

ART AS WORK

by Elsen Price*

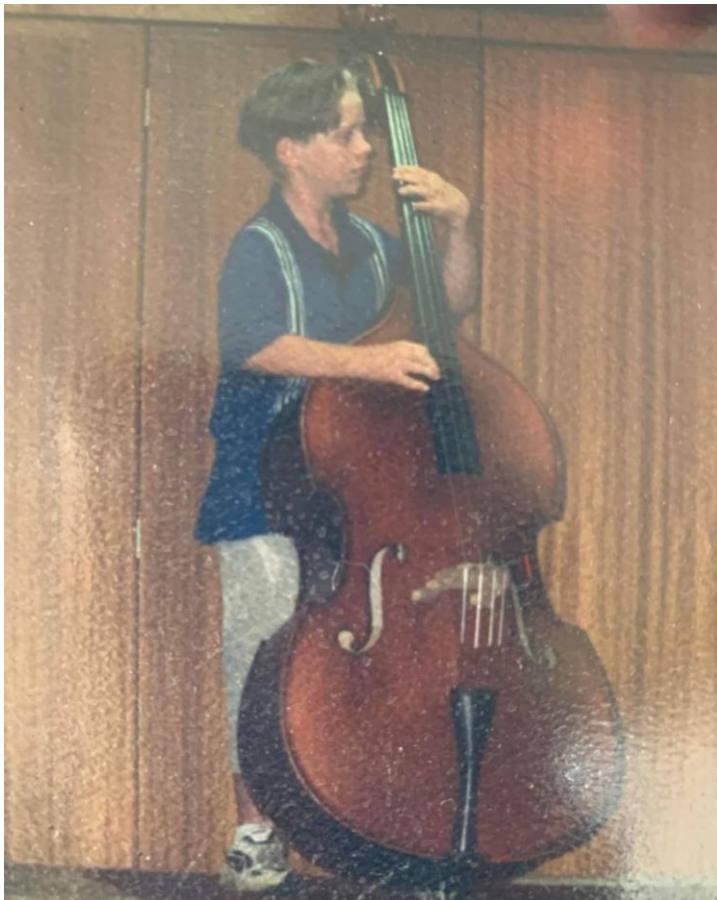
Art has been my job since I was old enough to work. Whilst I am quite lucky to be able to do it, it's definitely not something that is easy to do, both when I started and as I continue now.



**Elsen Price is an internationally award-winning musician based in Sydney, Australia. His career highlights include 'Best Soundtrack' Award at the 2016 International Independent Film Awards, performances alongside Josh Groban, Mike Patton, Lee Ranaldo, touring with international artists Sharam Nazeri, Alireza Ghourbani and Adnan Karim. Elsen has also developed programs for double bass tuition at multiple Sydney schools, conducts student ensembles, plus volunteers as a presenter of new Australian music at Sydney radio station Eastside FM.*

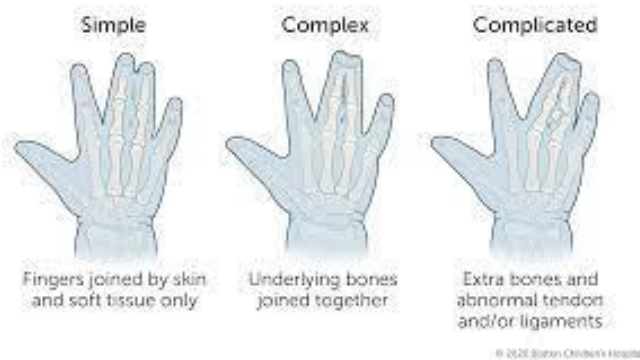
I feel I have had a very unique circumstance to be able to work as a musician. Growing up in Bithramere in Northwest NSW, the job description of professional musician did not exist in my working-class surrounds, or even playing an instrument like the double bass. When I was five years old I had the wonderful opportunity of seeing amazing Australian fiddle players at the Tamworth Country Music Festival at a free event at the local park. The players were Marcus Holden, Pixie Jenkins, Mark Oats, Ray Schoeffel and Andrew Clermont. To my five-year-old ears this was the most amazing thing I'd ever heard and so began a myriad of tantrums to my metal worker father and housewife mother attempting to convince them I needed to play the violin.

As luck would have it, I changed schools from a public school to a Catholic school, with the latter having started letting a violin teacher (who had moved from Sydney after marrying a farmer) do group lessons with students. My tantrums paid off as it was easier to let me play an instrument than to not. With very limited resources, the teacher was able to build small string groups with students she had started at other schools, and so began a routine of making music. It was beneficial not simply fulfilling an obsession of mine, but was a huge benefit for recovering and strengthening of my hands.



