



MAKING THE CUT

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By Penny McLeod

Helene Chung Martin's joie de vivre is palpable. Not even her polished broadcaster's vowels can suppress her delight at the life she's lived so far.

Born in 1945 in Hobart, Martin was the first non-white reporter on ABC TV; the first woman posted overseas (to Beijing) by the ABC; and the first journalist to scoop a radio interview with Princess Anne.

"Having fun has really been one of the main things in my life," she says over the phone from her home in Melbourne. "I never felt destined that I was going to do anything. I never planned anything. I just took opportunities."

University was one such opportunity – to have a fun life experience, and join the Old Nick theatre group at the University of Tasmania as an actor and producer.

"I wanted to join the Old Nick because the principal of my Catholic school [St Mary's] had warned us against it," Martin says.

"It lived up to my expectations. I spent more time at the Old Nick than on my studies. It was the group that had the most fun; it was considered a bit outrageous."

Although she says study came second, Martin was offered a scholarship to complete a Masters degree, and she graduated with honours and a Master of Arts in history.

She tried to find humour in everything she did. Her honours thesis was on Oscar Wilde, whose wit she loved, and she tried to use the satirical magazine, *Punch* as the central text of her Masters thesis – "Punch and Judaism".

Unable to find enough material in *Punch* to sustain a Masters thesis, Martin was forced to settle on a topic (*Parliament, Press and Prejudice: a Jewish Question in Britain, 1890-1905*) that would ultimately lead her to the ABC.

"I had to go through all these dusty tomes of Hansard," says Martin. "Doing that really put me off an academic career but that's how I got into the ABC."

"Whilst I was doing it [researching Hansard], I thought life has got to be more interesting than this, and I saw an advertisement for a job at the ABC."

Top: Helene as Datsun Bluebird in 1963 the Uni Revue



From left front: Anne Spences, Elizabeth Burnett, Helene Chung, Sylvia Hodgkinson;
back: John Hensby, Rowland Harrison, John Craig, David Ryder-Turner



Helene Chung-Martin at the 2005 UTAS Graduation Ceremonies

Martin applied for the job, but was knocked back. It was the first of many rejections by the ABC, but each setback was followed by unexpected opportunities.

On the back of this first rejection letter, Martin's stepfather, Egyptologist Lesley Greener, helped her into the ABC through a side-door – "I have not once waltzed through Aunty's front door" – by phoning a contact: the ABC's station manager.

Martin made the most of the lucky break. Her first interview, with a Hobart butcher who claimed to have seen a Tasmanian tiger, was broadcast on the ABC radio program AM.

She continued to freelance for the ABC while she completed her Masters degree, until her first full-time job with Radio Australia in 1970. Another opportunity arose at the end of the year, this time to travel. Then 25, Martin bought a pacesetter air fare (available to Australians 25 and under) to London.

"It was my last opportunity," she says.

During the three years that followed, Martin refined her skills as a reporter, freelancing for the BBC, Radio Hong Kong, and the ABC. However, it was her experience with Radio Hong Kong that secured her an interview with Princess Anne, who was due to travel to Hong Kong unaccompanied.

Says Martin: "It was the first radio interview ever granted by Princess Anne, and it made the front page of *The Times* newspaper."

One question, about women's liberation, didn't make the final cut – the palace vetted Martin's questions before the interview – and Princess Anne's comments about disliking yoghurt were removed before it was played on air. "If Princess Anne said she didn't like yoghurt, then sales of yogurt would have plummeted."

Martin's career with the ABC began in earnest when she returned to Australia and joined *This Day Tonight* (a precursor to *The 7.30 Report*) in 1974. She became the ABC's Beijing correspondent in 1983.

Her one regret, she says, is having too easily accepted the orders of her superiors.

Life experience has shown her that it's important to pick yourself up after each setback. "Don't put your head in the oven. What you need is persistence – take the opportunities as they come."

As a reporter on *This Day Tonight*, Martin was told to go in hard on the poet Clive Samson, who'd been given an Australia Council literary grant to write his memoir.

"The producer said, 'Why should the taxpayer fund this?' So I got poor Clive Samson and I hoed into him and I really am sorry about that.

"It's too late now, but although I had a reputation for being a fearless interviewer, when it came to authority, I reverted to my timid, convent-girl self."

Martin, who no longer works for the ABC, has written several books – one about her life partner, former university classmate John Martin, who died from cancer in 1993. She is currently working on a childhood memoir.

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