

Future Generation and 2Fold: Investing for impact
Episode Eight | Caroline Gurney and Don Spencer

Future Generation acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Please be aware that this episode contains references to domestic violence and self-harm which some listeners may find distressing.

CAROLINE GURNEY: That was Don Spencer - and you might recognise him from Don's three decades on Play School. That's how most Australians know him. But there's so much more to Don than bears and chairs. He is, as I discovered, one of those people with "stories to tell". He's toured with the Rolling Stones, flirted with Marianne Faithfull, played hockey with the national Kenyan team, learnt guitar from Roger Whittaker, and had Russell Crowe as a son-in-law. But it's Don's work behind the scenes that will ultimately ensure his legacy. For more than 20 years, Don's been providing free music lessons to Australia's most disadvantaged kids - through the Australian Children's Music Foundation, which he founded - and Future Generation Australia (ASX: FGX) supports. So far, the organisation has delivered almost 270,000 free music lessons. So, Don, I'm absolutely thrilled to have you on the podcast today. Welcome. Don I'm so thrilled to have you today on our podcast. Thank you so much. I'm going to start by asking you a question that we ask all of our guests but first a bit of background. This podcast is called 2Fold because at Future Generation our purpose is twofold. We want to get the best investment returns for our shareholders, but we also want to get the best social returns for young Australians by investing in mental health and youth at risk. So Don may I ask you what are your two driving purpose in life?

DON SPENCER: Wow it would have been a lot easier if you'd asked me my ten favourite purposes in life. Firstly privately my father left home when I was very young and my mother had a very tough time bringing up three young children and my purpose was to be a good father when I had children because I know what it meant. And I hope that I've achieved that in a sense that I have got two children and four grandchildren and I put family above everything else. And it's probably a common enough statement people make but it's particularly important to me and knowing the experience it is for children who are abandoned, virtually. And so that's the first purpose is really to be a good friend and a good father and good to people. But secondly, because of that, because of my problems then my purpose is to help as many young kids as I can who are maybe in a similar situation where they feel lost or they don't have hope and I use music in that sense to teach as many children as I can or help as many children as I can to have a path to a better life and music is a wonderful conduit to get them to school, to get them

educated and all the values of music I'm sure we can discuss a little later but yeah my passion is to make sure that the Australian Children's Music Foundation that I founded continues long after I'm gone and we keep helping as many children as we can and it's been a wonderful journey after twenty-one years we've been going. So that's my goal is to just keep trying to help as many kids as I can.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Thank you very much for sharing that with us. So you mentioned your early life and I mean I know that you had a tough upbringing. Can you tell me a little bit more about your childhood because that has so obviously shaped you into who you are now and what you've actually done?

DON SPENCER: Yes. Well childhood really shapes everybody. I mean those early years are incredibly important to anybody whether you're rich or poor or whatever but your first five to seven years is basically where we're formed. It doesn't mean we can't go off on a tangent or it isn't foolproof. Well it was just tough because I had a mother who was unhappy and she did suffer from depression but she had to press on. We didn't have welfare and those days. It was a long time ago in a country town. She had to do any job she could to keep the family going. And the upside was of course that we were incredibly close. I mean my brother and my sister and myself, we bonded being so close and of course we just worshipped my mother. And I wasn't too fond of men, I must tell you, at that stage of my life.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So you grew up in Tamworth in terms of the ...

DON SPENCER: Yes.

CAROLINE GURNEY: ... country town. And obviously that's Australia's country music capital. You know what did music mean to you as a child and what actually got you started in music?

DON SPENCER: Well I better point out first of all that the Country Music Festival didn't exist when I was a child.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Right.

DON SPENCER: It happened many years after I left Tamworth. So there was no music influence in Tamworth for myself. I didn't learn music. But music, because of the troubles of our childhood, and it wasn't just my mother because my mother's one of thirteen children and we had aunties and uncles, and I did experience, well witness, lots of domestic violence and pretty ugly stuff, which is not good for a child, and not good for anyone obviously but, so music was my solace but I could only listen to it. We had an old Pianola which you could pedal but I didn't play it. But also we had the radio. And I grew up before television so I never saw television in fact 'til I was twenty-one years old. And so music was good because it did fire my imagination, take me away. And it was just a tremendous comfort and solace and that's one of the reasons I started my foundation because I figured music could do the same for a lot of other children.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So in Australia you're primarily known as a children's entertainer after your many

years on *Play School*. But before that you were a very successful singer/songwriter. You've had hits here. You had hits in the UK. And you've toured with the Rolling Stones. Tell us about those days?

