

Almost Famous

After talent-spotting Hayley Westenra, Elizabeth Marvelly, Will Martin and Yulia, guitarist Gray Bartlett has turned star-making into a business. But do today's young singers have to buy their way to fame? Donna Chisholm reports.



Above and opposite: Bex Murray – barista, sheep musterer, nanny, rest-home performer and aspiring star.

"You've got big dreams? You want fame? Well, fame costs. And right here is where you start paying... in sweat."

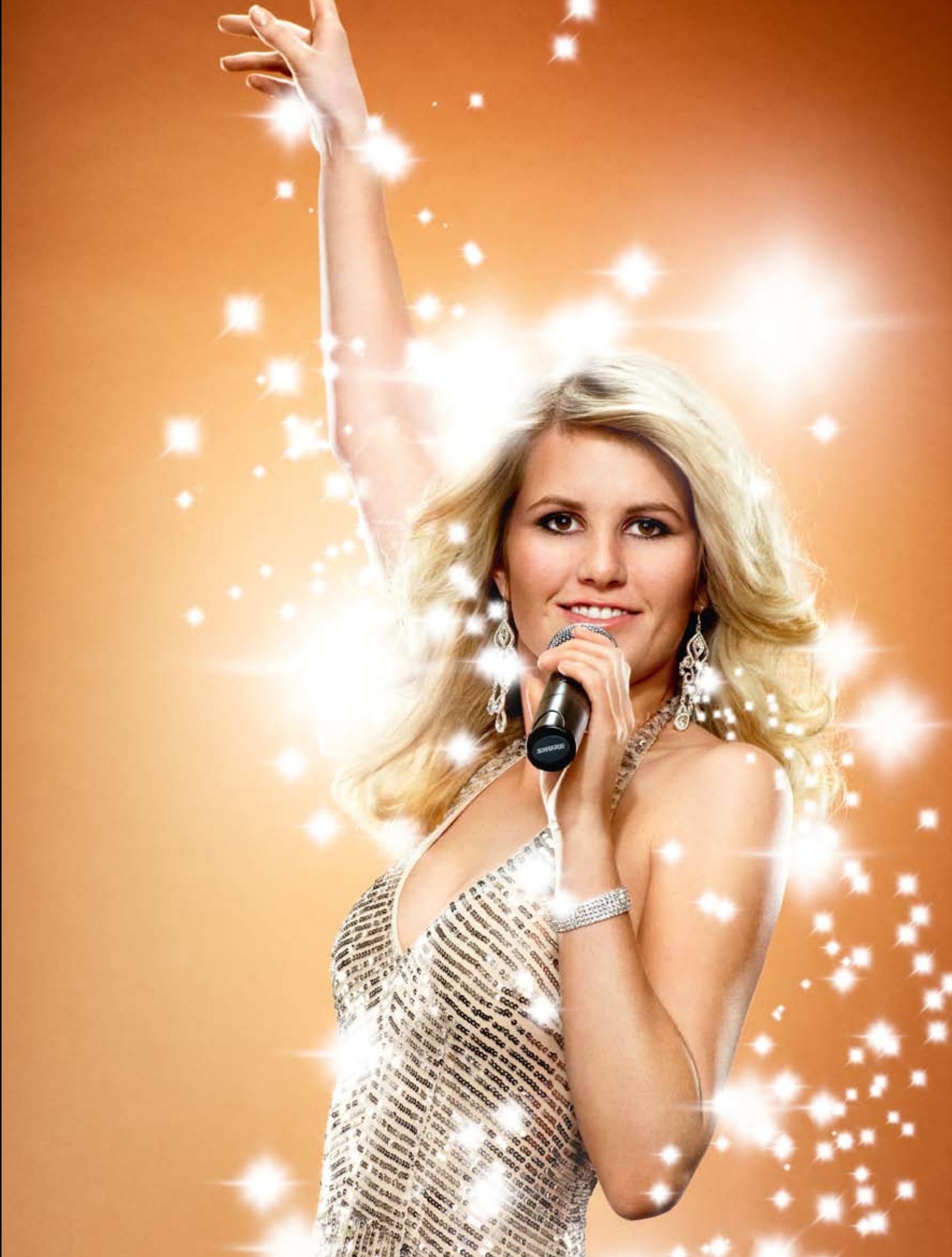
Choreographer Lydia Grant in TV show *Fame* ★

The bedroom roof leaks in her grungy inner-city flat. The \$3000 Rover she bought a couple of months ago blew a head gasket and will cost \$2000 to fix. She doesn't know her way around Auckland and copped a \$200 ticket for parking the wrong way in a one-way street.

