



Photo: Brendan McCarthy

Leap of Faith: Tom Wolff

By Megan Spencer © 2013

First published in Bendigo Magazine, June 2013

Chances are there wouldn't be too many people you'd encounter with 'lawyer' and 'music composer' printed side by side on their business card.

Tom Wolff does. New to Bendigo, mid-2012 the twenty-four year-old embarked upon a new adventure, when partner Felicity Eva landed an announcing job at at StarFM.

Freshly graduated from Monash University with both degrees tucked into his belt, Tom contemplated the best way forward. Intrigued by the law, and with a passion ignited for experimental music composition, he didn't want to have to choose.

“Truth is, if I'd stayed in Melbourne, I couldn't have done both,” he says of pursuing law and writing music.

“Life's too busy in a city; you'd be working 16 hours a day at a law firm, and have no time left over to pursue music.”

“Here it's worked out that I can do both,” he says smiling at his move to Dragon City.

With “no particular plan in mind”, and a strong love of “play”, Tom says local experimental music collective Undue Noise provided a strong incentive for coming to Bendigo. “Jacques Soddell (Undue Noise director) gave a workshop at uni and I was impressed that this kind of music was supported in such a place as Bendigo”.

“It turns out David Chisholm and I are alumni, we were just never at Monash at the same time,” he laughs, at what is another local synchronicity. An award-winning international composer, Chisholm is the founder/artistic director of this year’s inaugural Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music. Another good omen for Tom to journey up the Calder and try his musical fortunes in the goldfields. Landing a traineeship at a Bendigo law firm helped seal the deal.



Tom plays El Gordo 2013. Photos: Megan Spencer

Tom’s always loved music. Growing up in Brisbane he took piano lessons as a youngster, venturing towards guitar “when my sister began having lessons. When she wasn’t around I’d pick it up and teach myself – there were tears!” he says of the ensuing sibling rivalry.

“Music was such an immersive experience,” he says recalling his surrender to the art form. “I found it easy to devote hours and hours to it – and that I understood it.” The emergence of household internet made it even easier. “I used to visit the London Symphony Orchestra website and teach myself from that!”

Music teacher and composer Freeman McGrath (Liquid Architecture) also encouraged Tom to improvise, record music, sing and to push his guitar-playing. “Strategies to keep us from getting bored” he says. It worked.

The Composition Degree opened up even more opportunities. In 2008 he completed a six-month exchange program at SUNY (State University of New York), Buffalo. It was “no law, all composition, and I got so much better.”

Arriving home a friend invited him to compose the score for a theatre show at Adelaide Fringe. A series of student productions followed, with increasing degrees of responsibility in soundtrack design and music score. One was an opera “all sung in nonsense - I wanted to write an opera for non-musicians.”

“The most exciting project was... when I wrote a piece for the ARCKO Ensemble, a super-talented chamber orchestra. They had a residency at Monash. We [students] wrote pieces for them and they rehearsed and played them in a public performance. They are such excellent players that you could write whatever was in your head, and they could do it!”

He recounts another formative highlight with “DIY cellos using PVC pipe and U-bolts”.

“This took away the intimidation of the formal, classical environment.” A fan of unorthodox instruments, Tom says “what I really want to do is put together installations or performances which are inclusive – like my ‘nonsensical’ opera.”

In 2012 he wrote the score for ‘The Well’, by playwright Robert Reid (MTC, Theatre In Decay). Building a folio and maintaining a network of collaborators has been important for Tom, as “composition is really only an internet connection away,” he says of working remotely from the perceived ‘cultural hub’ of a city.

A dapper dresser and regular songwriter, it comes as no surprise to discover Tom plays in a band ([Migrations](#)) and solo (stripped back bossa nova/jazz interpretations of pop songs, and originals). But he sees his composition work and pop gigs as distinct. “I like both, but for entirely different reasons,” he explains. Like for example, strange bedfellows law and music composition perhaps?



Tom left, in Melbourne indie-pop band, Migrations.

“Law’s fun, and it gives you the opportunity to help people. It’s another way of interacting and understanding the world and your environment. Same with music – it gives you more avenues to enjoy yourself and other people.”

Always up for a challenge – be it musical where all he has is a “blank slate” at a rehearsal, or, undertaking a new life experience - Tom is not afraid to take a leap of faith.

“There is an infinite number of things you can do with your life,” he begins. “It was worth giving being a composer a go – I love it so far. And being a trainee lawyer and living in Bendigo, they’re all choices I’ve made that have made me really happy”.