

OBITUARY: ARCH MCKIRDY 1924-2013

by Peter Martin and Peter Wall

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Broadcaster inspired generations of stars

The presenter of Australia's most popular radio program had a wicked secret he kept from his 1960s ABC audience. After 10 each night, he introduced the show with the words: "This is Arch McKirdy inviting you to ... relax with me."

Over time, the gap between the "to" and "relax" became longer and longer. During the break he would turn off the microphone and glare through the glass into the ABC Forbes Street control room with a "watch how long I am going to stretch it tonight" expression. The staff would squirm as the gap grew and grew. After what seemed like an eternity, he would turn his microphone back on and finish the introduction. Then he would turn it off, hit the talkback button and roar with laughter, to the relief of the control room.



Dulcet tones: Arch McKirdy believed in being as much like a friend to his listeners as possible...

In fact, Arch McKirdy and *Relax with Me* were legends well before he joined the ABC. He was born on March 17, 1924, in country Victoria into a musical family (his father ran country dances and encouraged Arch to play drums and guitar). He auditioned for the job of cadet announcer at 3TR Sale in 1941 at the age of 17.

Its sister station 3SH in Swan Hill was short staffed because of the war and he moved there for a few months before joining the army, on the usual condition that he could return to his job when the war ended. Within two years the army had shifted him to its entertainment unit and he toured the Pacific for the rest of the war, becoming a singer and comedian, and mixing with some of Australia's best jazz musicians.

Back in Victoria he did a music appreciation course and then headed to Sydney and 2UW, where he took over Bobby Limb's midday show and then an evening program called *Starlight Serenade*, which he renamed *Relax with Me*.



Bobby Limb: after arriving in Sydney Arch McKirdy took over his midday show on 2UW... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

"Modern jazz" would have been one description of the music, although he preferred the less-specific "music for adults", which gave him licence to play whatever seemed right for the mood he was trying to create in the minutes leading up to midnight. Tony Bennett, Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald made frequent appearances, as did Artie Shaw and Louis Armstrong, who would drop in and play their favourite records when they were in town. More than a radio program, it was a chance to "sit down, share a piece of music and talk together".

The tobacco giant Philip Morris noticed, and showered dollars on the program and on McKirdy personally, moving their money with him as he moved to 2SM and then 2GB, all the time presenting *Relax with Me* and all the time sponsored by Ardath cigarettes.

In his 2005 ABC Andrew Olle memorial lecture, broadcaster John Doyle recalled his family sitting around the lounge room at night in the 1950s "letting Arch McKirdy guide us through Benny Golson or Oscar Peterson or Charlie Parker".



Broadcaster John Doyle: in the 1950s Arch McKirdy would guide his family through Benny Golson or Oscar Peterson or Charlie Parker...

"With voice alone he fashioned the smoky atmosphere of a New York jazz club," Doyle said. "His live commercials for Ardath had him ignoring the copy and the ad would sometimes be reduced to a pause, followed by the sound of a match being struck and an ecstatic draw."

(McKirdy discreetly moonlighted for one of the other Philip Morris brands, intoning unseen in radio, television and cinema advertisements: "Where there's a man, there's a Marlboro" - a source of amusement to those who knew the wiry and diminutive figure.)

All the while, McKirdy was juggling parallel careers as a co-host of Channel Seven children's television show *The Land of Make Believe* and as the promoter of jazz concerts showcasing Australian talents such as Don Burrows and Julie Bailey.

At the height of his commercial fame, in 1964, McKirdy infuriated Philip Morris by moving *Relax with Me* and his audience to the ABC, where it could no longer be sponsored but would be heard coast to coast, seven nights a week. McKirdy said he did it partly because he could see the way commercial radio was moving. The Top 40 would soon smother other programs.



Margaret Throsby: McKirdy really deeply understood what broadcasting is all about...

An "odd fit" at first, according to ABC colleague Margaret Throsby, McKirdy soon made the program the nation's most popular, drawing listeners in to a mesmerising mix of quietly spoken intimacy and sensuous sounds.

Throsby says he told her the title of the program was iconic. "I don't use that lightly," she says. "He used to say more babies had been conceived to his program than any other. I hung on his every word. He was a gentle man and a gentleman, and a generous man, who really deeply understood what broadcasting is all about."

Then, in November 1972, after 2403 shows for the ABC and aged just 48, McKirdy moved into management. His new title, "director of radio presentation", scarcely seemed worthy of one of Australia's most loved broadcasters. Yet McKirdy had plans for the job few in the ABC of the time foresaw.



Geraldine Doogue (above) and Fran Kelly (below): teaching them to speak not the Queen's English as had previously been required...



For the next two decades he took by the hand young broadcasters such as Norman Swan, Geraldine Doogue and Fran Kelly, teaching them to speak not the Queen's English as had previously been required, but how to do something closer to making love to their audience.

He would start by telling them to put the width of a fist between their lips and the microphone, and then asking them to imagine a personal friend on the other side (for him it was his wife, Margaret). Then he would ask them to talk to that person; not to read "one, word, at, a, time", but to talk in groups of words, breathing and pausing naturally while thinking about what they were telling that person and why.

Many of his students would have once been regarded as unsuited to broadcasting. But he never tried to change their voices, merely how they were used.

"It was about your brain as much as your voice," Doogue says. "His contention was that you had to remove every barrier between yourself and your audience, to let people see who you were, and you had to like who you were."

McKirdy himself went further. He would recall how during *Relax with Me* he would occasionally pretend to forget an artist's career highlight, ask for help and then thank the listener who phoned in. He never wanted to be seen as anything other than the listener's friend. He probably gave different advice to everyone who saw him.

"He was a brilliant diagnostician," Swan says. "He would zero in on a small problem, your particular problem, and fix it."

"It was bespoke service," Doogue says. "He would unlock whatever it was that worked for you, because your voice is so personal. He would never offer too much, because confidence is fragile."

In the early 2000s he worked at SBS, training ethnic broadcasters to speak real English rather than the stilted sentences they had thought were appropriate. At the SBS *Dateline* program he would come down from his home in the Blue Mountains to guide video journalists through the process of talking to viewers as if they were on location.

And he left behind a legacy greater than his on-air contribution. The generation that followed communicates naturally in large part because of Arch McKirdy.

His grandson Lewis is on Triple J. On Friday, August 30, ABC Jazz paid a tribute to McKirdy by re-broadcasting his final two-hour show. The tribute started at 2pm, as Lewis was doing his show. The synchronicity of two McKirdys broadcasting simultaneously on ABC radio made the tribute more poignant.

Arch McKirdy is survived by his wife, Margaret, and daughter, Megan, and his first wife, Frances, and her sons Grant, Mark and John.