For singer Bex Murray, the potholes on the road to fame are as unpredictable as they are daunting.

The 23-year-old from Tekapo, Canterbury, arrived in Auckland in March with a big voice and a bigger dream – her road map to stardom a \$45,000 deal with musician and entrepreneur Gray Bartlett. It's money she borrowed from a family trust and will have to

DONNA CHISHOLM IS *NORTH & SOUTH'S* EDITOR-AT-LARGE. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN MALLOCH. PHOTO OPPOSITE PAGE: CHARLES HOWELLS.





Above: Gray Bartlett does some fine-tuning with Bex Murray at his house.



Fame is like a shaved pig with a greased tail, and it is only after it has slipped through the hands of thousands that some fellow, by mere chance, holds on to it.

Frontiersman Davy Crockett

Entertainer Frankie Stevens was one of the first high-profile entertainers to mentor young Bex Murray. She was 16 when he MCed a NZ-Australia netball match in Christchurch at which she sang the Australian national anthem – and stuffed it up.

He remembers trying to mouth the words at her as “Our land abounds in nature’s gifts” became “Our land abounds na na, na na”, and then comforting her through her humiliation. He asked Netball NZ to give her another chance, and they flew her to Palmerston North, where she gave a flawless performance.

“She just keeps coming back, keeps on

repay. Money that buys Bartlett’s consultancy and “career design” advice – a who-you-know contract that promises to open doors but not necessarily keep them open; to make introductions that could change her life or change nothing at all.

Yes, say Murray and her parents, it’s a gamble, but possibly her “one and only chance” to make it. And yes, others advised them strongly against it – but had no idea what she should do instead.

“I thought she might fall on her feet but it just doesn’t happen that way,” says her father, Graeme. “Lots of good people have given her advice without helping her get to the next step – and here’s Gray Bartlett saying, ‘I’ll give you that help but there’s a fair cost.’”

Bex Murray says she’s taken the punt on Bartlett because the singers he’s worked with have done well – “better than most of the people who are putting him down”. And, she says, “He inspired me. He had a positive attitude.”

More than 200 musical wannabes contact Bartlett every year in the hope he will make them famous, attracted by his track record of talent-spotting rising stars such as Hayley Westenra, Elizabeth Marvelly, Yulia and Will Martin. He takes on just two or three in what is – for New Zealand at least – a

unique business venture.

“Of course it’s a gamble,” says Bartlett, who cheerily admits that what he does is more about bringing his charges fame and recognition than furthering their musical ability. “Most say they want to be the best they can be. Except they can be the best they can be and no one need know about them.”

He is bullish about what he charges, saying he can spend months trawling for the best material for his protégés to sing, often lying on his lounge floor at 3am with a notepad, listening to music. “It’s very much an emotional choice – there have to be notes in it you know that singer can deliver. It may be only four or six notes but if they’re there and I can hear them, I can tell it’s the right song.”

What Bartlett will do is make sure those who matter know about Bex (Becky) Murray. They will hear her three-track demo CD, which he has had professionally produced. They will see the publicity shots taken by photographer to the stars Monty Adams. They will get a professional media kit from publicist to the stars Sandra Roberts. Murray will have to pay for all this, of course, on top of Bartlett’s contract.

After five months in Auckland, Murray is already paying – and not only in sweat.

believing in herself,” says Stevens, who also booked Murray to perform at a Christchurch Casino Christmas Concert. But when Murray asked him if she should sign up with Bartlett, “I’m quite happy to say that I advised against it. The days when a manager used to believe in the performer and invest in the performer are gone. Now it’s the performers investing in themselves with the manager and I personally wouldn’t do it.

“I’ve got high regard for Gray, don’t get me wrong, but I’m just not big on a young performer paying \$40,000 to someone to get ahead. I believe talent will always win out.”

“Bullshit,” says Auckland entertainment lawyer, Music Commission deputy chair and bFM chairman Chris Hocquard. “Talent will not always win out; talent never has. Talent is part of it, luck is part of it, money is part of it. But most of it is connections. The recording industry is built on who you know and how you make it work.”

And what Bartlett has after 50 years as a musician, promoter and agent, is connections. “Gray is that old-school sort of impresario. He has networks, the sort that operate on handshake deals, but he also knows what they’re looking for; he knows how to craft a product to present to the record companies with a lot of the work already done so they can see there’s a reasonable chance of making it work.”

