

# LEN LUSCOMBE

## Australia's Premier Piano Roll Pianist and Arranger

Most Australian player piano owners and roll collectors are very familiar with the name of Len Luscombe. For whenever they pedal a Broadway piano roll, chances are Luscombe's name graces the box label as pianist and arranger. Broadway rolls were manufactured in Melbourne by Luscombe for more than 30 years until his untimely death in 1957. Today, with the re-born interest and enthusiasm in player pianos, Luscombe's superb recordings are being re-discovered. It's also time for us to re-discover the man.

The birth of Lennard Earl Max Luscombe was registered as having taken place in East Melbourne, Victoria on 19 August, 1894. Len was the only child of Max, a German immigrant watchmaker and 'teacher of the violin' and Elsie, a music teacher born in Daylesford, Victoria. Birth registration was not time critical back then and Len may have been born in 1893. Regardless of the actual year, baby Lennard seemed destined for a musical career.

As Percy Grainger and Ernest Hutchison had before him, Luscombe developed quickly as another Melbourne child prodigy at the pianoforte. Residing in suburban Fitzroy and billed as the "*smallest pianist in the world*", Elsie & Max paraded their son in a number of keyboard performances around Melbourne. Taught by his mother from an early age, Luscombe later polished his pianistic skills while in the USA with lessons from Theodore Moses Tobani (1855-1933), best remembered today for the sentimental piece '*Hearts and Flowers*'.

Whereas his Melbourne predecessors created outstanding overseas careers in classical piano, the young Luscombe rebelled against his parents' insistence on following a similar path. The boy's love of popular dance music had him leading his own dance orchestra at the tender age of sixteen years.

In the early days of the 20th century the boom in pre-recorded home entertainment was making important inroads. No longer were the few musically talented family members required to perform upon request. Now with just a few turns of a handle, or the use of father's feet to pedal, the gramophone and player piano created instant music everyone could enjoy. Recordings of the latest ragtime tunes, foxtrots, operatic arias and sentimental ballads were now only as far away as the local music store.

As a teenage prodigy, Luscombe's interest in the player piano became quite obsessive. With pocketknife in hand, he reputedly sat at his mother's kitchen table and hand cut a number of rolls copied from gramophone records and sheet music. Happily one of these rolls still exists today, his own composition from 1916 titled '*Valse Impromptu*'. Little did Luscombe know that this laborious task would become the foundation for his forthcoming career.

In 1917, Luscombe sailed to the USA, with aspirations of a future in popular music. His duration is unknown, but this first visit certainly whet his appetite in the potential available to a visitor

with considerable musical talent. Reports exist of Luscombe performing and conducting in New York City, so his contacts must have been impressive.

On a return trip to the states in 1919, Luscombe was keen to find out much more about player piano recording techniques, as 'hand played' rolls had recently made their appearance onto the market. A pianist's performance on roll now had a lifelike quality, which hand punched and cut piano rolls could never achieve.

What Luscombe actually encountered must have been disheartening, as things were not the same as they were in 1917. An abundance of popular music pianists all trying to secure employment, and a 'closed shop' arrangement for music roll artists at the time made it impossible for the young Australian to acquire work. These were the days when 'doughboys' were returning from the battlefields of the Great War and unemployment, not only for musicians, was the order of the day. The post war recession also made things economically difficult.

Somehow Luscombe became acquainted with the Connor family, who were well established in the manufacture of 'Connorized' music rolls. Lessons from Tobani and a friendship formed with pianist Roy Bargy were also positive happenings. Bargy went on to be pianist for the famous Paul Whiteman orchestra and a giant in popular music circles.

It is also unclear how long Luscombe remained in the USA on this second trip, but meeting the Connor family and seeing firsthand the popularity of the player piano surely provided the impetus for the career which lay ahead. A decision was made there and then (and probably had been brewing in his mind since 1917) for a return to Australia to establish his own roll cutting business in Melbourne.

Luscombe sank his life savings into the purchase of the necessary equipment and machinery for roll production (and a red Buick roadster which he also fell in love with) but unfortunately his savings were not enough. Upon arrival of the equipment, the outstanding costs and shipping charges were paid for by Luscombe's mother, who reportedly had to mortgage the family home. So by 1921, the Anglo-American Player Roll Company was born with factory located on the first floor of the Solway Buildings at 112 Johnston Street, Fitzroy and the registered office in the London Stores building in Bourke Street, Melbourne.

From the beginning Luscombe's product was first rate. Starting life as the '*Monarch*' and '*Regal*' labels, the brand name was later changed to '*Broadway*' which remained for the next thirty plus years, with some label production overlap. It is unclear when actual production commenced (as early as 1920 has been suggested) but certainly rolls were available for sale by 1922. Although production was relatively low and mainly a two-person operation, Broadway rolls found an eager market in the heyday of the player piano. The clock symbol idea used on the roll labels came from a clock face on Broadway that had impressed Luscombe while he was in New York City.

Not only was Luscombe concentrating on his newly founded business, his services were also in demand as pianist and conductor for concert performances and silent movie accompaniment, making him one of Melbourne's leading musical figures. Luscombe conducted the Melbourne Majestic Theatre orchestra for many years and the 1928 program from the Melbourne Town Hall

performance of Chaplin's silent classic, "*The Circus*", features Luscombe conducting the United Artists' Concert Orchestra.

