

Anna Gare Profile

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Take a tomato, bread, a rolling camera and what do you have? Anna Gare's audition for a live cooking segment on channel seven's Perth at Five was memorable brutal. The fact that she made a tomato tart whilst quipping that all she needed was a little basil, as co presenter Basil Zempilas waited in the wings, demonstrates what separates a potential celebrity chef from the rest of us. Anna got the gig and it was the start of a whole new on-camera career that combined a couple of her very old passions – entertaining and cooking.

As singer and percussionist of 80s all girl band, The Jam Tarts, Anna along with sister Sophie, was performing live from the age of 13. At age 15 there were three or four local gigs a week, which led to interstate gigs, support tours with international artists and a question that many parents dread – what does algebra have to do with my life anyway?

Work experience at Kim's Bar and Grill in Cottesloe had planted a seed and for the next ten years restaurant work and performing was a good fit. Along the way one of the international artists, writer and comedian Ben Elton married Sophie, Anna married a fellow Perth musician and had two children, started a successful catering company, recently remarried former Australian and NBA basketball star Luc Longley and let's get back to the tomato tart – it's pivotal. It very nearly never got made.

Anna initially turned down the offer to audition for Perth at Five for many reasons (some of them even valid) until bro-in-law Ben got on the phone with some choice admonitions and convinced her to go for it. "He rang me and said 'you're mad! I can't believe you turned it down. The problem with you is that you think everything has to be cool. Being on no channel is not cool. You've always been good at doing it live - so do it!'"

The conversation underpins a significant theme in Anna's life which she gratefully acknowledges – there has always been fabulous support, in particular from her mum and dad (Kate and Bob), who encouraged her from everything from allowing her to make a mess of the family kitchen when she could barely reach the bench, to her mother managing the band and neither parent rending their garments or gnashing their teeth when she wanted to leave school at 15.

"I come from a family where whatever we did – they just encouraged our passions. I always wanted to cook and I was always allowed to cook. It was great but then everyone got sick of the sweet stuff.

You know when you are six, seven and eight - all you want to do is make sweet stuff. I made lolly jelly, coconut bickies and orange cake but finally they said ‘come on Anna – savoury’.”

The Gare’s are a musical family and all four Gare siblings (two boys and two girls) played in bands - older brother, Adam in The Nansing Quartet and the girls in The Jam Tarts. Anna and Sophie plus friends Jodie Bell and Lucy Lehman would often watch the The Nansing perform and when the boys went off over east decided to form their own band. “We just started busking – mum would drop us off at the markets. People asked us to do parties, the uni circuit and it snowballed from there.”

Anna sang and played percussion (tambourine, glockenspiel and maracas); Sophie played double bass, Lucy - the flute and Jodie - the ukulele guitar in an eclectic mix of retro pop and quirky originals. The Nansing came back to Perth and often the two bands played onstage together as one band.

The Jam Tarts did an 8-year residence at the Seaview Tavern interspersed with further flung gigs organised by mum and manager Kate. “We had mum all those years and she was amazing because she basically kept organising adventures for us...like o.k. we’ll go to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. She even hopped on a plane, went to Sydney and got us gigs over there as well.”

There were three albums and many highlights, not the least was securing the mid Eighties Australian support slot for Rik Mayall and Ben Elton riding high after the worldwide smash of The Young Ones. “We toured all around Australia and struck up a friendship with them - we all got on really well,” says Anna. “Actually I think they were a bit worried when they heard that four schoolgirls and their mother were coming to tour with them. They were very relieved when they came to the sound check and could hear that we were actually quite good. We’ve have had a strong friendship ever since and of course my sister ended up marrying Ben - so it is great.”

The band petered out in the Nineties when they relocated to Melbourne. “We had a lot of airplay on JJJ with our album, Never Staying Still and we felt we had done as much as we could in Perth. I can’t really remember what happened - I think we all ended up getting boyfriends and everything just fell by the wayside, particularly without mum managing us but it was a fantastic vehicle for everyone and the whole lot of us are still musically inclined.”

Adam Gare continues to perform professionally in Melbourne and Perth singing and playing mandolin and the fiddle in bluegrass bands and for artists including Paul Kelly, Renee Geyer and Tim Rogers. Sister Sophie along with husband Ben and their three children relocated back to Fremantle from the UK at the end of 2009 and Anna says “you never know” about further sisterly

collaborations. “Sophie still plays – she was in a funky bluesy band in London doing the odd gig with comedian Lenny Henry. The last time she lived here for a little while we started up a country band called Shonky Tonk just playing our favourite Lucinda Williams – good ole country.”

But after the Jam Tarts demise it was a passion for food rather than music that became the next phase of Anna’s life. “At 25 I had two children and didn’t feel like doing the rock and roll thing anymore – even the thought of playing in a smoky pub (as they were in those days) was not on.” After catering for a friend’s wedding she “accidentally” started a catering business that with a lot of hard work and the support of family became very successful over the next decade.

“One day I was doing the catering for a friend’s wedding in Mum and Dad’s house. All the food had just arrived and I had it on the table tennis table. I’m cooking, ordering everyone around. All the family are running around helping me and Ben (Elton) walks in, sees it and says ‘this is terrible...this is unfair - Anna needs a kitchen!’.”

