

Silvio De Pra

30th March 1925 -- 1st May 2012



Silvio De Pra was born in the small village of Pieve d'Alpago in the foothills of the Dolomite Mountains in the north of Italy near the Austrian border on the 30th of March 1925. His father was Edoardo De Pra and his mother was Irma Nenzi. He had eight sisters and three brothers and also in the house were their grandparents Francesco and Maria De Pra.

As a young boy Silvio learned to play the button accordion and at 10 his father bought him a piano accordion. At twelve he joined his father's dance band and was invited to join a massed band of piano accordionists who played at Belluno during a visit by Mussolini in 1938. At eighteen years of age he formed his own band.

In September 1943 the fascist regime in Italy collapsed, the German troops occupied Italy and a curfew was imposed from 8pm to 6am. The Italian partisans working underground provoked revenge with ten Italians being shot for the death of one German soldier. Half of Silvio's village was burned by a reprisal party but Silvio's home survived. In February 1944 he and 60 others were press ganged into work for 6 weeks but allowed to return home for the harvest.

After the war Silvio formed a duo with his friend Vincenzo and they won a place in a touring show for Italian Radio called *The Golden Microphone*. This led to plenty of local work for a time. In the summer of 1948 he found work in a spectacle factory in the Dolomites and supplemented his income with accordion playing. He then joined the *Basori Company* in Switzerland which sent him to Belgium, Denmark, England and finally to NZ, lining concrete beer fermentation tanks with a special composition called *Ebon*. While working in Hamilton he secured contracts with the local Radio Station *1XH* and played weekends at the *Riverlea Cabaret*.

It was at this time that Silvio, although an accomplished player, felt the need to further his accordion studies and improve his technique. He tells the story of how he went into a local music store and enquired about the possibility of obtaining accordion lessons. He was informed that this was possible but when the shop keeper heard him play, the offer was withdrawn and reversed, with Silvio being asked to teach instead.

After six months he moved to Auckland and in 1958 he became a full-time entertainer contracted to George Tollerton of *Fuller's Agency*. He broadcast on *National Radio* and subsequently joined the Paul Lester and Nancy Harrie groups performing at the *Great Northern Hotel* and *Winter Garden Lounge* for nine years. Following this Silvio formed his own group and presented a Cabaret at the *Top of the Town* at the *Intercontinental Hotel* for almost twenty years. He also performed at *The Sorrento*, *Fagals*, *Pinesong*, *Hi Diddle Griddle*, *The Dutch Kiwi*, *Poename* and many private functions.



Silvio met his wife Lesley on New Years Eve 1957 when she was working as a part time waitress at *Fagals*, supporting herself through *Teachers Training College* in Palmerston North. He became naturalised in 1960 and they married in 1961 and had two daughters, Gianna and Chiara. When things became slow he would find work at the *Hughes & Cossar Liquor Store*.

In 1970 Silvio became an examiner for the *Accordion Examination Board of New Zealand* and also a regular adjudicator at the *New Zealand Accordion Championships*. He enjoyed travelling, mostly performing on the Gold Coast for the *Queensland Accordion Club*. In 1992 the *Air New Zealand Accordion Orchestra* performed concerts in Italy, organized by Silvio, one in the city of Belluno and another in the small village he grew up in. Whilst only 300 still lived in the village, 600 people turned up for the concert during which he was presented with Life Membership to the *NZAA*. The mayor presented him with a plaque for 'being a good citizen of Pieve d'Alpago'.



He recorded an EP in 1962 at Zodiac called *Spotlight on Silvio De Pra*, then he released *Souvenirs for You* in 1981 and *An Evening With Silvio De Pra* in 1997. He had a hit record in 1979 with a duet *Save Your Love* with singer Ann Dumont.

The NZAA commissioned a work for accordion orchestra in Silvio's honour. VAC Benny winner Gary Daverne composed *Musical*. It was premiered in June 2001 at the national competitions.

In 1982 *The Variety Artist Club* presented Silvio with a *Scroll of Honour* and in 1987 he was granted the *Benny Award*. In 2011 he received a *Certificate of Achievement* to acknowledge 75 years in Entertainment. In June 2008 Silvio was represented the NZ Accordion Assn at an evening

reception hosted by the Governor General at Government House.

Silvio has travelled extensively and entertained at many overseas locations. Included have been Noumea, Fiji, Australia, and Italy.

He began to suffer heart problems in 2005 and the return of a shoulder injury made playing his accordion increasingly difficult. In 2010 he was given a pacemaker.

In 2011 he published his autobiography called, 'I've come a long way'.

Silvio passed away on 1st May 2012. He was 87 years old.