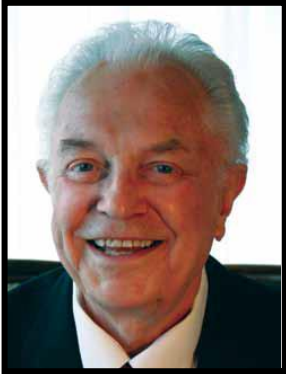


# Max Cryer MBE

b. 8 January 1926

I tend sometimes to be pompous!



Max Cryer is one of New Zealand's best-known entertainers. He describes himself as an, 'academic, opera singer, high-brow chorister, musical comedy performer, pianist and journalist.' You can add to that, accompanist, cabaret artist, master of ceremonies, radio and television host, quizmaster, producer, director, actor, publicist, fashion show presenter, public speaker, game show champion and author. He is believed to be the first NZ-resident entertainer to appear in Las Vegas. And he can ride a horse!

For many years he has presented the Benny Trophy at the *Variety Artist's Club of New Zealand's Awards Night*, bringing humour and dignity to the evening.

In America he was called, 'the best New Zealand import since lamb' and Zsa Zsa Gabor said he was, 'too good looking to be allowed to leave America.' He could have been a household name there but chose to keep returning to this country where he has been called the 'New Zealand Noel Coward'

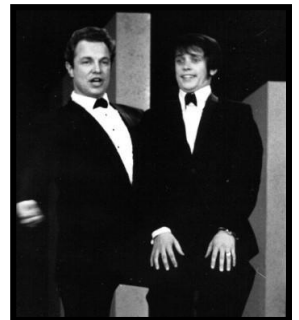
He describes himself as, 'Mary Poppin's big brother!' and when his costume included a long white cloak, as Prince Danilo in *The Merry Widow*, he said that he looked like, 'the world's tallest registered state nurse.'

He has perfect pitch, good diction and an excellent memory. He can also play the double bass. His tenor voice suits opera and light entertainment but has been described as, 'without soul' and at one stage he stopped singing altogether when his style went out of vogue. He can whistle well which helped immensely when doctors prescribed total silence for three months after an operation on his vocal cords in 1967. His skill with sign language will come in handy if he loses his voice again.

At some times of his life Max has spoken Italian, German and Spanish – but 'not any more.' He imbibes little alcohol and doesn't smoke though he had to learn for his role in the 1967 spy comedy *Loxfinger*. I am certain he has trouble finding hotel beds long enough to fit his ample height but he's very handy if you need to find that certain something on top of the wardrobe. Max has two pet dislikes; people who comment on his height (oops!) and organisations which ask him to give his time without any form of payment suggested, ('except VAC on Benny night ....I look forward to that'). He'd rather watch dancing than perform it although he manages well when he has to, such as during the King of Siam's polka and Prof. Henry Higgins' *Embassy Waltz*.

He was this country's first quizmaster on TV and then became producer for a number of other quizzes. When Max auditioned some people for a junior television quiz host he chose an agricultural biology graduate just returned from an Australian University. His name was Lockwood Smith and from being a TV quiz host he became *Speaker of the House* and *NZ High Commissioner* in London.

Max went on to produce ten series of *Mastermind* and of *University Challenge*. He also produced *Mastermind International* for the BBC. He has served on the executive of the *Auckland Festival*; the *Boards of Central Theatre* and *Northern Opera*, has been a consultant to the *Education Department's* music broadcasts to schools and is a member of the *Auckland Library Heritage Trust*.



His awards include the 1973 *New Zealand Entertainer of the Year*, the 1977 *Variety Artists Club's Benny Award* and *Life Membership* in 1996. He received the *Commemoration Medal* for services to New Zealand in 1990 and in 1995 he was made a *Member of the Order of the British Empire* for services to entertainment.

