



# Q&A MERVYN BISHOP

Nicola Young interviews Indigenous photographer Mervyn Bishop, who has been meeting communities, taking photos and researching a travelling version of the exhibition

## Tell us about when you first started taking photographs as a boy

My mother had a camera and she used to take photos of the early days and our family in Brewarrina. I was always fascinated with it, so one day in 1955, when I was about ten, I borrowed Mum's camera. A flood had isolated the town, so lots of aircraft were flying into Brewarrina. I wanted to be a pilot, so me and a mate rode on our bikes out to the aerodrome and I took photos of the planes. When the film was processed, Mum found all the pictures of the planes and she was a bit surprised, because I hadn't asked her if I could take the camera. She said that she didn't want all the film wasted on pictures of aeroplanes. I still have some of the photos. They're nice pictures.

Vic King, who was a grader driver for the council, converted one of the bedrooms in his house to a darkroom and it was always set up. He used to take pictures semi-professionally of townsfolk and I used to go over to his darkroom a lot. The first time I saw a print come up was 'Wow!' as the blank paper sitting in the developer suddenly changed. I loved all that, the technological stuff, and I was hooked. A friend of Dad's was also into photography and he had an enlarger. I used to go round his place and set up the kitchen and do black and white prints.

In 1957, I had a friend who had just bought a 35mm camera and was beginning to take slides. So, with the money I'd saved I bought a similar camera. After the slides were developed, I would borrow someone else's projector and set up the kitchen-dining room, and other people would bring over their slides and we would have slide nights. It was seen as smart, uptown.

## How did you become a press photographer in the 1960s?

I started work in Sydney at the ABC as a general hand. In 1963 a friend of mine, who sort of helped me go through school, worked at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and he arranged an interview for me with the photographic department to become a press photographer. It was his idea, as he'd seen some of the slides I'd taken and was impressed. So, I took them in and showed the boss of the department, Fred Halmarick.

I talked about what I did, showed him some slides and told him I'd dabbled in darkroom work. Then Fred showed me one of the *Herald's* darkrooms and asked me to make a print. It was pretty good first up, bang! I thought, 'OK, that'd be a nice job', but I didn't really think too much more about it. A week later they offered me a cadetship as a press photographer. I was surprised and thrilled.

Being trained at a newspaper taught you that you could only work with the conditions that you had at the time. You had to have a picture for publication, so the photo had to be taken no matter what. Because of this, I am confident and comfortable with just going out and taking photos of people and situations.

## One of your most famous photos is from 1975 of then prime minister Gough Whitlam pouring soil into the hands of Elder Vincent Lingiari as a symbol of land rights. What are your memories of that moment in history?

At the time I was working for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in Canberra, employed as a photographer in the public relations section. The symbolic handing back of land was in a boughshed where it was quite dark, so I asked them to repeat it outside in the sun. I didn't allow them to escape. They might have mingled in the crowd. It would have been difficult to get them together again.

So, I grabbed them as soon as the applause ended and said, 'Can we do this again in the sunshine please?' There were other photographers there at the same time, and most of them would have been content with the inside photograph. As I got Gough and Vincent to re-enact the moment, the others were shooting over my shoulder and later tried to claim ownership of the photograph in the other location.

Not long after that picture was taken, Gough got the axe as prime minister. DAA could have promoted the image, reproducing it as a poster and publishing it in books, but it didn't happen. Never mind. It grew slowly in interest to people over the years. It's now become an iconic picture. I thought at the time it would be remembered, but not as a history-making picture. As Gough himself said, [impersonating Gough's voice] 'Great photo Mervyn, great photo'.

## Are there any photos you wished you'd taken?

I always wanted to do portraits of people when I went back home to Brewarrina, but they were never there or I wasn't around long enough. Those old people aren't there now; they've since died, which, I suppose, is out of my control. But I would have liked to have taken photographs of those people I knew in my community, ordinary folk, black and white.

← *Roy Orbison & Mervyn Bishop, taken by Roy Orbison's drummer, Sydney Showground, 1965*

↓ *One of Mervyn Bishop's first photographs: helicopters land in Brewarrina during the floods of 1955*



At the time I was young and I didn't have a clear idea about that concept. I thought of it later on in my career, but it just kind of drifted away from me. These days you can see books and magazines with photographs from that time, and the pictures of people in them aren't so good. In hindsight, with the equipment and know-how I had back then, the images could have been so much better.

## You have an exhibition at Customs House until 22 September which features photographs you have taken, but which have never been displayed or published before. What are some of the highlights of the exhibition for you?

The exhibition has a photograph of Jimmy Little in a very similar pose to another photograph featuring Roy Orbison. They show a black man in a white suit and a white man in a black suit.

When I was a lad in 1965, I went to take some pictures of my favourite singer Roy Orbison. I went along to see his show at the Manufacturer's Hall at Sydney Showground. I borrowed a 35mm camera from work, and went there on my day off to take pictures. Roy was the star billing, but the Rolling Stones were also on the bill. I took photos of them, but I wasn't really interested in them.

