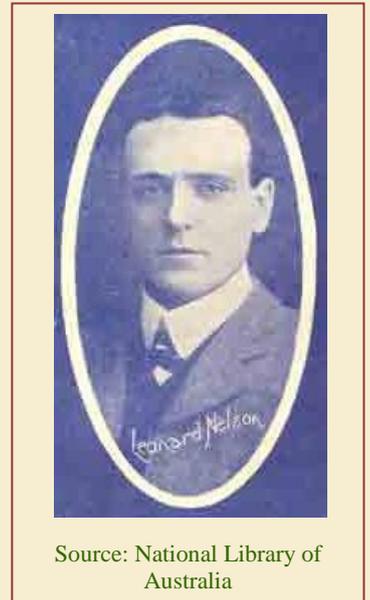


LEONARD NELSON

Leonard Nelson began his professional career in the early 1900s playing weekend harbour cruises in Sydney. He made his first Tivoli appearance at a trial night and in 1902 undertook a tour of the East. After establishing himself in New Zealand as one of John Fuller's biggest stars he then spent 3-4 years with Harry Rickards. From ca. 1910 until the mid-1920s Nelson was largely associated with the Fullers, however. He is known to have still been performing in the mid-1940s.

Born in Melbourne and raised in Kew, Victoria, Leonard Nelson was left an orphan at age eight. He started out playing suburban shows and weekend engagements on Sydney Harbour concert cruises. For the latter engagements he would perform eight songs in the afternoon and another eight at night all for the sum of 10 shillings. After deciding to try his luck at a Tivoli Theatre trial night, his performance was noticed by the management and he subsequently secured some engagements. It was his 1902 tour of the East, playing military stations in countries that included India and the Philippines, that provided him the experience that he needed to make the next up the ladder of success, however. It also proved fortuitous in that he made the acquaintance of John Fuller Snr's daughter Hetty. Impressed with his style she suggested that Nelson make his way to New Zealand and apply for an engagement with her father. Nelson subsequently travelled to Christchurch following the end of the Philippines' engagement and secured a spot with Fuller's show. Within a short period of time he established himself as one of the firm's biggest stars, and as Peter Downes notes, became a "household name" (154).

Nelson returned to Australia in 1907 for Harry Rickards, where he scored a hit with "Goodbye Melbourne Town." The song came about after he gave Fred Hall (Melbourne Opera House music director) some lyrics he'd written. According to Frank Van Straten, Hall jotted down a tune while travelling to work on the train. Nelson learned the melody that afternoon and performed it in the evening. "An instant hit," writes Van Straten, "it became the most successful Australian song of the day. The Great War gave it a new lease of life and it remained popular for decades" (33). Nelson would also change the title to fit any town he was playing at the time, which gave it additional resonance with Antipodean audiences. "Goodbye Melbourne Town" wasn't Nelson's only hit during his return Tivoli engagement, however. In 1908 he wrote and performed, "Mr Booze" another of his signature tunes and perhaps the song he was best remembered for.



Source: National Library of Australia

After some 3-4 years on the Tivoli circuit Nelson returned to the Fullers and for whom he worked almost exclusively as their biggest local stars through until the early to mid-1920s. During that time he worked either solo or various revue/revusical companies, including Frederick Shipman's *Fantastics* (ca. 1917). During this period Nelson also collaborated on several collections of poetry - these being *The Dinky-Di Soldier and Other Jingles* (1918, with Norman Campbell) and *Lorblimey and Other Pious Pieces* (1920, with John E. Nugent). At least two Leonard Nelson songsters were also published in the 1920s, following on from his 1907 collection, *Leonard Nelson's Own original Songs*.

In 1923 Nelson left the Fullers to join Harry G. Musgrove's Tivoli circuit. By then he was often being referred to as the "Dinkum Aussie comedian." Nelson is known to have still been performing in the mid-1940s, with his last known appearance being in Sydney in 1945. His son Roy also followed him into show business, first in the motion picture industry and then as a light comedian, singer/songwriter. By 1926 he had become an agent for Chappell and Co.

While Nelson did not write all his own material (including songs) some of his own compositions and collaborations were among his biggest hits. Among his other successes were "Let Me Go to Bendigo," "Bring Back Those Wonderful Days," and "Don't Sing a Song About the war to me (The war's All Over Now)."

SEE ALSO

- [Roy Nelson](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. In *Shadows on the Stage* Peter Downes records that Nelson "stayed with the Fullers continuously for 15 years (154). While the popular singer was undoubtedly associated with the family-run organisation more than any other, he did not remain with them continuously for that period of time. As this biography notes, Nelson is recorded as having spent some three years with Harry Rickards between ca. 1907 and 1910 before returning to the Fullers.