Hocquard, who draws up Bartlett’s career-design contracts, says of 500 records made locally each year “you might hear of 10 of them. It’s a lottery. In the good old days, in theory, a record company’s A&R [artist and repertoire] person would go out, find someone with talent and nurture them, couple them up with songwriters and develop a career. They would release a record, then another record and another record and they would slowly but surely build up their career. Now it’s more instant disposal. Along they come, bang, they smack a record out and if it doesn’t click and radio doesn’t pick it up within the first six months they just move on to the next person.”

Bartlett, he says, looks for “people who are a complete package” within the “popera” or classical crossover genre. And, as Hayley Westenra has shown, it can work.

“But what they need to understand is in the music industry, there are more losers than winners. One in a thousand makes it. What Gray is doing is accelerating that, increasing your odds and giving you a chance to make it happen. You can’t fault that; you can’t say he hasn’t got a track record. You could say, ‘Why should it cost that much?’

but my attitude is why shouldn’t Gray be entitled to learn a living? He’s been doing it a long, long time and he’s good at it. He’s not cheating anyone.”

Singing coach Caitlin Smith – whose pupils have included Anika Moe and Nesian Mystik – takes Murray for songwriting lessons. She cautions against the heightened expectations that may come with deals such as Bartlett’s, believing it’s better for performers to serve an industry “apprenticeship” rather than being plucked from obscurity and groomed for stardom.

“What Gray will do is take people and shape them, which is a very sexy but risk-taking venture. He’s this Svengali who whips it all into shape.

“What he’s doing fits with the expectations of a lot of people who are desperate for fame and will do whatever they believe it takes. But what I’m interested in is serving my students to be the best singers and songwriters they can be.”

Getting good at what you do, she says, safeguards against finding fame but feeling you’ve faked it. “What is marketed often has very little to do with content, it has more to do with fashion and commodity, but not with the actual art of it.”

Hocquard, however, reckons there’s nothing wrong with avoiding the hard yakka if you can. “Hard yards is just a load of rubbish. Do you want to do the hard yards and then qualify to play for the All Blacks when you’re 42? It’s just not going to happen. It’s a young person’s game.”

The day will come when everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.

Andy Warhol

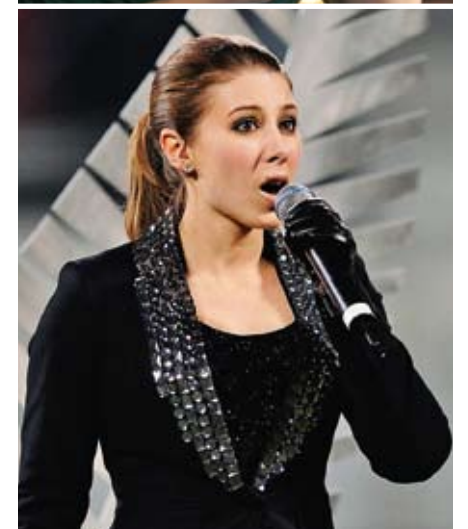


Hayley started it. She was busking with sister Sophie when a Canterbury Television producer gave the then 13-year-old a brief slot on the station’s breakfast show. Bartlett’s South Island publicist Nicole Saunders was watching – and alerted Bartlett.

He was looking for just such a voice in the wake of the Charlotte Church phenomenon. “I was thinking about child stars – how do we create this?”

Hayley’s parents had already made a demo CD which they sent to Bartlett. “I knew it was the right stuff. She sang like an angel.”

When they met, Bartlett, who was still in



Top: Of all Gray Bartlett’s discoveries, Hayley Westenra has had the most durable and lucrative career. “I said she would be bigger than Kiri Te Kanawa and they just laughed at me,” he says. “But she is.”

Centre: Elizabeth Marvelly is about to record a second album for EMI but has no idea when it will be released.

Above: Russian émigré Yulia Townsend’s six-album deal with Sony Music evaporated.



Opposite page and above: Photographer Monty Adams finds Bex Murray's best angle.

than compensates.

Hayley's father Gerald said the family had sent her demo to Universal Records several weeks before Bartlett contacted them. "We just don't know and will never know if they would have passed Hayley by or not. Gray certainly got things kicking along, no question about that, and all credit to him for that."

He said while he had no complaints with what Bartlett did for Hayley, "We simply wanted someone with international experience and decided to manage Hayley till we found someone."

Of all Bartlett's discoveries, Westenra had the most durable and lucrative career. "I was absolutely right on the button with my predictions," he says. "I said she would be bigger than Kiri Te Kanawa and they just laughed at me. But she is."

