

Neil Bidner ... a man of Character



Neil Bidner is one of the hinterland's most outlandish residents, but he flies well under the radar.

A CHARACTER comedian and entertainer for the past 28 years, he travels Australia peddling laughter by the bucket load, playing a motley crew of characters so hilarious they make Borat look boring.

He loves his job so much that when he's not working he has

withdrawal symptoms, though having a pristine bushland property at Bald Knob in which to spend his down time more than makes up for it.

"The most fun I have is when I go to work," says Neil. "If I'm not having a good time I'm not doing my job right. My work is my therapy."

Neil blends acting, comedy and music. His characters number in the hundreds, but he's narrowed them down to a core group of 14, including Cosmo the big bottomed hippy, Manuel the madcap waiter, Dawn the sherry-sipping bowling lady, and Buck the country and western singer.

Buck is the inspiration behind Neil's latest project, a television pilot that is essentially a tongue-in-cheek look at country Australia, in which Buck is a Molly Meldrum meets Reg Lindsay meets Norman Gunston, one of Neil's idols.

"What Norman Gunston was doing was ridiculous but he gave it his all," says Neil. "If he turned it down a notch it wouldn't have worked. His humour just hypnotised me. What he did with people and how he did it-the stupidity of it."

Neil was raised on a NSW Hunter Valley dairy farm, and at school he was one of the shy kids rather than the class clown. There's still a hint of shyness in the grown-up Neil, though it's mostly camouflaged by his sharp wit and ready humour. He's also a sensitive soul, so he doesn't go in for cheap, demeaning humour.

"I used to sit and watch the class clowns," he recalls. "I worked out how to do it and not get into trouble. It's a common thread in my life; I like to sit back and 'suss' things out and go about it in my own way."

"Whenever I was in a classroom, I worked out how to read the situation and win people over, and be who I needed to be to achieve what I wanted. I find that with bureaucracy — if you speak to people in the right way,

speak politely and make people feel good about themselves, they'll do anything for you. It's like that in performance too. If you're not belittling, offending or attacking — what I call toxic humour — they'll like you."

A pivotal point of Neil's life came at 15, when he compered a school concert in front of 600 people in the guise of Norman Gunston, complete with a pineapple donut hanging out of his mouth.

"Apparently I did a really good job and I remember being on a high for about two weeks," says Neil. "I've heard it several times over the years from people in different walks of life, that by the time a child leaves school, they've done something, been shown something, been involved with something, created something that's lit them up, and I think that's what happened to me that night on stage."

Neil arrived in Maleny in 1988 while travelling Australia as a musician and never left. It was here he met fellow performer Peter Merrill, who introduced him to character work as a performer at Eumundi Markets.

Neil was a natural from the start, and was once so convincing he almost got arrested. Neil and his cohorts were dressed as Ned Kelly and his gang, intending to 'hijack' a bus of 800 Asian travel agents en route from the Gold Coast to a hinterland venue.

"Traditionally the last bus is always late because of the stragglers," recounts Neil. "So I'm standing on the side of the main road as Ned Kelly with a sawn off shotgun. Two weeks before that, some inmates had just escaped from Wacol jail in Brisbane, and two were still on the loose. As I was waiting for the bus, a police car comes screaming around the roundabout and a male and female police officer are behind the doors with both their guns on me. My immediate reaction was to put my hands up, but I had a gun in one hand. I reckon I was lucky to get through that — it was like a near death experience!"

Having performed at festivals, expos, theme parks, agricultural shows, sporting events, resorts, casinos,



corporate events, weddings and parties in Australia and overseas, Neil can win over any audience, but finds country and outback audiences the most appreciative.

A country boy at heart, he's in his element in the peaceful surrounds of the hinterland.

"There are a lot of creative people around here, even in this street where I am," he says. "Even if they're in a mainstream kind of career in the hinterland, a lot of people go about it in a creative way. I like the fact it's removed from the rat race. I don't hang around for a coffee when I'm in the city — I want to get back home."

Neil once dreamt of being an architect, but is happy with the way his life has turned out, saying he wouldn't change a thing. His job allows him to earn a good living while having a ball.

So, in nearly three decades of observing people's reactions to his antics, what has he learnt about human nature?

"Never assume anything!" he laughs. "Never assume people are the way you think they are. Everybody wants to laugh, everybody needs to laugh. The way I see my work is, if somebody is in a hole emotionally or psychologically, if I can turn them around even for a short while then I've done my job. It's a real blessing to make people laugh, make people forget even for a brief while what else is going on."

Neil Bidner performs at the Co-operative Maleny Festival anniversary celebration at Maleny Community Centre on Friday September 18.

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