural Science at Adelaide University. That outfit, called *The Moonshine Jug and String Band*, played locally around town. Their reasons for starting, apart from their love of music, were also competitive. "We decided to become a band because Sherbet were doing it, and we could do better than that. And we did it blindly, it was just confidence that we could."

The jug band was eventually invited to Melbourne to perform in the first, and only, National Jug Orchestra, with legendary jug band *Captain Matchbox*. "That was our first tour," laughs Rick. "We made the decision that we wanted to go on with music and the band, and take it seriously, but being a jug band was probably not going to get us anywhere."

Their father was not keen to see the boys take the professional musician's path. "He knew nothing about contemporary music. In classical music there aren't too many ways you can get to the top without *being* the top." The Brewster brothers imagined their careers would be different. "In rock and roll, you don't have to be a band of virtuosos. The Beatles weren't virtuosos, neither were The Rolling Stones. They just had great chemistry and appealed to a lot of people. That side of it I don't think he quite got until we started to get ahead and eventually make some money..." Rick laughs. "He finally had to admit that it maybe wasn't so bad an idea after all."

Making money didn't happen straight away, of course. In 1974 Rick and John combined their talents with other local musicians, including Bernard 'Doc' Neeson, and became *The Keystone Angels*. After a single release, they moved to Sydney in 1974 to support larger bands, and approach record companies. "They knocked us back, on the song that's probably the most recognised song of ours now, *Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?*. That got knocked back all over the place."

Supporting larger acts proved to be a turning point for the band. "We did a country run in South Australia with AC/DC, and they championed the cause. They thought we were, or were going to be, a good band – because we certainly weren't! – but they could see something in it." AC/DC encouraged George Young and Harry Vanda, renowned music producers from Alberts Music, to see the band play. "They came down to Chequers Nightclub, saw the band and signed us up on the spot." The band became, simply, *The Angels*.

In 1976 *Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again* was their first single. It was not very successful at the time. Neither were the next two singles, *You're a Lady Now* and *Comin Down*, both released in 1977. Then, in 1978, *The Angels* released their second album *Face To Face* and the single *Take a Long Line*. The album stayed on the Australian charts for 79 weeks.

Breakthrough after breakthrough followed rapidly from that point. For Rick, that early success seemed sudden, even though "it was a good four years of slog to get there. Suddenly there were queues and people couldn't get in to gigs. We turned up to the Bondi Lifesaver one night and saw a queue literally around the block, people who couldn't get in. It was frightening. And the age we were, we didn't really appreciate it for what it was."

Although Rick had never had a proper job, he was unprepared for creative freelancing. "I've been in this business for over thirty years, and I still know next to nothing about the business. It's partly choice, it's partly laziness. I actually lack an interest, and I think there are heaps of people in that boat, musicians, who just don't want to know and don't even really care that much, as long as they can pay the bills."

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Even paying the bills proved to be difficult in the early years, although not from lack of funds. "When The Angels was the only thing we did, (our income) was quite irregular. You'd get this nice healthy cheque after a tour, and then nothing. We never paid ourselves a regular wage or anything. You're supposed to manage that money, with no management skills. I was forever getting two weeks out from the next tour and asking for an advance, and that's hopeless."

He looks momentarily wistful. "I've had many periods in my life when I've seriously wished I had a normal job, not working for myself, just working for somebody who took all the responsibility." It doesn't seem so hard to imagine this man in that role. He laughs. "Probably I would have been really happy doing that, if I enjoyed what I did."

The Angels had three decades of great success, some quiet times, a few line-up changes over the years, and an induction into the ARIA Hall of Fame in 1998. Original member Doc Neeson finally quit after suffering prolonged illness due to a 1999 car crash. The rest of the original line-up eventually reformed and began touring as The Angels Band, and then as The Angels.



Doc eventually formed his own version of the band, Doc Neeson's Angels. In September 2007 the feuding original members of the band went to court over who had rights to the name. Legal argy-bargy has, it seems, taken over from dodging beer bottles and crowd surfers.

In the meantime, Rick and John have gone back to their roots and formed The Brewster Brothers. "We're starting again, with a little more knowledge." They found out very quickly that they couldn't hang their new band on the life of their old one. Venue managers had little idea who they were, as the band had rested most of its branding on the face and name of their lead singer, Doc. When the connection was made, most venues assumed they would be too loud and wouldn't book them. The Brewster Brothers were anything but loud. "It is an acoustic act, totally different music. Very atmospheric, just John and me, and definitely not loud."

In the early days of the Brewster Brothers, Rick describes their act as 'singing potplants, part of the furniture'. They used their sporadic live gigs to work out songs, rehearse and find a direction. "The most refreshing thing of all, about starting the Brewster Brothers," he says, "was for the first time in our lives we could freely incorporate anything, all our musical roots, from classical to jug band to Bob Dylan to Angels, everything all in one. We just use it all, and we play songs from all those different parts of our lives."

The brothers have widened their band now to include other members, including Paul R Burton on stand-up bass and cajon, and Jim Conway on harmonica. In 2006 they released their first studio album *Shadows Fall* and the single *Blue Blood*. In 2007 they released the single *Keep Your Woman*, a duet with singer Anne Kirkpatrick, and the live album *Brewster Brothers In Concert at the Port Fairy Folk Festival*. Things are beginning to improve. "We're starting to pick and choose the gigs we do, which is great," says Rick.

Now more independent than their early days, the Brewster Brothers haven't signed to a particular label. Rick has even bitten the business bullet. "Most of the business side of things that I do, like GST and BAS statements... I'll sit in a park and pull out the laptop and do the bookwork or the artwork, layout, when I get the chance."

Rick's suggestion for new musicians making it on their own is to understand how copyright and royalties work. "I think ultimately a better situation is to always own your own copyright, but when you're a young band and signing your first record deal you don't necessarily have that option." When The Angels signed to Alberts, they gave the label copyright ownership in exchange for royalties. "And we still get royalties now, every six months we get a statement and a cheque."

He also recommends finding people you can trust, who are clever and trustworthy in the way they do business. "Alberts are classic, they've had so much experience you just know that they'll do the right thing, be accurate with their figures and so on." Still, he admits that it's difficult when starting out. "How do you know which direction to go? You sometimes only have one option, and you take it, if it's a chance to get your record out there and heard."

When asked if he is a success, Rick simply says "No." I laugh, a little surprised at that response from someone with a lifetime of acclaim behind him. Rick smiles and tells me of his grandfather. "He was a creative musician, and he wrote classical music, more than you and I could ever write in ten lifetimes, unbelievably prolific. In someone else's terms that's not success at all because only a handful ever got published, and the rest went straight in the archives." He sips his tea. "I always see him as successful because of what he did, not because of what he got from it."

And on that note of wisdom from a legendary rocker, we pile back into the station wagon and head for the afternoon train.