

Peter Newberry QSO

20 Feb 1925 -- 5 Nov 2003

In the Clown fraternity we usually refer to each other by our Clown names. For example, my friends call me 'Walnut', and we called Peter Newberry, 'Crunchy'. His friend and long time assistant Sally Metzger (b. Phillips), has pointed out that 'Crunchy' was a persona and the man himself without the makeup was 'Peter'. It is a decade since the passing of Peter Newberry and I have been fortunate to speak with many of his friends and assistants. I have visited his photographs at *Te Papa Museum*. His movies are housed at the *Film Archives*, also in Wellington.



Peter Leonard Newberry was born in Whangarei on 20 February 1925;hHe has a twin brother, Paul. Their grandmother was Mary-Ann Newberry (1876-1969), a world traveler and the inventor of wax fruit. Their father William Newberry fought with *The Diggers* in France during WW1. He married Winifred Francis Bruncker in 1923.

In 1929 William purchased the old *Whangarei Court House* at 57 Walton Street and ran a secondhand Shop. In 1939 the building next door was purchased and *Newberry's Funeral Chapel* was established and ran until 1969. 57 Walton St is still there, a tavern called *The Jovial Judge*. Both Peter and Paul worked as funeral directors.

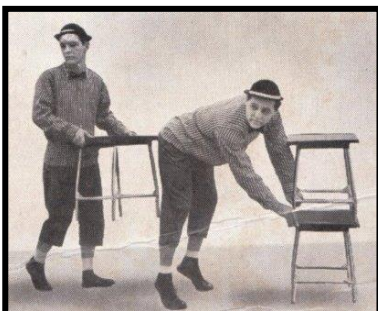
Peter was an outstanding athlete in his youth. He won North Island swimming and diving championships but had to give up water sports when ear trouble set in. Peter and Paul took up weightlifting and bodybuilding and Peter won a national featherweight title. They played basketball and were founder members of the *Whangarei Underwater Spearfishing Club* and the *Northland Weightlifting Association*.



Ever since he could remember, Peter was enthusiastic about Circus and he would often travel to Auckland to see shows. Artists were impressed with his enthusiasm and showed him a number of tricks. Possessing natural balance and strength he turned his hand to acrobatics and later trick cycling. He would practice for hours a day to master a certain technique. Peter and Paul formed the *De Mon Acrobatic Team*; they performed shows such as *Gambols Galore* complete with pit orchestra and drum rolls. Their comedy piano act entertained American servicemen stationed in the area during WW2.

Peter and his new wife, Pat Ford, headed to Auckland. Winning second prize in a radio talent quest led to his first professional engagement, as a trick cyclist at the *Avondale RSA*, for £2. In 1957 booking agent Mary Throll, recommended that Peter meet David Baylis, her next door neighbour, a 12 year lad who was a very good gymnast. This was the foundation of a new trick cycling duo *The De Monos*. David remembers their first gig at a children's party organised by Mayor Dove-Myer Robinson at his clothing firm. When they started they were lucky to get a job a month but work picked up as they established themselves. They had to get special permission for David to work because of his young age.

Peter's gimmick became playing musical instruments while performing acts of trick riding. They took their act to the *Theatre Royal* in Brisbane in 1959 where they found they needed a second act because the programme alternated every week. They worked out a slow-balancing adagio act which later became a favourite in Auckland cabarets, *The Mavados*, *the Laziest Acrobats in the world*.



David worked with Peter for 8 years until 1965. The *De Monos* toured as a circus act to Noumea, Tahiti and Fiji. One of their tricks was riding the smallest bicycle in the world, built by an Avondale milkman! In 1968 David returned to perform with Peter at the Nauru independence celebrations. Jon Zealando remembers working with Peter and David upstairs at the *Farmers Department Store* in a sailor skit called *The Jumping Jacks*.



Peter was unwilling to travel extensively and turned down a tour to Japan and a 9 month booking in Las Vegas. He and Pat now had a young family with newly adopted Robert and Marie and he wanted to give them as normal a life as possible. This frustrated David and he left the act in 1963. Peter Taylor, who also had his own act as *Del-mere*, carried on as Newberry's assistant for another 3 years.

