

# Eldred Stebbing MNZM

3 October 1921 – 6 December 2009



**Eldred Claude Stebbing** was born and raised in Avondale, Auckland on 3 October 1921. His brother Phil was 5 years older. Their dad Thomas Stebbing was a furniture company manager and their mum Claudia (b. Hannken) was a talented musician who played lead violin in a number of orchestras. At the age of 25 her grandfather Frederick Hannken had sailed from Germany and two years later he married Eliza in Australia. They contracted to purchase a large block of land in Auckland in 1839 but the deal fell through when the local Maori decided to sell it to the Crown. Frederick purchased 500 acres of coastal land in the Coromandel instead and later swapped it for property in Freemans Bay and Newmarket.

Frederick set up a store in Queen Street trading clothing and general goods, another in Shortland Street, then after a stint searching for gold he opened a general store in Thames. His sons Philip and Charles managed a general store on Queen Street and both played violin and piano in many early Auckland dance bands. Phillip married Isabella Waddel, daughter of William Waddel, Mayor of Auckland from 1883-86. On Frederick's death, Phillip moved to Ponsonby to teach music then moved again to Avondale. Many years later Eldred was able to purchase this house for his first recording Studio.

Granddad Henry Stebbing and his wife Hannah arrived from England via Australia and managed a number of hotels in and around Auckland. They had seven children, many of which showed strong entrepreneurial skills. Robert and Jack became merchants and Horace was a semi-professional singer, song writer as well as secretary to the Governor General. Thomas was very clever with his hands, working as a cabinet maker and saddler.

When Eldred was 10 his father died of cancer leaving Claudia to provide for the children by singing in recitals, leading a number of major orchestras including the *Regent Operatic Orchestra* and playing at Scottish Country Dances. Often she and Eldred played at dances together and he regularly delivered boxes of her home baked cakes and biscuits to local shops on his way to school at Avondale Primary. Brother Phil had dreams to become a concert pianist.

As a boy Eldred showed an interest in electronics, building radio transmitters to share music with his friends. He left *Seddon Tech College* in 1935 shortly before he turned 14 to get a job and support the family. *Radio Tech* had begun selling crystal radio sets in 1922 but soon discovered that there was nothing to listen to, so they set up Radio 1YA a year later. Now they were assembling a wide variety of radio sets, employing 250 men to build and test them.

Then, with the advent of the new talking cinemas, Eldred became a contract maintenance technician and back-up projectionist and helped his brother Phil with his sound business, setting up and running public address systems.

It was while working at *Hayward's Town Hall Pictures* in Avondale (now *Hollywood Cinema*) that he got to know Harry and Rose Whale who ran the dairy next door. Eldred had gone to school with their daughter. He married Margaret Whale when he was 24 and he and the Wales family went on to become a very strong team with Harry investing in Eldred's new businesses and Rose helping bring up the family.

Eldred was exempted from the Army so joined the *Red Cross* instead and Phil was due to join a radar maintenance team but missed his sailing due to illness. They established *Stebbing Sound* and became involved in setting up the sound and recording of concerts arranged by the *American Red Cross* for the American troops. One of the most famous was by US swing band legend Artie Shaw who was in Auckland on tour in 1943. Their PA van with it's loud hailer was earmarked as an ideal vehicle to muster civilians into the air raid shelters beneath Albert Park but happily it was never needed.



Early in 1946 Eldred and Margaret began recording at their home in 43 Methuen Rd, Avondale; originally his grandfather's home and part of a housing development financed by his great-grandfather. They converted Phil's music studio into a soundproof recording studio; the majority of jobs were commercials or private one-off recordings, direct to 78 acetates. Then they moved into a purpose built studio on the fourth floor of the *Pacific Building* on the corner of Queen and Wellesley Streets in the CBD. Phil and Eldred registered the *Stebbing Recording and Sound Company Ltd* in December 1949, launched *Zodiac Records* and gained a license to manufacture *Mercury Records* in New Zealand.



The *Pacific Building Studios* was very well equipped with the latest technology plus staffed by experts from the field of entertainment. The two secretaries were actor Elaine Bracey, later to become a President of the *Variety Artists Club* and their 2005 *Benny Award* recipient; the

other was Lorna Saunders, who sang at the *Trocadero Nightclub* nearby. The musical director was Julian Lee and the recording technician was Margaret Stebbing. Eldred put aside his violin but often played drums with the backing bands.

A record manufacturing plant was set up in 1951 on the first floor of the *Auckland Laundry* building in Grey Lynn, utilising the steam and waste water from below. Here Margaret worked full-time in the electroplating division making masters, often helped by brother-in-law Phil and her father. *Stebbing's* produced a yellow-labelled Jazz Series and a green and silver Maori Series, as well as the *Aurotor* Label ('Rotorua' spelt backwards). They also published the *Fidelity*, *Bosworth*, *Esquire* and *Hallmark* labels for overseas distribution.



Early *Zodiac* artists were Esme Stevens, Daphne Walker, Bill Sevesi, Johnny Granger, Derek Heine, Pat McMinn, Mavis Rivers and Bill Wolfgramme, specialising in the Hawaiian music craze. By 1952 the *Mercury* releases were taking priority and all seemed to be going well

until September 1952 when the company went into receivership and the *Pacific Buildings* studio was sold to Bruce Barton, later owner of *Mascot Studios* and *Viking Records*. The pressing side continued until 1954 when operation was taken over by *Green & Hall*. A large American recording company, *HMV Recordings*, had forced stores to stop accepting records from *Stebbing's* and *Tanza* and the business had become cut-throat.

