

Gray Bartlett MBE

'My first influence was Kiwi guitarist Mark Kahi. I was about 12 and heard him play 'In the Still of the Night' on radio. Then I discovered Chet Atkins. I played jazz initially but we'd be at dances and people would be asking, 'could you play some rock n' roll, sir?' That taught me a huge lesson. If you're only going to play one style of music you may not have a long career.'

Gray Bartlett was a VAC committee member in 1970 although he is mentioned as a new member in 1980. He won the *Top Instrumentalist Award* in 1994 and the *Benry* in 2001 and became our patron in 2010. Gray is a founder member of the *New Zealand Entertainment and Ballroom Operators' Association* (now known as *NEOA*) set up in 1963 to create the *Entertainer of the Year Award*. He has been listed as one of the top 12 guitarists in the world, selling over a million albums, and is one of our top promoters.



He was born **Graeme Neil Bartlett** in Epsom, Auckland on 22 July 1942, to Martha (b. Anderson) and Richard Bartlett. Richard was from Cornwall and had trained as a radio technician but worked during the war as a tram driver, transport being deemed an essential industry. Afterwards he joined *British General Electric*. Martha's Scottish parents emigrated to Napier where she was born. Graeme has seven siblings, Ewen, Ray, Barry, Doug, Nolene, Myra and Jean. He attended *Epsom Normal Primary*, *Epsom Intermediate* and *Auckland Boy's Grammar*.

At 13 Graeme had an epiphany while watching brother Barry play his white *Tex Morton* guitar at the *Te Papapa Gospel Centre*. He saved enough money delivering newspapers and mowing lawns to purchase his own guitar, a *Maton*, then hassled his brother in law Sam to teach him a few gospel chords. Father Richard loved to sing and had a natural sense of harmony which Gray studied.



After leaving school at 15 to begin an electrician apprenticeship he made the choice between two loves, rugby and music. Music won and he auditioned for an Auckland skiffle group called *The Phantoms* which performed at local dances. When they came second in a radio competition called *Have a Shot* in 1959 Graeme went full-time. He co-founded the 7 piece *Stereotones* with drummer Bruce King and guitarist Ian Lowe to play the summer holiday beach resorts north of Auckland. They recorded Graeme's instrumental, *The Hound Steps Out*, performed it on stage at the film *Hound of the Baskervilles* and also accompanied Vince Callagher live and in the studio, eventually cutting 7 discs with him, 2 on Harry M. Miller's *La Gloria* label.

In 1960 he co-founded *The Senators* with vocalist Clyde Scott, Peter Common on piano and Bruce King on drums. They played at the *Majestic Theatre* in Queen St to introduce Fabian's first film, *Hound Dog Man*, and worked on the first *Showtime Spectacular* promoted by Harry M. Miller which led to work backing overseas artists such as Connie Francis, Gene Pitney, Adam Faith and Cilla Black, although Miller complained about their inability to read music. Graeme immediately took lessons which came in handy when he later became a session guitarist in studios. *The Senators* opened Bob Sell's *Colony Night Club* and were still resident when Bob sold it in 1963.



In 1961 he formed the *Graeme Bartlett Combo* and they recorded a number of singles on Eldridge Stebbing's *Zodiac* label and Miller's *La Gloria*. His first single, *Last Stage West* (1963) led to more *Kerridge Odeon* tours backing Vera Lynn, Eddie Calvert, Tom Jones and *Herman's Hermits*. They also recorded *A Love Is Born*, *Theme from the Boy who Sold a Million*, *Brass Buttons* and *Holiday for Strings*.

In 1963 Graeme started his solo career contracted to *Zodiac* playing on the *Kini Quartet's* single, *Under the Sun*, and he continued releasing singles such as *The Wobbly* (1964), *Theme from the Munsters* (1965) and *Thunderball* (1966). He joined agent Mary Throll (then Fuller) and Des Gibson in the *Mary Fuller Trio* performing folk music.