Gay Jones was a long-time friend of Les Andrew's daughter Jennifer. Through Les she met many Variety artists and she worked as an 18 year old assistant to Jon Zealando. She worked with Peter Newberry from 1966 until 1967. 'I had no experience in gymnastics but Peter was such a good teacher that he soon had me doing contortion and body work. We did a lot of shows at *Milne and Choyce*.' Incidentally, it was Pat McMinn who designed and made Gay's beautiful costumes.

Gay was replaced by Sally Phillips who worked with Peter for 10 years as *Peter and Gaye* and also for children as *Crunchy & Sally Ann*. Another assistant was Kim Hegan, son of Benny recipient, Eddie Hegan.

The producer of Max Cryer's TV show *Do-Re-Max* wanted a clown but there was no time to prepare a script so Crunchy 'The Whistling Clown' was born. The act changed little over the next 30 years. Crunchy is described as, 'too shy to speak. He's a goofy clown with an inferiority complex, completely disorganised, corny and dumb. Crunchy cares little for hard work, carries his lunch in a vacuum cleaner and dives backwards out of a swimming pool.' Peter added talking to his whistling and became a familiar figure at shopping malls, children's parties and galas around the country.



A young woman called Josephine Windlass, visiting him back stage, told him that she remembered watching him as a girl and when she heard that Peter's assistant couldn't make it that night offered to help out. 3 shows later she had it down perfect. She continued on as Peter's assistant.

Newberry was recognised by the VAC with a *Benny Award* in 1974 and was made a *Companion of the Queen's Service Order* in 1980. He was a VAC committee member from 1975 to 1980. He was honoured by the *NZ Entertainment Operators Association (NEOA)* on 2 Oct 1978 with a *Merit Award*.

When his daughter Marie died in Sydney in 1980, Peter continued to perform at the *Auckland Easter Show*, a living example of the show biz saying, 'The show must go on!' It must have been unbearable because Marie had often helped out in Peter's act after Sally Phillips left. During all this time, the act was still known as *Peter and Gaye*.



He moved to Australia in 1981 to follow up offers of work in shopping malls in Brisbane and Sydney. His later years were spent in retirement in Tweed Heads, New South Wales. Peter was unwell for a year with Alzheimer's and died on 5 Nov 2003, aged 78. His son Robert has 3 beautiful daughters.

Peter was cremated and his ashes scattered by David Baylis at the northernmost point of Wenderholm Beach, where Peter would often launch his boat. Ashes were also scattered on a small beach in Devonport next to the *Sea Scout Hall* where Peter often swam while visiting his Aunt Mag, two doors down from the *Masonic Tavern*.

Peter is universally described as a wonderful man. He was loved by all. If a show set up was running late, Peter would jump in and help.

Primarily, New Zealanders remember Peter's acts of charity, especially during the TVNZ Telethons when he collected money on street corners and did impromptu shows.

Sally Metzgar told me, 'Peter was a treasured friend and a kind and giving gentleman and I use the word gentleman in its truest sense. I never knew him to say a bad word about anyone and he was always there to help and encourage any young performers. He was one of a kind and I was blessed to have been counted as his friend.'

People still come up to me in Malls and talk about their love for Crunchy and ask what he is up to now. Peter, wherever you are, I hope you are giving pleasure to all that surround you. There is a special gate in heaven for clowns. It's actually a hole in the hedge down the side, the same one that the Jazz musicians use.



Rusty Greaves, Unknown, Peter Newberry & David Baylis

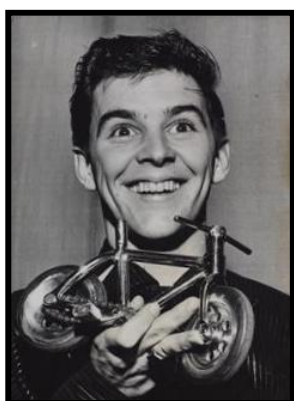
Where are they now?



Sally Phillips: Sally now lives in Australia and is married to singer Derek Metzger. She took over as VAC Secretary from Pat McMinn in 1975 and continued until 1983. In 1979 she received a *Scroll of Honour*.

