



# BORN TO BE WRIGHT

PLAYING ROCK STAR STEVIE WRIGHT OF THE EASYBEATS SHOULD BE CHALLENGING BUT, IT SEEMS, IT'S THE ROLE CHRISTIAN BYERS WAS BORN TO PLAY. PHOTOGRAPHY SALLY FLEGG.

**DNA:** You play Aussie rock star Stevie Wright in ABC1's *Friday On My Mind*. The band were around in the mid-'60s; it must've required quite a bit of research.

**Christian Byers:** I was in Tasmania, actually sitting in the MONA café, when I heard the project's funding announcement. As soon as I saw they were doing it, it wasn't even a question for me. I was like, "Good luck anyone else!" I read and watched everything I could for months, even before the auditions began. In my mind, seeing the announcement was almost as good as being told I was cast. That was the first step in preparing... telling myself that I'll be playing Stevie. Casting was a five-month process and during that time I read, listened and formulated a thorough backstory. I've wanted to play Stevie since I was 14!

**Does the script cover Stevie's later life, which was quite tortured?**

Not as such. This production covers from 1964 to the end of 1969. The period of his *Evie* and *Black Eyed Bruiser* music was where that other stuff really began. From my perspective, when you're playing someone like him, the character is kind of self-evident. The very thing that attracted people to him was detrimental to his life. People talk about how much he changed later in life, but there's a glint in his eye which stayed exactly the same right until the end. The one thing I will say in terms of preparation is that I didn't look at anything after 1969. You want to avoid postscripts as much as possible because it's not relevant to the story being told.

**You sang and played guitar in a band called The Slippers, which had shades of that era, particularly the Beatles. You're certainly prepped for this role.**

[Laughs] Oh no! I was 16 then, and nobody is proud of what they did at 16! I guess if you're making a sports film and playing a footballer there's a degree to how much you're invested if you did that sort of thing when you were younger. It'll be there subconsciously. But more importantly, my brother was in that band as the bassist, my best friend was the second guitarist and we had a revolving cast of drummers. So I learned how to fight from being in that band and, for this project, that was the most useful thing. The cast have all been in bands and we all know how to fight... in a way about creating something together. I asked the *Friday On My Mind* director at what point he realised we hadn't made a pile of shit. He said, the moment he saw us performing and thought, "We've got a band!"

**How did a Gen Y-er like yourself become a fan of Stevie Wright?**

I was watching the *Long Way To The Top* concerts in the early 2000s with my folks and thought, "Who is this fat old dude with the ponytail, rattling off a song I'd never heard?" My dad was like, "That's Stevie Wright." That was when I first had a conscious understanding of who he was and I connected the dots from there. Compared to the images of when he was young, I realised there was a big gap between A and B and thought, "Wow, there's clearly a story here." I was interested from that point onwards.

**You do look like the young Stevie.**

You'd hope so! I see images of him performing and see myself at age 11. It's a certain smile that he had. A grip on *Friday On My Mind*, named Fabs, grew up as a friend of Stevie's son Nick and new him. He says the three of us have one thing in common - the same eyes with a glint in them. I thought, "Great, I'm doing my job."

**One of your first roles was in *December Boys* with Daniel Radcliffe. How did you find working with Harry Potter?**

Well, I was young enough to be the right demographic for *Harry Potter* so I was one of those kids who was devastated when I didn't get an owl for my tenth birthday! To some degree it can warp you, working with someone like Daniel because, as they say, "Never meet your heroes." I did meet a hero and had it shattered because he wasn't a wizard. When I asked him about shooting the Quidditch sequences he said it was horrible; that he had to sit on a big, long stick for weeks. It was the most brutal thing a 12-year-old could hear. But it was also good as it disabused me of some of the fantastical notions connected with celebrity and the magic of show business. Daniel was really something of a mentor and schooled me and other kids in the cast about keeping our feet on the ground. Like how to live our lives outside of the profession... and the bullshit. One of the other kids, James Fraser is a very dear friend of mine and we still work together.

**You've played a couple of gay roles, too.**

Yes, I did a short film called *Kettle*, shot all around Sydney and it became quite a significant commitment over a two-year period. It's just gone up on Vimeo. It's about a kid who went to a very repressed Catholic school. He has a reserved mother and his father has abandoned the family. He rediscovers his sister as a stripper, and discovers his own burgeoning sexuality as he's in love with his best friend.

**And you have a significant part in the upcoming movie *Riot*, about the 1970s gay rights movement.**

Yes, I play Peter Murphy, and it's all about the lead up to the first Mardi Gras in 1978. It was an incredible experience and a beautiful project to work on, especially with the way things are at the moment. We were filming a scene where my character is at a demonstration at Macquarie University where Jack Munday and the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) backed this gay kid called Jeremy Fisher. He'd been kicked out of the Robert Menzies College but Munday got them on the basis that they couldn't discriminate through the use of a religious text. We filmed the demonstration and that very same day the High Court confirmed that the same-sex marriage postal vote would go ahead.

***Riot* sounds like it's going to be a very special production.**

Yes, with this project, more than any I've worked on, I felt the weight of that time, but also the present moment and it really endowed a lot of spirit. It's a story that warrants telling in this country. I spent time with Josh Quong Tart who plays original '78er Ron Austin and who is also his actual carer. [The term '78ers refers to people who were at the original Mardi Gras demonstration in 1978.] It



“  
History first-hand isn't history; it's very personal. Spending time with LGBTI people who are still very committed was an incredible experience.”



CHRISTIAN AS ROCK STAR, STEVIE WRIGHT, AND WITH THE CAST WHO PLAY THE BAND, THE EASYBEATS.

was incredible just to sit with them and learn.

History first-hand isn't history; it's very personal. I also spent a lot of time with Peter Murphy and his wife Pat. They are beautiful people and in many ways mentors. It's difficult with the slow crawl of neo-liberalism in contemporary society, and to spend time with people like that who are still very committed was an incredible experience.

**Let's play fuck, marry, cuddle or kill with your *Easybeats* costars.**

I'd fuck MacKenzie Fearnley, marry Arthur McBain, I think Du Toit Bredenkamp is the cuddliest person ever, and I'd kill Will Rush who plays George. I think the DNA audience will appreciate the degree of subtext between Stevie and George, if you know what I mean!

**You played '60s-inspired rock with your band, but what would be the campest song you'd dance to?**

*The Rhythm Of The Night* by Corona, absolutely! It has an I'm-alive-life-is-fine-let's-dance feel to it. It also has a certain melancholy.

**What about a music diva?**

I'd have to say Laurie Anderson. In terms of a diva, performance is so important and her stage shows are incredible and personal. I really love her concert film *Home Of The Brave*. Her style is so idiosyncratic and she understands performance in a way that most people don't. I also love Kate Bush.

**This is our swimwear issue, what will you be rocking this summer?**

My partner's mother has immaculate taste and she got me some very nice trunks as a Christmas present. They're like briefs, so not as inglorious as budgie smugglers and not as daggy as boardshorts. They're very Riviera!

**And for everyday wear are you briefs, boxers or freeballing?**

I'm a briefs guy because I like to be snug. For the *Easybeats* I was in tighy-whities and they were a nightmare. There's a scene where you see me roll into a hallway, clearly pissed and a bit wobbly on the legs and I'm in my tighy-whities!

**MORE:** *Friday On My Mind* screens on ABC1 and iview. *Riot* is due for broadcast in early 2018.