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Man of many names was top of the Pops

By **STEPHEN ROMEL**, LITERARY EDITOR

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There aren't too many biographers who can say all of the following about their subject: "In his lifetime [he] performed live to well over a million people." "[He] and Albert Einstein received equal billing on the front page of the LA Examiner." "[He] was a bigamist living with a bigamist." "[He] was envious of only one thing: Frank Sinatra's musical phrasing." "In another whisky-driven phase, unable to curb his fury, he picked up his plate of spaghetti and aimed it directly at her across the table."

He is "the man of many names": San Francisco-born Robert Cutter, known as Buster and Bob, a heart-throb musical star of the 30s and 40s, and Sydney-based Lawrence Brooks, known as Lawrie, newspaper proofreader, nightclub singer and father to future celebrated writers Darleen Bungey and Geraldine Brooks. Young Geraldine, at the time a "provoking teenager", was the target of that plate of pasta.

As Bungey writes in her memoir of her father, Daddy Cool, she and her younger sister "grew up surrounded by a confusion of surnames". That hasn't changed a lot in the decades since. Bungey, award-winning biographer of artists Arthur Boyd and John Olsen, retains her first husband's surname. That made life simpler for their two children, now in their early 40s. She is now married to Geoffrey Cousins, former advertising executive, one-time head of Optus, environmentalist and, in recent times, crime novelist. They have a property in northern NSW, which is where I telephone her.

US-based Brooks, who won a Pulitzer in 2006 for her American Civil War novel, *March*, uses the surname her father-to-be adopted on moving to Australia. He chose it Stateside, however, after looking at the window of well-known American outfitter: Brooks Brothers.

That time Robert Cutter shared headline space with Albert Einstein was not his only connection to the scientist. He wrote a ditty dedicated to his theory of relativity, which aired on the radio. He then wrote to Einstein and the great man wrote back, in a rhyming couplet. His view of the ditty, loosely translated from the German, was: “Though somewhat silly I don’t mind./ There’s no objection I can find.”

That whimsical exchange is a fair measure of how famous Cutter was. Like any good journalist, an occupation occupied by Bungey and Brooks at points in their careers, I underlined the names of the famous as I read Bungey’s book. It quickly became apparent that I’d soon run out of ink, so here’s just a sample:

Bing Crosby (who Cutter outsold from time to time), Bette Davis, Clark Gable and Katharine Hepburn (Cutter performed at the 1936 Oscars), General Thomas Blamey (Cutter served in the entertainment unit during World War II) and, in Australia, radio star Jack Davey, actors Peter Finch (a drinking buddy) and Chips Rafferty, Roy “Mo” Rene, war photographer Damien Parer (a dear friend, lost too young), Frank Packer and, from his foray into advertising, Bryce Courtenay and Peter Carey.

“He was the equivalent of rock star,” Bungey writes. “He was certainly not the man I remembered ... I realised that before this man became my father, he was Daddy Cool.”

Cutter’s celebrity was, as is the case with all celebrities, indifferent to the good or the bad. It’s just celebrity, in and of itself. As Bungey writes, “Everybody loved” this handsome, slick-haired tenor who could sing Cole Porter, or Richard Strauss if he wanted to.

“The biggest surprise to me,” Geraldine Brooks says from her island home at Martha’s Vineyard, off the coast of Massachusetts, “was the extent of Dad’s American success. I knew he’d been a singer in Hollywood but I had no idea how high he’d risen”.

“The Ace of Tenors” was thrice married, including to glamorous, difficult silent movie star Mary Rubey Cox, who Bungey describes as “a blonde you’d find in a Raymond Chandler novel” and, a few pages later, as “rivall[ing] Cleopatra”. I must say, with that combined image in mind, I can’t blame her father.

He was scandalously divorced and, due to differing state laws in the US, a bigamist for a while. He liked whisky, he gambled and he believed in Christian Science. Not all of that followed him to Australia in 1938.