His now classic ventriloquist act with Ray Columbus was performed on Ray's show, *Girls to Watch Music By* in 1969. Ray and Max later recorded the Louis Armstrong-Danny Kaye duet *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* for Max's LP *Max-a-Million*.

His book *Town Cryer – A Decade in the life of an Entertainer* is a great read. Nowadays Max explains that he exists in a cultural limbo, his fellow writers see him as a song and dance man and his fellow entertainers see him as an author. It seems you can't be both!

### The Early Years:

Max started piano lessons when he was 5 and had a secret urge to be a singer. His love of the English language led to a *Master's degree with Honours in Language and Literature* plus a diploma in teaching, and later he tutored media studies and communication between cultures. He studied singing with Hubert Miverton-Carla and won a singing scholarship to Vienna. He has performed on television in Berlin, entertained refugees and acted in Italian films. He did voice-overs on commercials, sang on backing tracks and modelled men's high fashion, appearing in the continental issue of *Vogue Magazine*.

### The Swinging Sixties:

In London, Max sang the role of the venetian magistrate at *Sadlers Wells Opera's* premier of the avant-garde opera, *Volpone* by Francis Burt. Heather Begg played Androgyno, a hermaphrodite servant. Then followed appearances at *Wigmore Hall, BBC*, and television and cabaret work throughout the continent.



In New Zealand he taught English at Otahuhu College and in 1963 he compered TV2s *Double or Nothing Show* and performed at the *Howick Arts Festival* accompanied by the *Baroque Ensemble*. He was working in a musical called *Pink Champagne* at *His Majesty's Theatre* when the leading tenor became ill and Max was called in to take over his role and learn the entire opera in an afternoon and go on that night.

Cryer sang for the first time on *New Zealand Television* in 1965 when he appeared on *21 and Out*. The next year he performed on *Festival Revue 66* at the *Auckland Town Hall*. Compered by Merv Smith, it also included *The Conveys*, Lee Grant, Rod Derrett and the *Kini Quartet*.

1967 sees Max acting in *Loxfinger*, a spoof on James Bond staged by the *Auckland Synagogue Women's Guild*. Max plays Israel Bond agent Oy Oy 7. Also appearing in the play is 1979 VAC President Ralph Cohen. Max also performs on the television shows *Anything Goes* and *On Camera* and is guest artist at the annual charity concert presented by *The Herald's Children's Choir*.

Surgeons order complete silence for 3 months after an operation on his throat ulcers. While visiting Ray Columbus in Los Angeles in 1968, he appeared on a television show called *The Dating Game* and won the opportunity to appear on the American Independence Day Special filmed in Manila, Hong Kong and Tokyo. This led to an offer from the Hollywood-based Gorham Agency resulting in a 10-year contract to tour America performing his cabaret show, *The United States of Max*. He was told not to lose his unrecognisable Kiwi accent and completed fifteen tours of USA. Max went on to win the Hollywood *Dating Game* three times; one prize being an evening out with Liza Minelli.



Back in Auckland, when asked if he would like to do an act for a Christmas television special, Max replied, 'how about getting a bunch of children together and singing *Do Re Me* from *the Sound of Music*?' This led to his *Max and the Children* act with a small choir of children appearing in town halls and department stores throughout New Zealand. With pianist Ossie Cheesman and MC Les Andrews (both *Benny* winners!) they toured the holiday resorts. A television show followed called *Do Re Max* which resulted in a recording contract with *Stebbing's Studios (Zodiac)* eventually recording 15 long-playing albums and 6 singles. Benny winner Phil Warren became their agent.



Trumpet diva *Edwina Thorne* was one of Max's singing children and remembers him fondly. They were required to rehearse nights at his home and record the show on weekends, often filming for 10 hours a day. She describes Max as infinitely patient, professional and caring, summing him up as cerebral. She also points out that as a result she has always felt perfectly at ease when in front of a television camera. Rima Te Wiata was another of Max's children as was Andrew Niccol, now a leading Hollywood director.