DON SPENCER: Well I'd like to tell you a lot about them but you'd probably be censored because pop tours with the Rolling Stones were, wooh!, quite a yeah a bit of an interesting journey for me.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Just give us some highlights.

DON SPENCER: The highlights were the fact that I was working with one of the great bands of the world and in the course my music career in England I worked with just about every top band or person in the country because it was just a wonderful experience for somebody who didn't really know what he was doing because I hadn't been trained. I didn't plan to be an entertainer. I honestly didn't. I stumbled across the fact that I, because of experience that I had when I was travelling in Africa, that I might write a song and my ambition simply was if I write one song that gets published I'd be happy. And in the course of writing songs I was asked to demonstrate them. And then I demonstrated a couple of songs and it turned that one of them became a big hit. But not straightaway. I mean after I, I don't want to bore you with this, but I was trying to sell some songs for about a year but I was working all the time because I had no money. Even to leave Australia I had to do three jobs to get my fare overseas and to hitchhike around the world and eventually got to England you know with a couple of songs. I'd been in England about a year at that time I'd been there, and I thought I'll go to Canada. My brother wanted to go to Canada and I said yep go to Canada and I went to Canada. And then I wrote a letter back and you didn't have internet or anything like that in those days, I wrote a letter and said, by the way did, my manager was a guy called Robert Stigwood, and I said hey did anything happen to those songs I demonstrated and he said we've been looking for you for six months you're in the Hit Parade, get on a plane, come back.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Wow.

DON SPENCER: So I flew back to London and they took me straight into Oxford Street London and a guy fitted me out with a blue mohair suit and I was on a pop tour the next day. Not having the faintest idea what to do.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So what made you think you could write?

DON SPENCER: I didn't think I could write at all. I just wanted to give it a go. I'd been, in my travels because I did travel for about five years around the world, just working my way and doing different a lot of different jobs. I did train for a few years as an accountant but I didn't like it, when I was a kid at Tamworth. And I used to write long, doggerel poems to my mother and my sister and my brother when I wanted to communicate. After a while instead of writing letters I'd write everything in verse. But I never thought of them actually being poems. It was just my quirky, well I was trying to be funny, and write stuff. And somehow or other because of what happened in my travels, you know I got influenced by meeting a songwriter and I went ooh wow maybe I can write a song.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And I must ask you, because I've read about it so many times but there was apparently a night with Marianne Faithfull you know-

DON SPENCER: A what?

CAROLINE GURNEY: There was night. Although you met her [laugh], yeah I should rephrase that.

DON SPENCER: I think you better rephrase that.

[laughter]

CAROLINE GURNEY: So okay let's go with you know-

DON SPENCER: You better start that one again.

[laughter]

CAROLINE GURNEY: So I understand you flirted with Marianne Faithfull, and there was some chemistry, and then Mick Jagger came on to the scene. Is that true?

DON SPENCER: Look I did know Marianne and she was lovely, lovely girl. But we weren't a couple so much. I mean, we were maybe heading possibly that way but I toured with the Stones as you mentioned earlier and Mick Jagger took one look at her and that was goodbye Don.

[laughter]

CAROLINE GURNEY: So I mean you know the life of rock 'n roll I mean it just sounds amazing. It always does I think when you watch it from outside. But what took you away from that more into that sort of children's entertainment?

DON SPENCER: Well because I'd had a tough childhood I always thought it'd be nice to write songs for kids. Particularly in Australia, because you know I was travelling around and when I'd come back to visit my mother or do some TV shows here, I did Bandstand and The Tonight Show for a while and things, I always wanted to do stuff for kids and also in Australia when I got back I realised even with Play School they were singing nursery rhymes and old songs and all that but there were no songs about Australia and I thought well I'm going to write some songs about Australia and luckily they turned out to be very successful. And I must say I co-write. I had a wonderful friend, Allan Caswell, who wrote a lot of songs with me as well. And I wrote a lot on my own of course. But they turned out to be very successful and then I became well-known as a children's entertainer, which was fine. Toured all of Australia, everywhere.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So let's turn to your most recent chapter when you set up ACMF twenty-one years ago to provide a musical education for disadvantaged children. So why did you feel it was so important to give them music? And what are the benefits of a musical education?