It was there, as Lawrie Brooks, he met his “fourth and final wife”, Gloria van Boss. They married in 1946. Their first daughter, now his biographer, was born in 1947. Their second arrived seven years later. Bungey’s book is also a tribute to her mother, who died in 1999. She understood a man “who could trouble as well as delight” and would ask her daughters “to understand, to forgive”.

Bungey adds that one significant point of difference between her parents was their senses of humour. “Geraldine and I remember this all the time. He couldn’t understand Monty Python, so we’d be rolling around the floor laughing and he wouldn’t know why. My mother on the other hand had a wonderful wit. She was just such a great person. She was so kind to anybody. And I can’t imagine having a better mother.”

The family lived mainly in western Sydney. As Geraldine Brooks notes, it’s almost ironic that her father once resided at Bland Street, Ashfield. While he did radio gigs and performed at Sydney music venues, his day job was as a newspaper proofreader. Bungey says she’s almost glad her father, who died in 1994, can’t read her book. A stickler for grammar and punctuation, “he’d put red marks all over it!”

Brooks’s daughters knew he went out at night, dressed up, to sing. Bungey remembers one particular night at the State Theatre. “That was exciting.” But by and large they did not know who their father had been. He was just Dad. “This is the question my sister and I have always asked each other,” Bungey says. “Why did Dad give it all up? Why did he walk away from Hollywood and settle for such a quiet suburban life? That has always been a mystery.”

She knows she could have tried to find out more while her father was still alive.

“But when you’re young you don’t think about asking the questions. And even when you do, you don’t listen properly.”

It was sorting out her father's possessions after his death that opened the lid, almost literally, to this book. She found an old tea chest, full of newspaper clippings and other documents. He was a voracious letter writer, much to his biographer-daughter's relief.

She also made contact with her US-based older half-sister, Miki, who had a treasure trove of correspondence.

She knew she had a book on her hands and that made her wonder about her previous biographies. "I began to question," she writes, "if it wasn't my father who was at the heart of my endeavours. Was he the man I had always needed to un-riddle?"

She thinks she has learned a lot, about her dad and about her younger self.

She's more aware of the two male shadows that dogged her father: the lack of an at-home father himself and the death of his elder brother at the age of two. Yet the riddle remains.

"He's still a mystery and I guess most people are," she says. "But Dad seemed to be more of a mystery because he had so many different talents and he had such a myriad life.

"Yet in the end, the one thing that I did understand was that he so desperately wanted what he ended up with: a stable family.

"It was denied to him when he was a child and I felt sad that I hadn't understood it earlier. All of that sort of heartbreak that he had to endure as a kid. I think now I'm making up for lost time, I suppose, listening to my father."

Her sister agrees. "You know how it is with families: there are all these half-heard, half-understood things about your parents.

"With my dad it was even more so. There was some kind of misty romance about his having been an American big-band singer, but the details were always shrouded."

Brooks loved Australia, Australians and Sydney in particular. When his daughters were living

overseas, he wrote to Geraldine, urging her and her sister to never forget they were born “Aussie” and at a time when “Aussies were true Aussies, not the one-eye-on-the-dollar, the other on the next spinner-of-that-dollar idea to come out of the USA. I was so proud of being allied to this country and its people”.

He also loved his fourth and final wife, Gloria, so it’s fitting to end with a poem Bungey found amid the “jungle of documents” in that tea chest. She thinks it was written by her mother, to her father. It starts with two people walking, climbing and tramping together through Sydney suburbs such as Coogee, Manly and Bondi and ends with this:

So when at last I ope my eyes

On other scenes beyond the skies

If this, indeed, is Heaven I’ll say

Where are the coves of Watson’s Bay?

Where the long line of South Head too?

And where, I ask, where are you?

That is so beautiful that I’m willing to bet that Daddy Cool would not had taken his proofreader’s pencil to that rogue apostrophe in Watsons Bay.

Daddy Cool: Finding My Father, the Singer who Swapped Hollywood Fame for Home in Australia, by Darleen Bungey, is published by Allen & Unwin (230pp, \$32.99).

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