But what has become of the others, those who made headlines one day and postscripts the next? Whatever happened to teenaged Russian émigré Yulia Townsend, signed through Bartlett and Pacific Entertainment in 2004 to a trumpeted six-album deal with Sony Music? And where's the honey-voiced Will Martin these days, the North Shore boy who attracted huge attention as a 22-year-old in 2006 when he signed a \$3 million, five-album deal with Universal Music Group in the UK? What of another find, Annabel Fay, the daughter of merchant banker Sir Michael Fay?

For Yulia, there's no longer any Sony deal; for Will, there's no Universal deal. Yulia's manager and husband, Glyn MacLean, says when Sony and BMG merged in 2006, the new management advised it wouldn't be releasing any more of her albums. Sony's former head Michael Glading – made redundant in the merger – then became Yulia's manager but failed to land the international signing they'd hoped for.

"We did showcases for all the main companies but we couldn't get it across the line," says Glading, now CEO of Football NZ.

He says had Yulia been signed, he would have handed her over to a UK manager. "We struggle in New Zealand to have world-quality management and there's a reason for that – you earn 20 per cent of buggler all."

MacLean says when he met Yulia, he found "an incredible talent who'd been left exploited and discarded"; she'd applied for a job as a flight attendant with Emirates.

He's resurrecting her career; she hopes to raise money from performances to buy back

her master recordings from Sony and release the albums overseas.

Yulia ended her business relationship with Bartlett after the launch of her successful first album, of which he was executive producer. He says Yulia wanted to "do her own thing... move on". Glading describes Yulia's management contract with Bartlett as "onerous".

Lawyers were involved, says Glading, but "to be fair to Gray, he agreed to drop the contract. He stepped aside relatively easily and I give him credit for that because he saw a problem with the artist."

And Will Martin? After spending most of the year working in the UK, he plans to spend the next year in New Zealand preparing to record and launch his second album. But it won't be on the Universal label he signed to amid so much fanfare three years ago.

And of the two million in predicted sales for *A New World*? Martin says he doesn't know how many copies it's sold. Close to double platinum (30,000) in New Zealand, he thinks, but he has no idea how many in the UK.

Martin implies he dumped Universal, not the other way around. "I decided I no longer wanted to be signed to a big, fat record company for a number of reasons..." but he adds, "and the record company, with credit crunches and bits and pieces... it probably worked out good for them as well."

I suggest to Martin that with no second album in sight, with his current performances largely restricted to corporate gigs, and with no international record deal, his career looks as if it's come to a screeching halt.

He says people can read into it "whatever they want to read into it, but my career is only just beginning".

He says he has many private investment options for his second album. "From a control perspective, it's nice to be in a position where I can take charge and do what I want to do creatively."

Annabel Fay says Bartlett shoulder-tapped her after seeing her perform Christmas carols at a Fay family function on Great Mercury Island off the Coromandel coast. She hadn't considered she could ever make it as a singer, but Bartlett encouraged her to try.

Because her style was edgier than his popera artists, he helped her record her demo, but then passed her on to Ian Magan's daughter Tracy and her indie label Siren Records. Two tracks from her debut album made the Top 10.

Fay says Bartlett didn't charge her a cent.

partnership with Ian Magan in Pacific Entertainment, signed her parents, Jill and Gerald, in August 2000 to a six-month management deal with an 18-month right of extension. He organised a quarter-hour segment on *60 Minutes* to coincide with the launch of Westenra's first album – which went "through the roof", selling eight or nine times platinum – and then introduced her to his contact at Decca Records in London, Costa Pilavachi, who signed her for her UK best-seller *Pure*.

But the Westenras pulled out of Bartlett's contract before the extension, leaving him

with only a three per cent cut as executive producer of her first two records and a booking deal for Pacific Entertainment, rather than a much more lucrative two-year management agreement.

"I guess everyone has said to me, 'Well, you'll never make that mistake again; you got done like a dinner.' In those first six months it cost me personally a lot more than I ever got out of it: there were airfares, running around, expenses. It was my fault not to have a decent contract, to be quite frank."

He concedes, however, that being able to trade on the Westenra name ever since more

sure how they're going to get it back."

Among the casualties of the worldwide industry restructuring was one of Bartlett's key international contacts, the highly respected Costa Pilavachi, who stepped down last September as president of EMI Classics. Pilavachi, who signed Andrea Bocelli, flew to New Zealand to grab Westenra for Decca; after moving to EMI he signed Elizabeth Marvelly but lost out on Will Martin when Universal trumped his \$1.9-million offer.

Marvelly says Pilavachi's departure has made a big difference. Although EMI has always been "very helpful" there's no commit-

Looking at the proliferation of personal web pages on the net, it looks like very soon everyone on Earth will have 15 megabytes of fame.

