

Seeking solace in a foreign spotlight

DADDY COOL: FINDING MY FATHER, THE SINGER WHO SWAPPED HOLLYWOOD FAME FOR HOME IN AUSTRALIA

By Darleen Bungey
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Mandy Sayer

Hollywood in the 1930s was glamorous and intoxicating: after filming all day at the studios, celebrities such as Joan Crawford, Carol Lombard and Bing Crosby would descend upon the supper club of the Cocoanut Grove, sip champagne, dine and dance beneath glittering stars painted against the dark blue ceiling.

On stage would be a young man crooning into a microphone, accompanied by a 28-piece orchestra. The singer had perfect pitch and was as handsome as a matinee idol.

This mythic image of tenor Robert Cutter caused author Darleen Bungey to wonder how the same man, her father, ended up in Australia following World War II, with a different name, and working as a sub-editor for *The Women's Weekly*.

Bungey is a distinguished biographer, having published *John Olsen: An Artist's Life*, which won the 2015 Prime Minister's Literary Award for nonfiction, and *Arthur Boyd: A Life*, which won the biography prize at the 2008 Australian Book Industry Awards.

Her sister is author Geraldine Brooks, winner of a Pulitzer prize for fiction, who provides a cover endorsement for *Daddy Cool*: "My sister's discoveries astonished me."

Robert Cutter was conceived during the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, a telling omen for his troubled childhood and youth.

His parents were heavy drinkers and prodigious adulterers and, after a judge convicted them both of moral turpitude, the boy, nicknamed "Buster", was adopted and raised by his maternal grandparents. Both mother and father swiftly moved on to new partners, leaving Buster alone to negotiate the confusion of a scattered, and scandalised, family.

Moreover, when World War I broke out, Buster's grandfather arranged for him to be let out of school early each day to deliver telegrams and dispatches from the front, a routine he was forced to continue during the Spanish flu epidemic, when the state was in complete lockdown.

"It must have been eerily quiet as Buster ran through the besieged town carrying news of destruction and death," Bungey writes. "So many people were dying that there weren't enough coffins or gravediggers to go around."

After viewing the first "talkie" film — Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* — at the age of 21, Buster resolved to become a professional singer and began to take lessons from a famous tenor.

When his career failed to take flight in California, he accepted an offer of a house-painting apprenticeship from an uncle in Hawaii. There, in that tropical paradise of the late 1920s, he soon secured a job at the local radio station, as a singer, host and scriptwriter, and was received so

well that he was soon fronting a big band each night at a luxurious resort.

He also married the first of what would become four wives: the sister of his best childhood friend. After two years, and the birth of a daughter, they abruptly separated and divorced.

The primary source of Bungey's research into her father's peripatetic life are the many letters he wrote to this firstborn daughter, Miki, who was raised in California without him. Other sources are the various American front-page news headlines and articles that featured Robert Cutter — not as a singer, but as a participant in a carousel of divorce proceedings.

Cutter fell hard for the blonde and busty first wife of the famous silent film director, Lloyd Bacon, who'd played Charlie Chaplin's fall guy in his early shorts. Bacon was rich and powerful, and moved in elite Hollywood circles. His wife, Rubey, also fell hard for Robert, and together they fled to Mexico, where they married six months before their respective divorces were finalised.

Once legally free of their former partners, the couple lived the high life, courtesy of Rubey's staggering alimony payments. Rubey accompanied Robert on band tours, mothering and spoiling him.

Like his birth parents decades before, they both became heavy boozers and Robert developed into a bad and unrelenting drunk. After

Rubey endured a car accident, she left Robert, and obtained a quickie divorce in Chihuahua, Mexico. Another round of scandalous front-page articles appeared in the press and, due to the public controversy, Robert began losing jobs.

Can a legal change of name alter an individual's destiny? In the case of Bungey's father, this seems to have been the case. Now knowing that his reputation had been stained in the American entertainment industry, Robert Cutter changed his name to "Lawrence Brooks" and accepted an offer to tour Australia, which would transform his life forever.

In 1939, after the tour's booking agent fled with the band's money, Brooks moved to Sydney's Kings Cross and befriended such Australian luminaries as actor Peter Finch and comedian Roy "Mo" Rene. During this time, he managed to marry once more, but the union again ended in divorce, after only one year.

Eager to remain in Australia, however, he fibbed about his American heritage — claiming Canadian ancestry — and was accepted into the AIF and the legendary ABC Dance Band, led by Jim Davidson, which toured the Middle East and New Guinea during World War II, entertaining battle-weary troops.

To reveal any more would spoil the surprising twists and turns of this cool daddy's life. However, the image that emerges from Bungey's research and storytelling is a man desperate to escape his lonely childhood and reinvent himself, again and again, through popular music and the poetics of marriage.

Mandy Sayer's most recent book is *Misfits & Me: Collected Non-Fiction*.