In 1965 his manager John Berry suggested that Graeme should change his name to 'Gray' to stop misspelling and to add a bit of 'pep'. That same year Gray released the single *La Playa* and it made the charts in New Zealand and Japan (reaching No. 2 there and selling 410,000 copies). This led to many tours through Japan and *Victor Record's* first *International Golden Disc Award*.

In 1967 Norm Glover from *Kerridge Odeon* arranged for him to join Rolf Harris as a backing musician and guest artist on his New Zealand and Australia tour which was so successful that Gray and his wife Jan moved to London for 18 months then returned intermittently to work with Ralph for the next 7 years including *The Rolf Harris Television Show* on *BBC1*. Rolf's recording of *Two Little Boys* in 1969 reached No.1 for six weeks and his 1968 single, *Have a Beer* is still great!



By 1971 Gray and his brother Barry had set up *Gunn Industries Ltd*, marketing *Gunn* amplifiers and *Ovation Guitars*. He was on the *VAC* committee that organized the *Auckland Centennial Command Concert* at *The St. James Theatre* in front of Princess Alexandra and the Governor General Sir Arthur Porritt. Gray played *'Zorba the Greek'* with Silvio De Pra and also a Country segment with Brendan Dugan, Rusty Greaves and Sally Sadler.

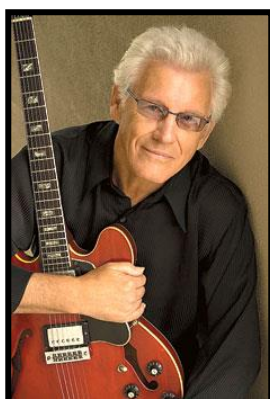


Next year he completed a two month tour with John Boulter from the *Black and White Minstrel Show*, toured Australia then flew to London to cut an LP with John. He worked with Rolf Harris again, toured the USA for 4 weeks then appeared in Fiji. He returned home via Japan with a stop over at Aussie again and at the same time was booking agent for the *Turquoise Room* in Otahuhu and the *Pinesong* in Green Bay! Busy! He picked up a contract to work 300 shows a year for the *Lion Breweries* circuit that lasted for 7 years and invited Brendan Dugan to join him. In 1975 they released *The Ballad of Robbie*

Muldoon and he set up *Music City Artists* to promote New Zealand entertainers including a young Jodi Vaughan.

Gray was musical director for Christchurch's *Touch of Country* when he was chosen to be bandleader and arranger for *TVNZ's That's Country* which ran from 1976 to 1983. It was an unexpected success in the United States and helped launched the careers of the *Topp Twins*, Suzanne Prentice and others. He met his 3rd wife Trish working as a make-up artist on *That's Country*. 1978 was the disastrous tour with Jodi Vaughan, Brendan Dugan and British comedian Reg Varney. Just before arriving at Whanganui their truck caught fire with all their costumes and instruments on board, then they were robbed backstage in Wellington.

In 1981 Gray performed on the *Royal Variety Show* for Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip in the *St James Theatre* along with other *That's Country* stars; Ray Columbus, Brendan Dugan, Jodi Vaughan, Suzanne Prentice and John Hore. He set up *Gray Bartlett Enterprises* to tour Country artists Johnny Tillotson and Slim Whitman then *Pacific Region Entertainment* was created to promote tours for Ruby Turner, *Boney M* and others. The *1990 Together Again Tour* was a financial disaster when the tour manager, Ian White, gambled away the money then declared himself bankrupt, causing Jodi Vaughan and Brendan to sell her homes to cover the debts. The album was a success though.



In 1993 *Pacific Region Entertainment* merged with Ian Magan and Charles Brown to become *Pacific Entertainment* which in turn was sold to *Sound Group* in 2004. They toured Pavarotti, Michael Jackson, *AC/DC*, *Boyz 11 Men* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Gray remained as a consultant until 2007 but continues to represent many New Zealand artists through his company *NZ Entertainment Academy* which has arranged some very successful tours including *The Highway of Legends*, *True Legends*, Bonnie Raitt, *The Hollies*, Norah Jones, Diana Krall, Ringo Starr, *Boney M*, Billy Connolly, Kenny Rogers, *Steely Dan* and Hank Marvin. His young NZ stable includes Kylie Price, Will Martin, Yulia Townsend and Bex Murray plus *Pat McMinn Rising Star Award* winners Elizabeth Marvelly and Ben Morrison.