Coincidentally her architect dad, Bob had often pointed to a space beside the converted church that he had redesigned as their home saying he wanted to build another building there. “We used to say – ‘you’re bloody mad, Dad’ but Dad got to build the building, funded by Ben (it was very generous) and it became my kitchen. It was the best thing that ever happened.”

Honing her skills and culinary expertise over those years led to opportunities and some tentative steps back into the limelight albeit with a wooden spoon in hand rather than maracas. Fellow Perth muso and TV chef Ian Parmenter asked her to help out behind the scenes of his cooking segment Consuming Passions and he shocked her by exclaiming that she should be out front. “She was a knockout because she was very well organised,” he says. “She has a great sense of humour which is very important in television and I just knew she would be great on camera too.”

It took a few years and a little persuading but Perth at Five was followed by cooking segments on Today Tonight, DIY show – Nuts and Bolts and featuring in a Lifestyle Channel show called Chef’s Christmas. In 2007 she partnered with Ben O’Donoghue and Darren Simpson in what has become a surprise hit for the Lifestyle Channel – The Best in Australia which currently stands at three series – all filmed in the Gare family’s converted church in North Fremantle.

Kitchens are funny places, says Anna with a throaty guffaw as she explains the dynamic on the show. Described as part cooking, part comedy, part chaos the show captures a genuine spontaneity and off the cuff ‘earthiness’ as Ben, Darren and Anna compete to create themed dishes for guest judges.

There is banter, wild stories and says Anna quite a bit of below the belt stuff that has to go but “that’s kitchens for you. I think we all become a bit younger when we are together,” she adds.

The show based on a British version that only lasted one series is created by Perth based production house Mago films. Surfing the Menu with the golden haired, square jawed larrikin chef Ben O’Donoghue put them on the map and husband and wife team producer Marion Bartsch and writer Alun Bartsch are proving to have quite a knack with the genre.

In contrast to O’Donoghue and Simpson who are seasoned TV performers with formal cheffy credentials, Anna has followed her passions with a distinctly DIY ethic. On screen her girl- next-door appeal with a little Nigella flair in her theatrical gestures and her retro chick aesthetic are winning ingredients: In 2008 and 2009 Anna was nominated for favourite female personality in the ASTRA (subscription television) Awards. The show is captured largely as it happens with three cameras and the result might be a little more Three Stooges than Margaret Fulton but there is a Gen X and even Gen Y appeal in the fast paced frivolity and the food is seriously good.

She admits to many endearing moments of self doubt “Both those guys are amazing chefs who have worked for michelin star restaurants and I thought what am I doing putting myself in competition with these guys and on TV where thousands of people can watch me.” But the proof is in the pudding and on screen as Anna more than holds her own with a cooking style based around light fresh meals often simply prepared with a genuine flair. Food Purist Darren Simpson may shake his head exclaiming ‘but that’s not how you do risotto’, but the clash and clamour of three different styles in one smallish kitchen makes engaging viewing.

“You do forget about the competition during filming because we are learning from each other but it does feel good when you win. I’d come home and Luc could always tell when I’d won depending on the height of my eyebrows and then I’d whisper ‘I beat them’.”

Says Anna “Mago films are pretty adept at making cooking shows that appeal to all different types of people. If you’re not that into cooking, there’s always something else in there for you.” Cue Anna’s new solo show ‘Quickies in the Kitchen’ by Mago films which is not nearly as racy as you might suspect but does add a little celebrity chat element to the slicing and dicing. It will debut on the Lifestyle Food channel later in the year.

It may have been a circuitous route to the TV kitchen for Anna but she remembers playing Chefs and Waiters as a child rather than Doctors and Nurses. “I loved the whole theatre of food when I was young. My sister would lie down beside the pool and say ‘let’s play restaurants’ and I would say ‘oh

great' – of course looking back now I think God she was cunning but I was so excited. I would make up a menu with my own creations on it and she would say 'well I will have a toastie roaster'."

On the issue of food qualifications fellow TV chef Ian Parmenter (Consuming Passions) has the last word. "One of the problems these days is that there are too many TV chefs who don't know about real cooking and Anna's a real cook. Look at Stephanie Alexander, Maggie Beer, Rick Stein - they all come from a background of loving food and being good cooks not from being well trained cordon bleu chefs."

Anna says TV is good for her not because of the fame element but because it stretches her abilities. "I'm one of those people that unless I have a deadline I don't work well. I need a good kick up the bum to get going and to become more creative – I need to be under that pressure but I'm not chasing being famous - I'm not doing it for that. I'm doing it for personal challenge and motivation."

There was a flurry of publicity recently when Anna turned down a call back audition for smash hit cooking show MasterChef which brings us back to family. Anna calls her and Luc Longley's blended family – The Brady Bunch. Luc has two teenage girls from a previous marriage and Anna's two girls are 14 and 16. The high school years are upon them and even though the potential offered by MasterChef, if she had been successful was huge, the timing was just not right and it would have been too disruptive to film in Sydney.

"Luc and I have been married for a year now and together for five. We both came from Fremantle families and we have known each other for years. Every night is a party when you have a big family and I do like to gather people together to feed them so it has been a real bonus meeting Luc and the girls. I'm the happiest I have ever been – don't they say life begins at 40." And that, she says may be a fitting end to the interview - besides Luc and the girls have requested a roast and she can just about make the shops.

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