Gabrielle Jones: Gay studied Law at *Auckland University*, then married in 1968 and has two children. She became a journalist with the *NZ Herald* and later went freelance. In 1990 she wrote, *New Zealand's Secret Heroes* and later a biography on Jack Hinton, a WW2 soldier who was awarded the *Victoria Cross* for leading an assault in Greece in 1941.

His was one of nine *Victoria Crosses* that were stolen from the *Army Museum*. While writing a book called, *Man with 9 Lives*, she fell in love with its subject, WW2 bomber pilot and winner of the *Distinguished Flying Cross & Bar* and other decorations, Geoffrey Rothwell, and married him. At present she is editing her semi biography about growing up in New Zealand in the 1950's.



David Baylis: I visited David in Ruakaka. He pointed out the window to the estuary and told me that many years ago Peter had saved a young Maori lad from drowning there. After leaving the duo, he ran *Zajj Diablo Restaurant* next to the *Crystal Palace* in Mt Eden Rd. After a stint with *Walker and Hall* he retired at age 46. He was Director of the *Devonport Food and Wine Festival* for many years and raced mini cars successfully. He describes himself as an investor. At Mary Throll-Harris's funeral, David shared Mary's many kindnesses. Life was not easy in the Baylis household due to his father's illness and Mary often ran an extension lead across the fence when their power bill was unable to be paid. David had a lawnmowing business at age 11 to help out. His work with Peter at age 12 must have seemed a godsend. Of the many friends that he met through Peter, David said, 'They taught me best what to do and what not to do.'

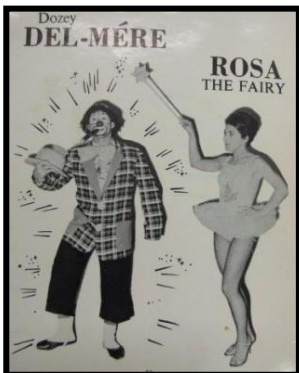
Max Cryer: Still very much with us. Each year he presents the *Benny Trophy* at the *VAC Awards Night*, having been granted it himself in 1977. He became *New Zealand Entertainer of the Year* in 1973 and received an *MBE* in 1995.

Paul Newberry: Paul died in Whangarei on 23 December 2007. He was a showman, promoter and night club operator. In 1949 Paul was elected the first Secretary of the *Northland Weightlifting Association*, a position he held for many years. He was a marshal and *International Referee* at the *1950 Empire Games* in Christchurch and *NZ Weightlifting Team Manager/Coach* at the *1968 Mexico Olympics* and the *1972 Munich Olympics* team.



Russell Middlebrooke: Although not mentioned in the above article, Russell was a good friend of Peter and Mary Throll and helped David to develop his skills very early on. David pointed out that apart from being a gifted clown and acrobat, Russell was also a skilled plaster worker and that his work could be seen in the *Civic theatre* and above the *Wall of Remembrance* at the *Auckland Museum*. He worked with sculptor Richard Gross, who produced the controversial statue at the gates of the Domain. Russell received a *Scroll of Honour* in 1973 and the *Benny* in 1983. He passed away on 9 Oct 1999.

Mary Throll-Harris: Back in 1958, Mary was then Mary Fuller, running *Fuller's Entertainment Agency*. She received *Scrolls Of Honour* in 1973 and 2011 and the *Benny* in 1994. After a series of strokes which left her speechless and incapacitated she passed away on 21 June 2012.



Jon Zealando: Jon is still active, performing his fire, vent and magic acts. He was awarded the *Benny* in 1972, a *Scroll of Honour* in 2002 and a *Certificate of Achievement* in 2012. He is a mine of information and it is thanks to him that I have made contact with David and Gay. He was on the VAC committee from 1975-1977, 1984-1994 and 1997-2009.

Peter Taylor: Peter and Sally were engaged but broke it off when he moved to Australia. He met and married Rosa in Sydney and they worked together as *Delmere and Rosa* for years, spending 6 months of the year doing the Sydney clubs and the other six touring Europe. They then moved up to Southport on the Gold Coast. Peter died of Cancer on the 5th August 1997.