I took a roll of film of the Stones from one side of the stage and then moved to the other side to shoot a different scene with my next roll. Later on someone borrowed the negatives from that second roll and I don't know what happened to them; I've lost that set of prints. Keith Richards was on that side of the stage. So, I've got individual shots of all the Stones, but not of Keith Richards.

There were two shows, and at half time I went backstage. The stars' dressing rooms were in caravans and I looked in the door and saw Roy Orbison. I knocked, went in and introduced myself. I asked if I could take a photo, then if I could have my photo taken with him. His drummer took a shot of me and Roy. I could see that the Stones were really hooting up in the other caravan, flinging girls all around everywhere, and I thought 'Nah, I don't want to go over there'. Imagine what those shots would be worth now!

## What other photos and photographers do you admire?

I really admire Australian photographer David Moore, as he was very instrumental in starting the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP) in Sydney and getting photography accepted as art in Australia. At that time there was no such thing as a recognised photography scene in Australia. No-one bought photography as art, only as wedding memories and portraiture. The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) had very little photography in their collection, as they thought that anyone could take a photo. But after the ACP was established the AGNSW was encouraged to establish its own photography collection.



David got photographers from all fields to show their work at the ACP; it's still going today. Other centres have since developed, following the ACP's lead. Moore's legacy is a good one. At the time there wasn't anyone else around doing what he was doing, like getting in exhibitions overseas. We exhibited photographs together at the ACP just before he died. One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't get one of his books signed by him before he passed away.

**How are you adapting to digital photography?**

I've recently purchased a Nikon D200, a digital SLR camera. Technology has made it harder and easier at the same time. I can link my camera to a laptop and show the pictures I've just taken straight away, which is fantastic. No more waiting for photos to be developed. But at the end of a day of shooting, it takes an hour and a half to upload the photos from my digital camera, delete the bad ones and then burn the rest to CD. That just stresses me.

I don't use Photoshop; I make minor adjustments in a digital darkroom. I have a proper darkroom at my house. I don't use it much since I got my new camera, but I still like working in a good darkroom that's set up. To me, it beats working on a computer. It's something really soothing to me.

**How do you respond when you look through the Aborigines Welfare Board photographs?**

Some of the photographs look like they were taken by a government photographer, possibly working for the Government Printing Office. They would have been engaged by the Board to take photographs of different occasions. But in *Dawn* magazine, a lot of photos were taken by amateurs, like the mission manager or his wife. Not many black people had cameras, because they didn't have the money. A couple of people like my mother and Jimmy Barker from Brewarrina were lucky enough to have a camera and liked taking photos.

I think that I was fortunate to be able to make a living out of what I consider a hobby, because my love for photography means that I never really regard it as work. It enables me to move around to meet people, to go places where usually people don't go, or can't go, and a lot of the time I'm paid to do it, which is very nice thank you!

**The photo of your grandmother is one of the key images of the exhibition. What do you remember about Emma & Billy? Tell us about the colour version of the same photo that you have at home?**

That wedding photo was always up on the mantelpiece in the old lounge room. It was the only one I'd seen, and I didn't realise that there was a copy in the Aborigines Welfare Board files. Granny must have had a copy she had enlarged. It was handtinted, which gave it another look.

I was the eldest grandkid and I was special; it was pretty good for me. I'd just do little jobs for them. They had a lot to do



← Mervyn & his father William 'Minty' Bishop, 1946  
↓ Mervyn & his son, Tim Bishop, 1976



with raising me, as my dad was always away shearing, and Mum was doing bits and pieces at work. So, I used to always hang out with my Pop. I need to do some copies of that photograph to send to other cousins, who don't have copies.

**What influence has the archives had while you have been involved in the exhibition?**

I've learnt that it's good that the Welfare Board images are in a safe spot, that they are being looked after. The exhibition means a lot of folk will be able to look at these old images. Photos are highly treasured objects.

Since I've been at the archives, I've also started to index and catalogue my own photos again, so that, should I fall off my twig, someone else will know what they are. I have thousands of photographs just sitting in boxes. I already have some catalogues on CD: 6000 low-resolution scans of negatives that you can search by name or place. An archivist is helping me devise a system to get the images into some sort of order, using archival quality boxes for storage.

I've liked travelling for the exhibition. I like getting out there and seeing the countryside. But I focus more on people; I can relate to a lot of different people. It's been interesting working in an office again, after all these years. Part-time is OK!

**What are your other passions in life?**

Apart from golf! My kids. They're adults, but I'm keen to see them succeed in their lives, so I try to do as much as I can for them. My folks did a lot for me, even though they didn't have the stuff that I've got, as far as work and money goes. But we had respect for our parents and there was love and kindness within our family. My sister Cynthia and I show that to our kids too.

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