Cryer spoke the first words nationwide when television and radio linked throughout the whole country for the first 'simulcast' of the *1968 Golden Disc Awards*.

### **The Seventies (The Television Years):**

In 1970 Cryer produced the *Super Pop 70* concert at *Western Springs Stadium* to welcome Prince Charles and Princess Anne. It featured Larry Morris, Peter Reilly, Bunny Walters, Lew Pryme, Corben Simpson, Ray Columbus and *The Chicks*. Golden Disc winner Shane Hales was top of the bill, but unfortunately was fired during the dress rehearsal and replaced by Ray Woolf, who had to quickly learn Shane's number one hit, *Lady Samantha*.



Back in America Max recorded a series of interviews with Hollywood show business stars, including Lucille Ball, Lorne Green, Shari Lewis, Danny Kaye, Dick Van Dyke, *The Clampett Family*, Doris Day and Eva Gabor. *Max in Hollywood* was aired on *Radio New Zealand*. While in the States he promoted tourism in conjunction with *Air New Zealand*.

He performed on *Happen Inn* playing a concerto version of the *Beatles* hit *Obla Di* and also sang *Bridge over troubled Water*. He also appears on *My Name is Ray Columbus*, *Studio One*, *Volley-Word*, *On Camera*, the *Golden Disc Awards* and *the Music Makers*. The *Do Re Max* show features a silent Peter Newberry as *Crunchy the Clown* making him a national celebrity. Cryer also hosts a TV special on the works of Cole Porter.

In Feb 1970 Max introduces the live television broadcast of the final of *Mobil Song Quest* at *His Majesty's Theatre* and performed a cabaret season at the *Beefeaters Arms Restaurant* in Wellington. In 1971 he was Musical Director of a comic Jewish version of *The Sound of Music* at the *Dolphin Theatre*, retold as the tale of a kosher butcher with an outsize family. When *Otahuhu College* produced *Pirates of Penzance*, Max was Major General Stanley. All performers are past and present pupils. *Benny* recipient Elaine Bracey played the role of Ruth.

In 1972 he had his head shaved for the role of King of Siam in the *Whangarei Theatre Company's* production of *The King and I*. Away from the theatre, during the day he wore a wig. In 1973 he appeared as Pontius Pilate in the first of the Jesus-rock shows, the British musical, *Man of Sorrows* at *His Majesty's Theatre* in Auckland. It also starred *Rob Guest* as Jesus and Grant Bridger as Judas. Max took the *Entertainer of the Year Award* that year, performed as a soloist in *The Messiah*, presented *Maxi-Pack*, his musical review with Suzanne Lynch, Val Lamond and Barry Knight, lead a tour group to the *Sydney Opera House* and gave a concert at the *Te Awamutu Rose Festival*. He also sang on Peter Sinclair's *Happen Inn* pop show. He worked on the script and music of a new musical, *Mister King Hongi*, hosts *Revue*, a fortnightly television Arts program and performs on *Pinocchio's Travelling Circus* on Xmas day (Max and Ray Columbus played the Cat and the Fox).



In 1974 Max hosted NZ's first, and still only, live television talk-variety show, *Town Cryer*. A later television documentary *Max Cryer, Entertainer of the Year*, summed up his career to that time date. In one segment he joined with the *Gordon Forrester Marionettes* who used to be regulars on his early series *Do Re Max*. He performed at the *Auckland Symphonia's* *Hoffnung* concert narrating Dame Edith

Sitwell's *Facade*, music by Sir William Walton; in the same concert Max and Ray Columbus jointly conducted the *Symphony Orchestra*.



On a TV special Max performed *The King and I* with opera star Vincente Major. That summer he compered beauty contests in Whitianga, Manawatu, Invercargill and New Plymouth. Cathy Harrop and Max held concerts with at the *Taranaki Brooklands Bowl* and *Te Awamutu Festival*. His *TV1 New Year's Eve Television Special* starred Elisabeth Hellawell, Lauren Havill and Glen Rowling, the Prime Minister's wife.