Downes also writes that Nelson "retired in 1924, a little before his sixtieth birthday" (154). The first statement is now known to be incorrect given that he was still appearing on the professional stage as late as 1943 in places such as Adelaide and Perth. He is also recorded as making a special appearance at a 1945 anniversary show celebrating Sir Benjamin Fullers 60th year in show business (DNP: 28 Sept. 1945, 8). Other old time performers with him that night included Ted Tutty, Ward Lear, Bert Warne, and Doris Tindall.

While Nelson's year of birth has not yet been established, he is known to have still been alive and living in Blackheath, NSW in 1953 - evidence for this coming from a letter he wrote to the *Sunday Herald* columnist "Onlooker" (see below). If Nelson had indeed been 60 years of age in 1924, this would mean that he still touring professionally into his late 70s, which is unlikely (although not impossible).

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "Dinkum Australian Comedian, The." GR: Jan. (1923), 15.
Djubal, Clay. "[Nelson, Leonard](#)." *AustLit* (2006).
Downes, Peter. *Shadows on the Stage: Theatre in New Zealand - the First 70 Years*. (1975), 154.
Norman, Charles. *When Vaudeville Was King*. (1983), 180-81.
Van Straten, Frank. *Tivoli*. (2003), 33.

FULLER'S THEATRE
ALWAYS MERRY & BRIGHT

Direct from Aussie

**LEONARD
NELSON**

THE DINKUM COMEDIAN
And Big Bill of Vaudeville & Revue

TWICE DAILY 2.30 & 8

Smith's Weekly 24 Jan. (1920), 16.

A Pozzie In Aussie

IN the course of some remarks about Australian popular songs, I said recently in this column that "probably the worst one of all time was the now (happily) forgotten tune which ran: 'I've Got A Pozzie Way Down In Aussie.'"

The statement has evoked this charming letter:—

Dear Onlooker,—Your paragraph about popular songs gave me a good laugh, because I was responsible for the "worst one of all time"—"I've Got a Pozzie In Aussie."

I composed the music and gave the idea to Beresford, the "Bulletin" writer. The number was published over 30 years ago and was quite a fair seller.

I composed the music and gave the idea to Beresford, the "Bulletin" writer. The number was published over 30 years ago and was quite a fair seller.

I also wrote a number of others quite as bad, or worse, such as "Goodbye, Sydney Town," "Meet Me at the G.P.O.," "Land Of My Birth," and "The Bonzer Boys From Aussie," and about 50 more. Some were considered by good judges to be sound, but did the audience or the publishers like them? No.

I quite agree with all you say—the stuff is tripe. And I feel sure that when the Jubilee Song Parade winner turns up, it will be on a par with the rest of them. Sincerely yours,

LEONARD NELSON.

Blackheath.

P.S.: You have made one little error in your paragraph. "A Pozzie In Aussie" is not forgotten—I received royalties on the number only to-day. Will post you the return if you'd like to see it.

Sunday Herald (Syd) 9 Sept. (1953), 2.



A Smile and Its Story....!

Here you see the smiling countenance of Leonard Nelson, the "dinkum" Australian comedian. He is not chuckling at one of his own jokes (good comedians never do), he is simply demonstrating the smile of perfect health, and the story relating to that is told in Mr. Nelson's own words. He says:—

"A sick man is never optimistic, and when a friend recommended me to try CLEMENTS TONIC, one day, I was rather sceptical regarding its merits. However, I bought a bottle, and must acknowledge that the tonic did relieve a nasty attack of 'nerves.' Since then I have taken CLEMENTS TONIC whenever that 'run-down' feeling assails me, and I think it is only fair to let you know that in my case, CLEMENTS TONIC has always proved a beneficial, invigorating remedy."

Part 2

now concerns you. Has the hot weather sapped your energy and left you like a withered leaf? If so, test the rejuvenating influence of CLEMENTS TONIC. It does not contain alcohol or narcotics, but only medicinal ingredients that calm the nerves, nourish the system, and enable you to wear the broad smile of health, well-being, and contentment.

After illness, overwork, or worry, you will find CLEMENTS TONIC of great assistance towards speedy convalescence.

Clements Tonic

is sold throughout Australia and New Zealand. No reputable chemist or storekeeper will try to sell you a substitute.



"It Puts the 'Vital' into Vitality."

Green Room Mar. (1923), 15



RIGHTO! DICKEN! STRUTH! GARN! BLIME! WOT? IT.
The popular Australian performer, Leonard Nelson, in some of the characteristic expressions in which he is being seen on the Fullers' circuit.

Theatre Feb. (1920), 26

First published: 3/10/2012

NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:
Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/practitioners-n/>