

FOREWORD

My oldest memories of Seaman Dan hark back to the early 1950s — I was five or six years old. At the time, I was playing in the front yard of our house in John Street, TI when I heard a stranger speaking to me. ‘Hiya, Guy! Your Mum and Dad home?’ he asked in his quiet silken-toned drawl. He had a brown paper bag with a few large bottles of beer in one arm and was balancing a guitar on the gatepost with the other. How did I know it was beer? Come on ... this *was* TI, aka ‘Thirsty Island’ back then! The guitar I recognised from pictures on the covers of vinyl records I’d seen at Uncle Porgie’s place next door.

The ensuing party that day was one of many such spontaneous events at our place as well as other friends’ and relatives’ houses — gatherings that were pretty common in our little cultural melting pot of a community whenever certain luggers were in port. They would doubtlessly have happened before this particular time, and I clearly recall them as being joyous, happy and exciting times for the grownups and kids alike. Sometimes these visitors were straight off the boat and smelled strongly of the ocean and the gifts of salted pearl shell meat they brought ashore — a delicacy when cooking ‘Long Soup’. At other times, they were all spruced up and ready to relax with some serious all-night partying. I only ever remember Mr Dan as always looking very cool and dapper.

Over the ensuing couple of decades, the four remaining pubs on TI slowly became more of a focal point for entertainment from the old house parties. By then, younger people were plugging electric guitars into their amps and had taken over the pub lounges and beer gardens at what were known locally as ‘cabarets’. However, fans of good old-timey tropical tunes were still able to join mainstay acoustic minstrels such as Uncle Seaman, the Mills Sisters and a handful of other talented musicians such as the late George Dewis and the late Izzie Shibasaki for a big singalong in the public bar. These events were hugely popular, and on Friday nights the number of sweaty bodies packed into the old Grand Hotel made it almost impossible to get into the place after 7.30 p.m.

The live music scene on TI tended to lose its way somewhat throughout most of the 1980s and early 1990s, and consisted mostly of disco beats pumped out by anonymous DJs working canned dance beats through a reel-to-reel tape machine. However, the famous Mills Sisters had recorded their CD during this period and were becoming very popular with audiences on the mainland and overseas. The fact that one of the songs on their CD was written by Uncle Seaman helped remind people of his place in the Torres Strait music scene. However, we need to ‘fast forward’ to the late 1990s, just as things really started to come together for him.

It was at this time that he met Karl Neuenfeldt, who was visiting TI to interview people as part of a research project on which he was working. This meeting at the Torres Strait Media Association’s radio broadcasting studio was to be the beginning

of a strong musical and personal friendship/partnership that has proved mutually beneficial and that has endured to this day.

I'm not quite sure how my own involvement came about, but somehow I've had the honour of having been a tiny part of Uncle Seaman's wonderful journey ever since Karl's visit. This special privilege has allowed me to be in the studio with him as part of the *Mata Loose* backing group (under the skilful engineering, co-production and guidance of Nigel Pegrum), to feel his personal glee over the phone when he received the first of three national music awards — 'Hey guy, I did it! ... won this trophy ... woohooo!' I also did a stint as his tour manager on a highly eventful road trip visiting several communities across Cape York Peninsula from TI to Cairns. You wouldn't believe how many hula dancers there are in these remote places — testament to the goodwill from visiting boat crews back in the old pearling days, no doubt! I even learned his main weapon for maintaining that super-smooth voice, but you'll have to ask him for that secret recipe yourself.

One of the things that has fascinated me as I have followed Uncle Seaman's career over the years has been the wide range of people that enjoy his music. The fact that he is loved and appreciated in the Torres Strait and by people of his own vintage elsewhere is understandable, but his following among younger audiences (especially women!) is quite special. A friend from Canberra once told me that his children (all under seven years of age) insisted on having Seaman Dan CDs played at the start of every single long-distance car trip they ever did.

My personal observation is that his fans simply enjoy the way he tells such great stories through music, with so much grace, enthusiasm and fun. The smile is also totally sincere both on and off stage, and his genuine joy in what he does is absolutely contagious.

There are so many facets to this great man's life, and I trust you'll enjoy reading about these as much as I have. I'm sure there are many of you — especially his family and close friends — who could easily fill many more chapters with your own stories and experiences.

In the 60 years that I've been fortunate to know Uncle Seaman, I can wholeheartedly say that I feel blessed to have experienced the good fortune to have grown up as a TI boy in these beautiful Torres Strait homelands, with such wonderful role models as Henry Seaman Dan ... a humble human being with a zestful appreciation of life and love of people second to none. He is a true world ambassador to his people through his dignified charm and music, and I am sure you'll all join me in saying '*au esoau/koeyma eso*/many thanks' to Uncle Seaman for making our lives richer and for just being who he is.

'You can take the man out of the sea but you can't take the sea out of this man ... well, certainly not out of his songs!'

Vic McGrath