

An old trade that still hits the right notes

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CARLY THOMAS/STUFF

Jim Taylor is a piano tuner from Waituna West who learnt his trade in the 1960s.

*Piano tuning is an old and intricate art. **Carly Thomas** went to Waituna West to visit a man who knows it well.*

There is something timeless about Jim Taylor. Put him in sepia tones with his initialled leather bag and his old trusty pop-lock suitcase and he could easily walk on to the set of *Casablanca*, sit down at Sam's piano and rather than do what Ingrid Bergman tells him to do, he could tune the little upright piano to perfection.

Taylor can't play the piano – he never really got the chance to learn – but he has been tuning "the most complex of the instruments" for many, "let's not count them", decades.

Piano tuning is an old skill that gets passed on from an older tuner to an aspiring tuner and Taylor fell into his trade when he worked at a piano shop after school for 3½ years. It was just off The Square in Palmerston North, where Lone Star is now. Fredrick Bertie Sheiley was the owner and he used to advertise his shop as being "on the grand side of The Square".



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The tools of Jim Taylor's trade haven't changed at all over the years.

He imported pianos and in the heyday of the 1960s when a piano was common in New Zealand households, Sheiley employed seven staff. Taylor says the shop was humming, with his Cockney boss being the best salesman there was.

"He could sell ice-blocks to an Eskimo. One day, just before Christmas, Mr Sheiley sold five new pianos and we were delivering them on Christmas morning. Those were the days."

When he left school, Taylor started an apprenticeship at the shop in piano tuning, but then when his mother's health dictated that he needed to earn more money he went out labouring.

"I got four pound 15 and six and that didn't quite run a household."



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The inside of Jim Taylor's old suitcase holds old piano parts.

He found he was pretty good at making things – good enough to quickly get offered an apprenticeship – and that's how he gained his carpentry qualification, a skill he has fallen back on throughout his life.

But pianos drew him back in and he settled back into an apprenticeship, this time with Frank Caple, a blind tuner from Palmerston North who Taylor says was "very, very good and a very good piano maintenance man too".

"His hearing was acute and he could repair things that others had trouble with. People say to me today, 'would you like the light on?' and I say, 'well, Frank did it in the dark, so I should be able to'."

Eric Stewart also taught Taylor and he says both men had a lot of patience – "they needed it with me". It was a couple of years before he was trusted to go out and tune on his own and he says, "that was a big step". He learnt to train to concert pitch and he learnt very quickly that every piano is different, with some being so flat that it takes several tunings and years to bring them up to the perfect pitch.

"There is 15 tonnes of tension between the bottom of the piano and the top of the piano, not weight, but tension. And this is what makes the strings stretch."



CARLY THOMAS/STUFF

The bag that holds Jim Taylor's piano tuning tools also holds his initials.

A household piano needs a tune-up every year, a music teacher about every three months and a concert pianist, "much more than that".

"When I was tuning Michael Houstoun's years ago, I was doing that every six weeks, because he was spending eight hours a day on the piano."

Every piano is different, says Taylor. They all have their individual characters, depending on their construction, their action, their history and where they have spent their lives. They hate the dry, they hate the wet. Extremes are not kind on pianos. "Humidity upsets them, changes in temperature upsets them, moving them all the time upsets them.

"The worst place that a piano can be in is a church because it's dark, empty, dry and then people come in once a week and start singing and the atmosphere changes, they turn the heaters on and the piano doesn't know what's going on."



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The paraphernalia of an old trade.

Taylor once found half a dozen rats in one, and in another "all the moths of creation".

That was in Papua New Guinea, a country that Taylor found himself in for a number of years, a place where his very specialised craft took him several times.

"When I first went over in the early 80s there were tribal fights in some areas and they were using bows and arrows and spears and then when I went back in later years they were using machineguns and carving people up."



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Jim Taylor loves nothing more than explaining the intricate art of his trade.

Taylor says just getting to his work was a succession of high-security precautions and that after a few years of that he was done. He is now retired, living in Waituna West in rural Manawatū in a little cottage that is dwarfed by his shed and he still takes on tuning jobs here and there. He enjoys taking apart broken old pianos and making them work. Old parts can be tricky to come by, but he has a stash and also makes his own when necessary.

It's a tinkering of the ivories now rather than a full-time job, but it has been an interesting pastime that stemmed from a little after-school job all those years ago. Taylor still carries his old initialled bag, his tools haven't changed and, in sepia or full-spectrum technicolour, the tunes are still the same old melodies for the piano tuner who lives at the bottom of the Stormy Point hill.

- Stuff

Comments

Jim was employed by Piano Services in the early 1990's. There was never any mention at that time that he was apprenticed under Frank Capel, this news came as a complete surprise to myself. Frank had a technician working with him, Mr Brown who according to Mr Brown gave to Jim a lot of materials after Frank died. (Mr Brown gave the remained of the materials to me in about 2000).

I know of no way of clarifying if Jim did finish his piano apprenticeship as I was never shown or seen evidence of completion, however Jim has spent many years around pianos.

Comments regarding M Houston, Jim use to tune his Bechstein Grand, (now owned by a Masterton/Palmerston North music teacher). A broken string from that piano was auctioned off for the Palmerston North Regent on Broadway fund raiser for a new Steinway piano.

Mr Houston has over the years been very generous allowing a verity of piano tuners service his piano. The fact that any tuner has tuned his instrument is more because of the good grace of Mr Houston then that tuners ability.