

The genius of sound in Newcastle lives on through his innovations

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Iconic: The late Alan Bourne, seen here in 2006, was the Hunter Valley's movie picture and sound man. Picture: Brock Perks

THE late Alan Bourne, of Cooks Hill, was an electronics wizard.

His handiwork was seen and heard not only in the Hunter Valley but throughout the state, although he stayed out of the limelight.

A modest, yet extraordinary, gentleman he was one of Newcastle's quiet achievers.

And one of his legacies lives on today in community radio station HRN, the hospital radio network, daily going out over the airwaves from the inner-city home where he once lived and worked.

Alan Edmund Bourne (1924- 2012) was once Newcastle's best-known sound engineer whose work remained his hobby. And what a versatile talent he was.

When mercurial US entrepreneur Lee Gordon brought many of the world's top performers to Australia in the 1950s, Newcastle was the place where they previewed acts for their new audience Down Under.

Naturally, it was Alan Bourne who provided the sound system at the old Newcastle Stadium (now West End's Market Town). Relying on him were major overseas stars like Nat 'King Cole', Johnny Ray, Little Richard, Louis Armstrong, Abbott and Costello, Gene Krupa, Frankie Lane, Bill Haley and the Comets and Sammy Davis Jnr.

Bourne was once instructed to unplug his friend, the Aussie 'wild one' Johnny O'Keefe, when he got carried away on stage and broke the rules.

At one stage Bourne also piped background music everywhere, from the Hunter Street Mall, to department stores, to supermarket aisles from Jesmond and Kotara and out to Swansea and Toronto.

He was also responsible from 1960 for "music on hold" on telephones. When people rang large companies, such as NRMA, while waiting they would hear some of 80 hours of music continuously playing on tape each month.

Weekender was recently alerted to Alan Bourne's forgotten fame by the bubbly, all-round former musical entertainer Mrs Pat Charker.

"He was such a lovely gentleman and extremely clever. I remember he went to Sydney to buy a piano, asking advice from Claude Moore [the legendary Alcron restaurant pianist] which I'm sure he didn't need, being such a wonderful musician himself," she said. "Such a pity such a talented man passed away without most people today knowing what an influence he had."

One person who knew Alan Bourne better than most was long-term employee Barry Parsons. His working life has been tied up with Bourne's Associated Sound Newcastle, operating from a humble brick house in Dawson Street, Cooks Hill.

He said he worked with Bourne for 51 years, adapting as commercial circumstances changed.



Memories: Barry Parsons with rare microphones. Picture: Mike Scanlon

"I started off here sweeping the floors, to the stage now where I now own the business," Parsons said. "I was 10 years on the road with electronic organ servicing, mainly in the Hunter Valley, until other demands of the business took over."

That other demand was providing an emergency repair service to Newcastle theatres, especially independent operators, and drive-ins (movies were another of Alan Bourne's passions).

His company once installed sound and projection equipment at the city's old Lyrique and Roma picture shows. There was also work at the Lake and Regal cinemas, plus at The Entrance, Forster, Port Macquarie and Sawtell cinemas, and setting up sound in theatres in Woy Woy and Mudgee.

By 1986, Bourne employed a team of five electronic technicians, installing equipment or doing repairs at places far and wide.

These days, Barry Parsons still has a busy schedule, specialising in digital cinema supply and installation, plus a breakdown repair and service. Busy working weeks could see him anywhere from Katherine in the Northern Territory, to sites in Sydney, Orange, Ettalong or Nambucca Heads.

Radio 1629_{AM}

And this is on top of operating community radio 1629AM (or hospital radio), 24-hours a day, seven days a week with the help of 20 announcers, all volunteers, and 3169 CDs playing on a computer called 'George'.

"Our radio station 1629AM playing classic 'golden oldies' music for the over 40s age group was always Alan's dream. He put everything into it for 20 years," Parsons said. "This station site was once his parents' house, growing out of one room and a garage, initially with recording studios for musicians, or school choirs, brass bands or church concert groups.

"The station has a few ads, but it costs \$1000 a month to keep going with the phone line, electricity, equipment, insurance, maintenance [including a radio tower] and \$200 for an imported news service.

"We need five or six announcers a day. That's why there's always someone here. The radio operates on a narrowcast band; 400watts, that's our broadcast licence compared to 10,000 watts for the ABC. People wanting to hear us, have to find us."

Parsons said people sometimes found it hard to find 1629AM on old radios as the AM band could end at 1602.

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Barry Parsons

"That's why we offered to supply, deliver and tune a new CD/radio for \$60 to customers. We thought we'd sell probably four, but we've sold 569 of them in the last three years. Our listeners are very loyal. People are even listening to us in the USA," he said.

Parsons said the Newcastle-born and educated Bourne was recognised as the first person who built and sold an electronic organ in Australia.

In 1943, during World War II, Bourne worked at radar stations in far-flung outposts. During his youth he'd already developed three great passions - music, radio and movies - and they shaped his whole life.

He met famous stage hypnotist Franquin and became his musical director, touring Australia and New Zealand for several years.

Bourne Electronics was born (later renamed Associated Sound Newcastle) and he provided PA systems for fetes and performances at Hunter Valley church halls. In 1948 he took a contract to broadcast at Newcastle trots, the speedway and Newcastle Showground, plus old Dockyard ship launches. His biggest, trickiest broadcast job: broadcasting the length of Hunter Street (in separate zones) for the 1954 Queen's visit.

He also had to "make everything" like audio amplifiers, designed by himself, based on which valves military disposal stores were selling that week.

As TV emerged to close a lot of cinemas, he bought up all the theatre equipment he could to lovingly rebuild it, later selling it to small independents like Mike Walsh's 10 cinema chain stretching from Avalon to Penrith.

Bourne stayed a bachelor all his life, devoting his energies into his work, including building at least 23 organs, until he died aged 87 years.

"Alan was a very private person," Parsons said. "He never really wanted to go out. He loved recording at home. He was a very kind gentleman who would do anything for anyone."

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https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/6404567/master-of-sound-the-alan-bourne-legacy/?fbclid=IwAR0mfVTEpGMLov2vFs3MbEtGIJFAdoJ_1rHo3E7nIMRkLPKY6JQI2b9vSE