Here I am on the bass in 1999, aged about 9-10...PHOTO COURTESY ELSEN PRICE

I was born with a condition called syndactyly [*editor's note: the medical term for webbed or conjoined fingers or toes*], a condition in which my hands had not developed properly when I was born, with extensive surgeries needed to attempt to make my hands as usable as possible, especially as child's hands grow quickly, and corrections would need to be made at as early a stage as possible. From the ages of three months till I was aged five, I saw regular drives to Sydney's North Shore Hospital for various surgeries. During most of that period my hands were in bandages or casts. The doctor advised my mother that it would be unlikely I would remain with ten fingers or be able to use them in any significant way as an adult. Whilst I have no idea if being born with this condition, or the lengthy surgeries, have limited my ability to play an instrument, I do think that playing music has been a positive reinforcement.



I was born with a condition called syndactyly, the medical term for webbed or conjoined fingers or toes... [Editor's note: these are images from the internet, to illustrate this general affliction; they are not specific to Elsen Price.]

A few years later, the wonderful teacher who built these string programs in the area had the brilliant idea of getting funding for a one-quarter size double bass for the string groups. After seeing this instrument, I made it a personal mission to find out how I could play this instrument. Given that I was the only child who wanted to play it helped quite a lot. Learning an instrument like a double bass in a rural area does require a lot of imagination and access to playing in community orchestras, big bands and any music-related activity. Being the only double bass player for a few 100 kms did open a huge number of opportunities for me to play, even at a very young age.

When I finished school in 2006, and it had been decided that I should get a trade, I became a mechanic. The only problem was that I still had a very obsessive desire to play music, and hence continued playing music as much as I could, despite suddenly being arms deep in oil, brake fluid and all sorts of things on a daily basis. It was clear to my boss that I didn't belong in a mechanics shop and after three months he told me I should do something else. With a stroke of luck, I got a phone call while walking out of the shop for a local covers band wanting me to play bass for them. It was quite the coincidence as I was technically made unemployed seconds before, so I accepted.

There was a surprising large amount of covers work in the area and I was happy as I got to play my bass every day. My parents weren't particularly happy that I was only working on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, and told me I needed to get a proper job. Being a bit smart, I decided to look on the internet for work playing a double bass. This was supposed to be a bit of a joke though I saw an ad for the NSW Police Band and decided to give it a try as I didn't have anything to lose. After auditioning



my Mum got a phone call while I was out asking how old I was. At the time I was 18 as I finished school at an early age. Unfortunately, I was too young to be employed though she was told that I was of a professional standard. This changed my whole perspective on what music was for me, as it had been only a passion until that point,

with it now possibly being a job. I moved to Sydney and re-auditioned for the job the following year and won it.

Being an employed musician opens up a lot of opportunities, especially if you are just starting your career. After working for two years in the band, I still had a desire to actually get proper lessons on the double bass, as everything I knew I had taught myself. In 2010 I auditioned for the Sydney Conservatorium and was offered a scholarship to study with SSO Principal Alex Henery. This was a huge opportunity for me to learn how to actually play a double bass, as while teaching yourself might achieve a small amount, there is a huge amount of repertoire, technique and general skills that can only be taught with modern double bass playing, especially if you want to try to do it well.



I studied with SSO Principal Alex Henery (above) on a scholarship: a huge opportunity for me to learn how to actually play a double bass...

Halfway through my degree I began producing my own performances and events in Sydney, the entrepreneurial spirit of wanting to broaden horizons as an artist and also my own belief in that it's often best to do things yourself meant a huge learning curve for me, trying to be a self-employed musician. This was during the time of mass closure and restrictions on venues in Sydney, which didn't help with my interest in creating performances. I secured a number of regular performances, most importantly a weekly solo performance at a café in Marrickville, where I would improvise for three to five hours on a Sunday morning. This became a catalyst for a pursuit I didn't intend on pursuing, being a solo artist.

One thing I enjoy about being a solo artist is being 100% self-sufficient and autonomous, meaning you can be as much or as little as you like, the music you want to play, and at venues you want to play. The regular solo performances snowballed to the point where, after I finished my degree, I produced a sold-out solo performance at the 2015 Vivid Sydney festival, collaborating with Andrew Batt-Rawden and Marcus Holden. This took place at the Sound Lounge on May 28, 2015. At this point in my career, I had a number of options and avenues to work from, which laid the ground for where my career had gone.



