

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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MORE THAN “... just a Rural Store”



JUSTIFIABLY proud of their reputation as the number one Rural Store on the Hinterland, Maleny Town and Country Supplies are set to expand on their reputation under the new ownership of previous Manager, John Jeffery and his wife Paula.

John says, “The perception of some people in the area is that we are just a Rural Store and unless I own a horse or a cow, I have no reason to shop there.” This could not be further from the truth as those that do shop there will reiterate.

Not only does the store continue to cater for the needs of their valued rural customers, but also to the wider cross section of the community in Maleny and the Hinterland. “Everyone has a garden, a kitchen, lawn (and weeds), maintenance requirements, pets etc, and we cater for the vast majority of people in the area,” John adds.

John and his loyal staff are dealing with new customers every day and it is their objective to provide the very best service available. John believes “We must keep up the highest level of customer service and the business will thrive, lower your guard on service and we will suffer.”

They now have in stock a far broader range and variety of products than in the old days under previous ownership. In particular there is a huge selection of Hardware, Garden, Building Products, as well as Homeware, Kitchenware, Pet Supplies, Camping Gear, Work Boots, Clothing and Pool Products, not to mention the range of tools that will satisfy the needs of everyone in not having to travel down the coast for that elusive item.

Plus, the newly arrived local produce such as avocados, citrus fruit, passionfruit, honey, macadamia nuts etc at very reasonable prices. “People just love coming into our store, especially visitors, and think of nothing better than to take

home some good old-fashioned country produce.”

The store has already undergone a facelift in the brief time of John's new ownership, and the staff have been diligently reshuffling the store layout to make it a far more user friendly environment. The store is well stocked and laid out, with a light, bright and friendly atmosphere. As many as ten new stock items are arriving each week and the store has a policy: “If we haven't got it in stock, ask and we'll see about getting it in, although this is not always possible for different items... we will give it our best shot.”

John proudly boasts, “We intend to remain committed to providing the highest level of service to the public of Maleny and that is why we have only the best staff working for us.”

The store is always prepared to negotiate on bulk buying for farmers, tradesmen and gardeners and will happily provide discount to trades, seniors and pony club members, where conditions apply of course.

John also insists, “We still retain a strong bond with the rural community and intend to fully enhance this situation. They are extremely important to us as they have been the backbone of the area for many years and we still want to retain that valuable connection into the future.”

You can still expect to see the all of the familiar faces and receive the same friendly service that you have been used to.

Store Manager, Brendan Hicks is our Garden Consultant and offers an outstanding service to anyone that seeks his expertise, not only in the Garden Section, but throughout the whole store, where his past experience is invaluable. There's also agronomist Paul Mackay and Jason Bartholomew in Hardware. Long-serving stalwart Kerry is a wealth of knowledge on everything in the shop, and our invaluable members Nick, Lisa, John T (on Saturdays) and Gillian in accounts form a wonderful team of people keen to service the needs of everyone.

All staff are well trained in their respective fields and are more than willing to share this expertise with customers. John is also a 'hands on' owner and can often be seen on the floor serving customers, taking in their suggestions and showing anyone around who is half keen to listen and see what is happening.

Prepare to be delighted when you enter the 'new look' Maleny Town and Country Supplies at 31 Coral Street, Maleny or phone them direct on 5494 2302.



Super September Saving!!



Store Manager, Brendan with Richard of Solothurn who says “The range of product around here suits all my needs in running my business.”



Jason with regular builder Tod Heron of Country to Coast Building Solutions “These guys are providing the best service and really give it their best shot at helping the trades.”



Kerry looking after Faye Willis of Conondale “We just love coming into the store - the staff make us feel so welcome every time we come in.”



Agronomist, Paul Mackay speaks with farmer Clive Marshall who says “I can get almost anything here and when it's not on the floor, they can order it in for me.”



Staff Member Nick can be seen on the floor selling, loading cars or delivering to the front door - always with a friendly manner and nothing is a problem to Nick.



Lisa with customer Jane Webb and son Nik says “I wouldn't shop anywhere else, it's such a lot of fun whenever we shop there.”

31 Coral Street, Maleny. Phone 5494 2302 Fax 5494 3036