The family went back into paid work. Phil held a sound contract for *Auckland Town Hall* from 1953 to the mid 1970's as well as for the *Western Springs Stadium*. Eldred took work at electrical wholesalers *Arnold and Wright* and *Electrical Equipment Ltd*, installing home hi-fi systems. By 1957 Eldred was back



recording the new rock & roll sounds with his *Grundig* reel-to-reel tape-recorder, usually in suburban halls such as the *Pt Chevalier Yacht Club* or *private homes*. The *HMV* threat was disappeared and things began looking up. New competition appeared with *Viking Records* in 1957 and by 1960 they were poaching artists from other companies. *Stebbing's* first release was *Hawaiian Rock n Roll*, written by brother Phil, sung by Morgan Clarke with the *Hulawai'ns* and released on 78 and 45 format. That was followed by more Polynesian releases.

Benny Levin's group *The Howard Morrison Quartet* recorded ten singles on *Zodiac* between 1958 and 1960 until they moved to *La Gloria*, Harry M. Miller's label. Then Eddie Howell, the *Maori Elvis*, released 11 singles and an

EP between 1959 and 1961 when he decided that the big time was not for him! *Herma Keil and the Keil Isles* left *Tanza* for *Zodiac* in 1960 then moved to *Viking* two years later. His brother Freddie stayed for 5 years, producing 11 singles and an album.

By 1959 the Stebbing family had moved into their new home in Saratoga Ave, Herne Bay and the following year Eldred set up a small basement studio. Famous bands that recorded there, with all of the problems that come with working with a family living upstairs, included *Ray Columbus and the Invaders*, the *Hi Revving Tongues*, *Max Merritt and the Meteors* and *Human Instinct*.



Peter Posa was managed by Eldred until 1962 then came back in 1967 on a casual basis. While he was away he was replaced by Gray Bartlett who also backed many of the solo acts such as Ray Woolf, Sandy Edmonds, Allison Durbin and Tommy Adderley.

Though a number of their releases were successful, Eldred maintained that the real money was made recording adverts. By this time Eldred's two sons Robert and Vaughan were old enough to assist, often helping build new equipment to his specifications such as their 1960 audio valve compressor.

Since 1962 *Stebbing* had been supplying acts for the *Shiralee Nightclub* on Custom Street West and in 1965 he purchased it from its owner Fred McMahon. The family renovated it, gave it a second stage and a lick of paint then reopened as the *Galaxie*. Here he was able to promote his new recording stars; the *Action*, the *La De Da's*, the *Underdogs* and the *PleaZers* with lead vocalist and 2011 *Benny* recipient Shane Hales MNZM. In late 1968 they sold the club back to McMahon.

Construction begun in 1970 on the purpose built *Stebbing Recording Centre* on Jervois Rd in Herne Bay. It was business as usual with more significant artists and bands releasing hits and misses, including country star Patsy Riggir as well as *Dragon*, *Hello Sailor* and *Th'Dudes*. Legendary, award-winning advertising campaigns were produced including the *Dear John BASF Tape* and *Cadbury's Crunchie Bar* train commercial.

In 1975 the *Zodiac* brand was retired and replaced by the *Key Label*. When *Gutter Black* was released in 1977 by *Hello Sailor* the members expressed disappointment not to be on the old *Zodiac* label that had covered all their old favourite classic groups like the *La De Da's* and the *Underdogs*.

In the early 1980s *Stebbing* extended its facility to include two more studios as well as audio and video cassette production facilities. A 1998 multi-million dollar expansion saw the erection of a state-of-the-art CD manufacturing plant and they were soon producing CDs for major record labels. In 2003 they began to produce DVDs. *Stebbing* is still New Zealand's sole manufacturer of DVDs. With the popularity of internet MP3 music sales *Stebbing* now act as digital distributors.



In 1984 Eldred was presented an award for *Outstanding Contribution to the Music Industry* and in 2002 he was given a *RIANZ Lifetime Achievement Award* by Prime Minister Helen Clarke. In 2004 he received the title of *MNZM* and became a recipient of the *Variety Artists Clubs Benny Award*. Robert and Vaughan were honoured by the *VAC* with the *Fullers Entertainment Industry Award* in 2012. Eldred's distant cousin Gary Daverne, a *Zodiac* engineer and owner of *Viscount Records*, received the *Benny* in 2010.



Sadly Margaret Stebbing passed away in 2003 and on the death of Eldred on 6 December 2009 control of the *Stebbing Recording Centre* passed to their sons Robert and Vaughan. Phil's son Keith is the principal Mastering Engineer and Steve McGough, the son of trombonist and Musicians Union President Neil McGough, heads the sound engineering team along with bass player Simon Lynch. The

studio's reputation is now world-wide with many international acts recording there.

An amazing coffee table book was published in 2019, authored by music archivist and producer of *Frenzy Records*, Grant Gillanders, and author Robyn Welsh, Eldred's daughter in law, on the history of the family and the business. It's called *Wired For Sound*.