At the 2015 Vivid Sydney festival, I collaborated with Andrew Batt-Rawden (left) and Marcus Holden (below) in a sold-out performance...



From that time of 2014 to now has been an incredible experience, though there have been a number of setbacks which have been unavoidable. A self-employed musician exists in exactly the same way as any small business, with your business relying on

creating a network of collaborative businesses and clients, creating a product which can reach its intended customer regardless of whether it is commercial or unique, being able to adapt to change and circumstance – though music is unique in that it can connect people to their community, to each other or even themselves (it can also inspire a five-year-old).



The Inlay Ensemble, L-R, Carl St Jacques, Elsen Price, Susie Bishop, Dr John Napier...

During the pandemic, many of the issues associated with creating music in Sydney were exacerbated by the pandemic. Whilst artists were performing online, no musicians were making anywhere near the financial returns or professional continuum that they had prior, and it has left a massive hole in an industry which has been struggling with numerous restrictions placed on it for at least 30 years. During the pandemic I realised I needed to greatly diversify my job if I was to be able to continue after things opened up again. I've made a huge number of initiatives to develop music programs at schools, developed a number of ensembles to cater for a broader audience and have made extra effort to pay to see live performance of local musicians in Sydney. The music industry is very symbiotic in the way that it works,

more music venues mean more audiences for performances. More audiences mean more money being spent within local economies. More wealthy local economies mean more benefits to the Australian economy as a whole. While no musician would ever admit to being a conduit of national financial development, it is comforting knowing that the work I put in, and the work every other musician puts in, is benefitting the entire country in its own unique way.

Recent Discography:

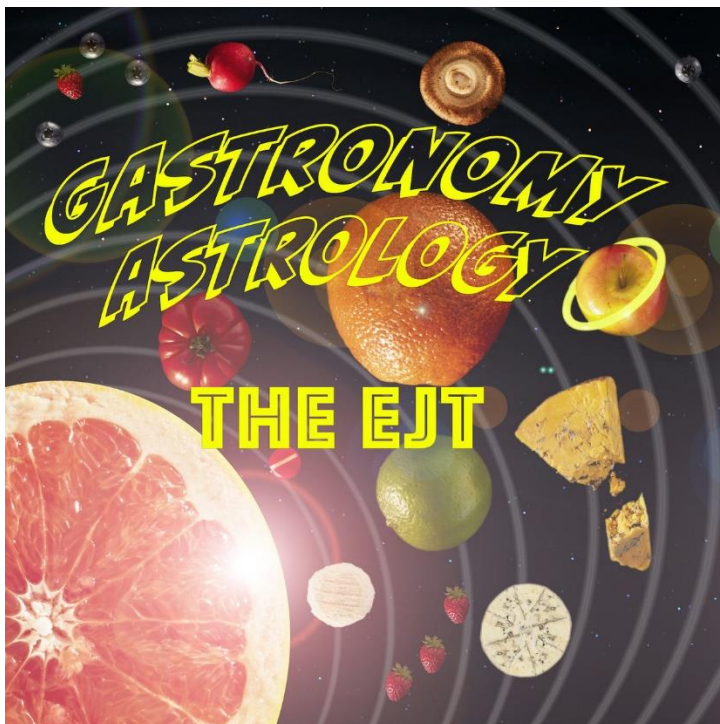
Solo albums:

The Life Long Day Dreamer (2020) – Rippa Recordings

The Descent of the Free (2019) – ABC/Universal

Jazz:

'Gastronomy Astrology' The EJT (2021) – Rippa Recordings



Classical:

'Songs for Habitual People' Inlay Ensemble (2021) – Creative Sources Recordings



Elsen Price's 'Daily Apocalypse Tour'

9th July - Blue Mountains w/
Susie Bishop

13th July - Tempo Rubato
(Melb) w/ Mindy Meng Wang

14th July - JSJ (Syd) w/
Fingermae

16th July - Dots and Loops
(Bris) w/ Bernardo Alviz

17th July - Launceston (TAS)
w/ Spike Mason

18th July - COMA (Adelaide)
w/ guests

Solo tour 2022:

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Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, review of Inlay Ensemble's album "Songs For Habitual People", The Australian, April 30, 2022, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-55>

Eric Myers, review of The EJT's album "Gastronomy Astrology", The Australian, November 20, 2022, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-50>