DON SPENCER: Oh, well music is the universal language. It crosses all boundaries and prejudices. It brings great joy. Inspires the imagination. And imagination as Einstein said imagination is more important

than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world. And it's imagination that got me to travel around the world. It was imagination that got me to think maybe I can write songs. And you need an imagination to write songs but you need imagination and creativity in any career I think in order to be at your best. So part of the journey with music is the joy. Everybody reacts to music. And through music, apart from the things I've said, creativity and imagination, there's the discipline, there's the camaraderie. It can help literacy, numeracy. Wonderful for mental health. I mean, we're there teaching music, but I did start it for kids who were troubled like I was. And music has its own great goals to pursue. But I didn't start it to find musicians. I started it to get kids involved and get the kids to feel all those things that I've talked about, the joy and the discipline, and that helps them not follow the path that they came from perhaps because they've had a background. And that's, yeah, so basically a bit of a reflection of my life. I didn't do anything wrong. I mean I started in a female juvenile justice centre. I had never had any problems with the law or anything I was very straightforward but I was dealing with kids who were there and they were full of angst and music calmed them and music has proved to be wonderful for them, and song writing is a way to express their angst. And we found through the song writing, and juvenile justice centres, you know nice word, euphemism for jails, jails for children, are pretty tough, a girl told us she'd stopped cutting herself because she was expressing herself through music, through song writing.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And how do you think that music education has actually changed in schools over the last twenty years? And are you seeing more or less emphasis now placed on music?

DON SPENCER: Look it's really disgraceful that we have you could safely say that 70% or 75% of children do not get a music education in Australia. I'm excluding the private schools but even the numbers are the same. And the results, the research, has shown just incredible benefits of a music education. Kids who study music young can be up to 30% better academically, and socially. And you've got countries like Finland and Canada have music education and its wonderful results from it. But we have some politicians who were really inspired by it. Brendan Nelson was the Education Minister when I kicked off and he did a whole research or he organised a research on music in schools and decided they would spend an incredible amount of money on schools but before he could implement that they made him Minister for Defence and that was it. So there were still people out there including myself and The Tony Foundation they're lobbying the government just as I used to lobby before I started the foundation. And after a while I got sick of lobbying and said I'm going to do it myself.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So you set up ACMF twenty years ago last year. And you know it's the anniversary. What have you seen in those times, what have been the rocky times?

DON SPENCER: Well, having a charity, or not-for-profit they say, we've had some very tough times. There was one time where some years ago after the Global Financial Crisis etcetera went on we were in, we looked, well we were definitely heading for being insolvent and we were \$300,000.00 short so I quietly put my house up for sale so I could pay it, because I'd used my own money the first couple of

years of the foundation so I'd spent a lot on that and I was not regretting it. And I was selling my house and I told another Board member who was actually a personal friend, and his wife worked for me as well, still does, and I told him what I was doing and then he told Geoff Wilson of course.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Our founder.

DON SPENCER: Who is the founder of Future Generation. But that was well before Future Generation. And Geoff heard about this and phoned me up and said very quickly and said, I hear you're selling your place, and I said yep. He said okay, I'll make a deal with you, if you promise not to sell I will guarantee the surety of that \$300,000.00. So that was a wonderful, unbelievable gesture of Geoff and he's been a friend and he joined the Board and now of course he created Future Generation. So, yeah, hell of a guy.

CAROLINE GURNEY: He is, he is indeed. I mean obviously as you say Geoff you know started funding you know when we launched Future Generation Australia. What has the funding meant to you? What have you done with it for your organisation?

DON SPENCER: Oh well it's been phenomenal for us because it's just allowed us to create you know programmes all over Australia. We have programmes in many, well most unfortunately, like our foundation is aimed at disadvantaged kids. I haven't actually said that before but I'd like to have music education for every child but we concentrate on the ones who need it most, need more help. So it's for disadvantaged children and unfortunately most of the disadvantaged kids we're dealing with are indigenous, whether they're in juvenile justice centres, or whether we work in remote areas. We've got programmes in the Kimberley's. We've had programmes all over, Darwin, the Kimberley's, Groote Eylandt, you name it. And I've been there. I've been to all of them and slept in containers, all that stuff, to teach and talk. I haven't been doing any teaching for almost, oh for so long because I've employed people while I get out there and try and find the money to keep it going and visit everywhere and make sure. And we do it through school hours to make sure the kids get transformational education. If they're doing music they have to learn other things as well. And, so there's that, and obviously we also do music therapy in Children's Hospital in Sydney and in Melbourne and that's growing. And we have a national song writing competition for every child, any kid in Australia, which is the biggest song comp in the country and we've had, I don't know how many entries, forty fifty thousand or more. And we've discovered some great kids but in the meantime we've got some kids to express themselves and during bad times like COVID or bad times with mental health at the moment, there's a lot of angst out there and music's a great help for mental health.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And how many you know children have you helped in that twenty-one years?

DON SPENCER: Oh, honestly Caroline I couldn't answer that but tens and tens and tens of thousands. I mean we've been going for twenty-one years and, I hadn't thought of it that way, but it would be hard

to say. I know we've helped a lot in terms of they're working and they've got jobs and they're doing things and the kids in jail are now nurses and stuff like that. But don't never count because you'd be, I'd have to count up every school we've been in and every remote area we've been in over twenty-one years, and this'll be the longest podcast in history if I do that.