In 1975 Cryer chaired the *Oxford Union* debating team. He was Prince Danilo in the NZ production of *The Merry Widow* starring Australian Soprano June Bronhill and he hosted a commemorative television programme on Noel Coward's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was a ring announcer for the wrestling show, *On the Mat*, and hosted the show a few times when Barry Holland was absent.



Max emceed the first *Xmas in the Park* at Potters Park in Mt Eden. In December a special nostalgia black and white version of *Town Cryer* was telecast with pianists Jack Thompson and Nancy Harrie; pop singer Pat McMinn; Country and Western singer Glory Thorburn; *Kiwi Concert Party* performers Taffy Owens and Cyril Pasco; June Barson, winner of the Deanna Durbin Quest in the 1930s, plus flautist Johnny Williams. Opera diva Heather Begg appeared on the *Town Cryer Christmas TV Special*. And Max began his column in the *NZ Womans Weekly*.

1976 saw the last *Town Cryer* show broadcast on Xmas Eve. He also compered a *Northern Opera Wine, Cheese and Opera* night to launch a supporters Club at the *Symphonia Theatre*.

In 1977 Max won the *Benny* and transferred to *TV2* where he was the first entertainer to be appointed a TV producer and produced over 200 shows over the next decade including quiz shows *Mastermind* and *University Challenge*. He was employed as the radio host of *Broadcasts to Schools*, and *Working with Music* for intermediate pupils. He gave up touring the States in 1978 and was invited by *Cleo magazine* to pose nude – but declined.

Late in the decade Max appeared as the Wicked Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Wombles*. He also appeared with the *New Zealand Symphony Orchestra* and Merv Smith in *The Stone Wall*.

### **The Eighties:**

In 1981 he judged the *Watties Book Awards*, compered the 1982 and 1985 *Dame Sister Mary Leo Scholarship* and was MC at the 1986 *Perkel Opera's Show*. In 1987 he performed with Cathie Harrop at *Mansion House* on Kawau Island.

Max directed all New Zealand entertainment at two massive six-month events: the *1988 Brisbane World Expo* and the *1992 Seville World Expo*.

### **The Nineties:**



He played Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* for a sellout season at the *Founders Theatre* in Hamilton, with soprano Wendy Dixon as Eliza. Later in 1990 he made his last appearance in an opera at the opening of the as Prince Orlovsky in *Die Fledermaus*, with Dame Malvina Major, Chic Littlewood and Phillip Warren. He was presented with the *Commemorative Medal* for contributions to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Zealand and was the *New Zealand 1990 Commission Co-ordinator* for the visits to New Zealand of overseas celebrity *Living Treasures* during NZ's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In 1995 he became a *Member of the British Empire* for services to the Entertainment Industry and community of New Zealand. From 1997 his weekly radio session, *Curious Questions*, on *National Radio* answered listeners' questions on the English language. He transferred the session to *Radio Live* in 2005.

In 1999 he was repertoire co-ordinator for Dame Kiri Te Kanawa's recording, *Maori Songs*, released to celebrate the new millennium.

### **The New Millenium:**



Max is a popular speaker on the subject of language at corporate functions and conferences throughout New Zealand. He performs his 60-minute one-man show *The Max Factor*, most recently at the Dunedin Festival, the *Dolphin Theatre*, the *Napier Art Deco Festival* and *Waiheke Island's Whittaker Museum*. For the last nineteen years Max has been MC for NZ's biggest annual singing prize, the New Zealand Aria, with the *Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra*. He looks forward to his twentieth gig with this prestigious contest, in November 2014. His

*English Language* programme still runs on *Radio Live* on Saturday nights. He was columnist in the *NZ Herald* for 15 years, the *NZ Womans Weekly* for 11 yrs, and was drama reviewer for the '*Sunday Star Times*'.