In 1924 a Mr. Charles Urquhart joined the company. Born in 1908 and one of eleven children, he remained the right hand man at Anglo-American until Luscombe's death, eventually inheriting the company. The two men established a close working and personal relationship and have been described as being "as close as brothers". Urquhart's position was in roll manufacture, production and packaging, whilst a Mr. Blade kept the perforators (roll cutting machinery) and stenciling machine (prints the words onto a song roll) in operation, with one or two casual women called upon as required.

Anglo-American also cut rolls for the Myer Emporium, a large Melbourne department store under its in-house label, '*Dahlmont*'. Myers tried to renege on its supply contract (probably due to poor depression sales) but Luscombe wisely held the firm to its contract. The depression years and particularly the period 1932 to 1935 were lean indeed – Anglo-American was losing each week on average seven Australian pounds.

'*Broadway*' recordings, editing and arrangements were always Luscombe's sole responsibility and many overseas masters were imported to fill out the catalogue of rolls. The legendary Fats Waller can be heard on Broadway in a few issues, along with other American luminaries such as J. Lawrence Cook, Frank La Forge and Max Kortlander, to name but a few. Luscombe also used the pseudonyms Dan Rawlings, Earl Lester and Art Kaplin to make his roster of recording artists appear larger to an unsuspecting public. A few compositions also flowed from Luscombe's pen with "*Valse Beryl*", "*Warragul*" march and "*Zethus*" overture being the most successful.

In an interview with Charles Urquhart in 1989, Urquhart recalled Luscombe's playing as being perfect, sounding exactly the same as his rolls. His ability to arrange a tune for roll production was, he felt, unsurpassed. Playback and editing was made on player pianos at the factory and also on one at the Luscombe residence. Production runs were generally up to 1000 per issue, with the best paper for manufacture coming from Germany.

Main opposition for Broadway within Australia came from the Sydney based company "Mastertouch" owned by George H. Horton. The two rivals 'stayed their distance' with Luscombe predominant in selling in the south of the continent, and Horton dominating the north. Urquhart also recalled that sheet music was obtained immediately a new song was released, for roll creation. When music was not available, such as "Bluebird of Happiness", the words and music were taken directly from a radio!

Mr Frank McCoan recalls the factory in 1952 being located in the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, on the south west corner of Johnston and Brunswick Streets. Anglo-American was still located on the first floor when Frank worked downstairs for Solway Clothing until 1954. Occasionally hearing the sound of a piano playing in the distance, one day Frank asked his manager what the company upstairs did, and was told it was the piano roll factory. "Oh, I'd be interested to see how they make those" enquired Frank, "You cannot" came the reply, "It's a *secret* and *no-one* is allowed up there". "I probably said hello to people arriving or departing who worked there, but during those three years they kept very much to themselves", recalls Frank.

Late in his life, Luscombe married Eugenie (known as Gene) with a son and daughter resulting. It is unknown if the children were fathered by Luscombe or were from Gene's previous marriage. Gene Luscombe described her husband in 1988 thus: "He really was the nicest man, to everybody. He had many friends and entertained a lot in his own home in Kew". Rumour had persisted for many years that Luscombe was intensely shy and did most of his recording in the evening. "I would not say Len was a shy man, reserved yes, but a gentleman with a whimsical sense of humour", recalled Gene.

Sometime in 1957 Luscombe was diagnosed as having lung cancer. Although one lung was removed, Luscombe never fully recovered and died three months later on 8 December, 1957. Predeceasing his mother by two months, (his father having died in 1914), Luscombe was cremated and his ashes now reside at the Springvale Crematorium in Melbourne.

Charles Urquhart continued the manufacture of rolls from existing masters for a short time, but without new recordings the firm simply could not survive. Television had been released in Australia in 1956 and was making serious inroads into home entertainment. The player piano was becoming passé. It's perhaps hard to imagine today, but many families were trading in their player pianos as part payment on a new television set.

Urquhart sold his inherited business in 1958 to George H. Horton's son, and the old man is rumoured to have 'hit the roof' when he found out. Business must surely have also been tough at Mastertouch. The Broadway equipment and masters were subsequently packed and shipped to Sydney. Upon arrival, the more popular tune masters were kept, but due to space limitations, the culling process began. Why would they ever want to recut these old forgotten tunes from the 20's and 30's? Consequently, many masters were destroyed – a sad sign of the times. The new wave chrome and plastic decade had certainly arrived, with its rock and roll music on vinyl recordings taking the place of piano rolls.

None the less, one perforator has survived and until recent times, was still in operation at Mastertouch. A handful of Luscombe's surviving performances had also been released as part of the Mastertouch catalogue.

So, Luscombe's talent lives on for new generations to enjoy, with his sparkling arrangements and performances of the popular music of yesterday. His rolls are eagerly sought after by collectors as his pianistic ability rarely disappoints any contemporary listener.

Selfishly, we are today grateful that Luscombe was unable to carve a career for himself in the USA all those years ago. His creation of Broadway music rolls has instead left a lasting legacy in the musical heritage of Melbourne and Australia.

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