

# Comment

By Ross P Mawby

## On Murray Bollen's 'Thomas Albert Bollen: A forgotten champion'

I was privileged in 2018 to meet Murray Bollen, son and biographer of his father Tom Bollen, in the BIU (Barrier Industrial Unions) Band Hall. Together we discussed his father's life and his contribution to brass performance, and we viewed photographs of the brilliant cornetist.

Tom Bollen learned the rudiments of cornet playing in the Salvation Army, North Broken Hill corps, a band in which his father was bandsman and encourager. To be a member it was required that bandsmen make commitments regarding lifestyle and duty that sometimes stifle the natural exuberance of youth who have gifts and ambition. For example, Salvation Army bandsmen could not play in band contests or be members of other brass bands. After his father's tragic and premature death—the loss of his anchor—Tom grasped the opportunity as a teenager to participate in the wider brass band world with the AMA (Amalgamated Miners Association) Band.

It was possible Tom was influenced by former Broken Hill bandsman WS May, who was bandmaster of the Adelaide Model Band, to join him in Adelaide. Tom then followed May when he became bandmaster of the Glenelg Municipal Band. These were the years 1922–25, when Tom, as a cornetist, won South Australian State Championships and the Australian Championship. These, in turn, brought an offer to play first cornet at the newly constructed Capitol Theatre in Melbourne.

Tom Bollen was not the first, nor the last, brass player to win state or national titles. However, to be consistently successful on cornet, and to be chosen to tour with the Commonwealth Band for its 1927 tour of Canada and the USA, sharing with Arthur Stender the honour and responsibility of solo cornetist, was, I believe, the pinnacle of Tom's career as a cornetist, before becoming a professional musical director and artist.

Bollen remained in Canada after that tour, conducting a band of 150 instrumentalists, and teaching. Offers from the USA were accepted. Music was a very competitive field in the 1920s and 1930s and the fact that Tom played with, and accompanied, stars like Mary Pickford, the Mills Brothers, Frances Langford, George Raft, Ethel Merman, all huge names in the entertainment world at that time, indicated he had reached the apex of his profession.

Later, he took his band to the UK, touring and playing under the patronage of Edward VIII, and he then followed this with a tour of the European Continent.

On his return to Australia in 1936, and being unable to relocate successfully to the larger cities, he returned to Broken Hill with his ten-piece orchestra. Local conditions made it impossible for them to continue, however, the orchestra disbanded and Bollen took over organising the Zinc Corporation Orchestra (Mawby 1992, pp. 15–22).

In 1942 Tom Bollen enlisted in the Army from Broken Hill, and was discharged in 1946, having attained the rank of Warrant Officer, Class 2 with the 2/5 Armoured Regiment.



*Band of the fourth Armoured Brigade giving a concert for New Guinea Native Police attached to the unit for tank training. Tom Bollen is principal cornet player nearest to camera in first row (AWM 1944)*

Postwar years saw Tom directing several progressive top brass bands, teaching and starring as a guest artist at many concerts.

By 1953, his hectic, chaotic, but talented past had caught up with him and he returned to Broken Hill opening a music store in Argent Street. I had heard of the legendary Tom Bollen over many years from brass players who themselves were talented and yet gave him the respect and laurels reserved for a true champion. As a customer at his music store, I found him a fount of knowledge, willing to go that second mile in service.

The last time I saw Tom was at a salvation meeting at the Salvation Army Citadel in Wolfram Street. He sat quietly with me throughout the service and, after exchanging pleasantries, left. This was a few months before his passing in 1961. I couldn't help feeling he had come home—to the place where his musical profession commenced. His life had come full circle.

Murray has done a fine job in reminding us of the champion musician Tom was—a record that will never be broken. Such men should never be forgotten. Vale Thomas Albert Bollen!

*About the author: Ross Mawby is a life member of BHHSoc and a former President of the Society. Ross has been a Salvation Army Bandsman and Reservist for 60 years, and the BIU Band Secretary/Treasurer for 27 years.*

## References

- Australian War Memorial (AWM) 1944, 'Southport, Qld. 1944-01-18. Band of the 4th Armoured Brigade giving a concert for the New Guinea Native Police' <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C55284> (accessed 3 Feb 2019).
- Mawby, Ross P 1992, 'The Zinc Corporation Orchestra', *Broken Hill Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, (from presentation 13 July 1992), vol. 28, pp. 15–22.