CAROLINE GURNEY: But what you have achieved is truly amazing. I mean you spoke about your family in the beginning in terms of you know what your dual purpose is in life. So your family's really important to you. So you have a son and a daughter and you have four grandchildren. Tell me about your family. What part do they play in your life? Do you see them a lot you know, and what advice would you give to others about keeping your family close?

DON SPENCER: I don't know if I'm an authority to give people advice but I just, it was a bit like my brother and my sister, we spoke every day, when they were still with us, I mean. And I would speak to my daughter normally every day but it's yeah I'd say just about every day my son and my daughter. There's the odd day something happens but it's very, very rarely a day goes by and I haven't talked to them. Very, very rarely. And see them as often as possible. Well I'm at my daughter's tonight and, there we go, that's how it is.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So you're very present?

DON SPENCER: It keeps me going actually yeah.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So you to me are one of those people Don you've lived several lives you know in one really. So how have you fitted it all in? I mean we've talked before I know you're an insomniac. But how do you fit everything in? How do you make sure do all that you want to do?

DON SPENCER: Persistence. Determination. That's one thing I do have. I'm a bit restless in terms of I don't like to sit around doing nothing. And because I'm an insomniac it does give me extra time to do things, because apart from the foundation, I've still got music commitments, I've still got recording and song writing contracts. I'm an insomniac because of my childhood obviously. Something happened to me when I was young. And it meant that sleep wasn't good for you, what happened to me, so yeah I think it maybe that's helped the fact that I don't sleep because it gives me more time to cover the bases. I do my office sort of stuff during the day, or not that I spend a lot of time in the office now but, yeah.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And if you don't mind me asking how do you manage your mental health?

DON SPENCER: I've always managed it with activity. I've always been very active at sport. You mentioned something about the, but I've played a lot of sport quite well around the world. And exercise has been one of the best things for my mental health. And family.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Well, you have set a very high bar. You played hockey with the Olympic Kenyan Team and obviously you lived in Nairobi for a long period of time.

DON SPENCER: Well, I lived in Africa overall for about three years but I was in Nairobi for one year because I was hitchhiking around the world and I went down through the Middle East and down the Nile and got to Uganda. Ran out of money in Nairobi and East Africa, Kenya, okay for those who don't know, Kenya, and I worked there for a year and then I after that that's when I played there. And that's where I met Roger Whittaker and Roger Whittaker was already playing guitar and singing and writing songs and I wrote my first song with him. I said I've been writing these terrible doggerel things as poems, not poems, doggerel. And anyhow he put one of them to music that I'd just written and he recorded it and they played it on the radio in Kenya and people liked it and I thought well, golly that's great, I might try and write a song. Never thought about being a singer at the time. Anyhow then after that I went to South Africa for a year and then went up the west coast of Portugal back to London and where you know. Then I worked on a ship to Indonesia.

CAROLINE GURNEY: An amazing life. Very colourful. Can I ask you, who has inspired you, like who have you kept close through all the years?

DON SPENCER: I've kept close to Roger. Then, it's hard to say, I've been inspired, probably musically, more by people I didn't know. Like the Gordon Lightfoot and John Denver people. I managed to meet a lot of stars I used to see on the Saturday afternoon flicks in Tamworth when I was a kid. As I said we had no television in those days it was at the movies on Saturday. I managed to meet some very wonderful people. I won't bore you with all that. But I did, because of the work I was doing and lots of different shows I did. I mean worked with, look I could just stop. I'll stop myself because I'd be sitting here namedropping and.

[laughter]

DON SPENCER: I was lucky I did meet a lot of wonderful people. And it's been great. I still do you know.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Well thank you. Don it's been an absolute pleasure.

DON SPENCER: ... I mean Doris Day sent me a message for one of our-

CAROLINE GURNEY: ... Who did?

DON SPENCER: Doris Day did.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Oh wow!

DON SPENCER: Well I mean she was, I'm mentioning her simply because she was one of those idols like when I was a little young kid anyhow. And she sent a message, a beautiful message to us. I'd put on a dinner for Ken Rosewall, the great tennis player who's also a good friend of mine. But, anyhow, I don't want to namedrop any more.

CAROLINE GURNEY: [laugh] Oh Don I mean you've had an amazing life and I'm really glad that you've shared it with us today. It's an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much for your time.

DON SPENCER: Thank you very much. And thank you Future Generation.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Thank you Geoff. [laugh]

DON SPENCER: Thank you Geoff.

[end]