When he visited Taiwan in 1985 to promote a new guitar he had put his name on, he discovered that the Asian market for instrumental music was huge. In 1986, the head of the *Guangzhou Arts Exchange* invited Gray to visit China and he has since toured there 14 times.

By 1987 Gray had decided to try local politics. He served on the *Auckland City Council* from 1990 – 2001, was *Chairman of Auckland City Art Gallery Enterprise Board* for 9 years, *Chairman of the Auckland East Community Arts Council*, on the *Auckland Arts Festival Trust Board* for 6 years and on the *NZ Creative Arts Board* for 3 years. He contested the *Panmure* seat for National in 1990 then was asked by Robert Muldoon to take over his *Tamaki* seat in 1991 but couldn't get enough support.

One of his pet projects was the rejuvenation of *Mission Bay Beach* in 1996 by trucking in sand dredged 4kms off *Pakiri Beach*. Gray had been contacted by the Iwi that owned the beach and put the idea in motion. The technique has been so successful that many other Auckland beaches have since been re-sanded and *Oriental Bay* in Wellington had an upgrade in 2004 and again in 2015 which won a number of architectural awards. The scheme has been controversial with wave riders at *Pakiri Beach* complaining about poor surf since the dredging began.

He was a director of the *Sir Robert Kerridge Foundation*, Patron and founder of the *National Country Music Association*, Patron of the *New Zealand Country Music Association*, Ambassador of *Kidney Kids* and was a *New Zealand Cultural Ambassador* from 1985-86. He has won *Best Country Record of the Year* (1982), *Top Instrumentalist Award* (1984), *Top NZ Country Group Award* (1984, 1987 & 1988) *Foreign Artist of the Year Golden Plume Award* (China), *NEOA Merit Award* (1992) and *VAC Top Instrumentalist Award* (1994). In 2017 he received, along with fellow Patron David Hartnell, the first *VAC President's Award*. Gray's hand imprint was added to the *Gore Hands of Fame* in 1994, the *NZCMA Hands of Fame* footpath in Taupo in 2005 and he received a star on the *Boulevard of Dreams* in Orewa. He became a *Member of the British Empire (MBE)* in 1987 for *Services to Arts and Music* and in 2012 was awarded a *Queen's Jubilee Medal* for his help with fundraising for charities over the years.

In 1999 Gray heard about an interview on *Canterbury Television* with 12 year old Hayley Westenra and requested a copy of her demo cd. He referred her to George Ash of *Universal Music New Zealand* and George immediately flew Hayley and her mum to Auckland, re-recorded the album then released it. The project was overseen by Gray as executive producer and recorded at David Delves' *New Frontier Recording Studios*. Queues lined up outside record shops and the CD went triple platinum then hit number one, the highest selling NZ album ever. In 2002 Gray arranged for Hayley to appear at Palm Desert, USA with another of his discoveries, 15-year-old violinist, Ben Morrison.



He's a life-time supporter of the *SPCA*, working with Bob Kerridge to produce *Woofstock* Concerts such as the one held on 2002 with *Boney M*. That same year he raised \$47,000 for them at *Phil Warren's Memorial Concert* and in 2005 they were the beneficiary of his televised roast with a panel including Michael Barrymore, Winston Peters, Jodi Vaughan, Brendan Dugan and Ian Magan. Dame Thea Muldoon gave the vote of thanks.

To date Gray has recorded over 30 Albums and 20 singles, selling well in excess of a million units. Add to that all of the pirated records sold in China and you have maybe double that! *Two Shades of Gray* and 50th Anniversary went platinum and *Out of the Blue* and *Guitar by Candlelight* made Gold.

- 1990: *Together Again Tour*. (The biggest selling concert tour by New Zealand artists)
- 1992: *Together Again Reunion Tour*.
- 2002: *All the Best Tour*.
- 2005/6/8/9: *Highway of Legends*.
- 2010/11/12/17: *True Legends*.