Research scientist M.G. Sriram



When music went online and downloadable, the industry's bottom line went down the toilet.

Instead of embracing the technology, the recording industry tried to fight it; that drove it underground so they lost control, says Chris Hocquard. "I'm not

The Fame Game

Creating fame can create monsters, says Gray Bartlett. “Once an artist goes from being the guy that delivered the papers or sold things in a store to being idolised and driven around in limos, egos can get out of control.

“Ian Magan and I have had artists we have kicked off say to us, ‘I’ve gone beyond you guys now.’ Unfortunately, what they forget is that ‘beyond’ often turns out to be the downward spiral. That’s why I always stress to all these artists – never forget the people who have helped you on the way up because you will almost certainly meet them on the way down.”

Entertainment lawyer Chris Hocquard says Bartlett is the type of impresario who operates on handshake deals and networking. Loyalty is everything.

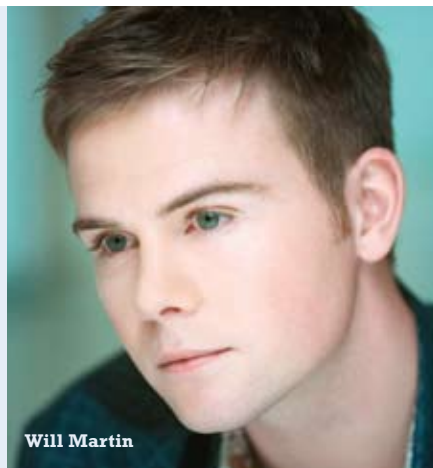
But with the “my word is my bond” approach comes a naïveté and informality which Hocquard has tried to hammer out of him. “He’s gone from not having contracts at all and getting into hideous arguments and fights and misunderstandings to having it on a very sensible, upfront, commercial basis.”

Hocquard said Bartlett was “heartbroken” when Will Martin – who he’d helped to organise the \$3 million Universal deal – ditched him, and struck out on his own.

“Will was unbelievably upsetting for Gray. He’d really taken him in and he and his wife Trish had gone out of their way to do everything for him. He thought Will had absolute talent and he put everything into it. But I think Will saw an opportunity to make a clean break and didn’t need Gray any more and went for it. I think Will’s a prick.”

Both Hocquard and Bartlett were upset when Will Martin suggested he’d done it all himself, without managers or lawyers.

“Definitely, definitely,” says Bartlett when asked if there was bad blood. “It was an attitude thing, it was like



Will Martin

“I always stress to all these artists - never forget the people who have helped you on the way up because you will almost certainly meet them on the way down.”

Gray Bartlett

dismissing me. I don’t mind at all if it ends up like that but please give credit for what actually happened, and the work.”

Martin told *North & South* that what Bartlett did for him was “brilliant”, but it was a “very short term” arrangement beyond which there would be no involvement.

“I was hoping for a few introductions, which I got. I didn’t need someone to help me knock on doors, ‘cos I’ve always been prepared to do that myself. What I needed was guidance as to which doors to knock on. He has the contacts, so I just went out and did it.”

Says Hocquard: “There was no way Will Martin would have ever got anywhere if Gray Bartlett hadn’t done what he’d done. No one would ever have heard of him. Of course he can knock on doors as good as the next person. But both doors he knocked on were already opened.”

Hocquard says he felt so sorry for Bartlett after the Martin experience that he didn’t charge him for the hours of time he’d spent trying to sort it out.

He says Bartlett turned up at his home a week later and gave him a brand new Fender electric guitar. “And that’s the sort of guy he is.”

ment to the original five-album contract. She says she’s in “communication” with EMI and about to head to the UK to record a second album, “but I wouldn’t have a clue when it will be released. It’s always the prerogative of the company whether to pick up an album or not.” So you could have a five-record deal one day and nothing the next? “Definitely.”

“The whole business is in deflation,” Pilavachi told *North & South* from London. Pilavachi, who’s starting a new crossover label, says the big weakness of the popera genre in which Bartlett’s protégés have made their name is the lack of new material being written for it.

“Most pop artists become famous not only by being great performers but also great songwriters. To have a singer-songwriter in this genre is like the holy grail.”

Despite the global downturn, popera CD sales have expanded, while the likes of R’n’B and hip hop have plummeted – probably because popera’s 40-something fans are less likely to download.

Downloads, says Ian Magan, have “totally changed things” for young artists. In the old days, the only way you could get a record was to buy one.

A founding director of Radio Hauraki, which once sponsored free outdoor concerts featuring up-and-coming artists, Magan says radio stations today no longer have the same sense of duty to support local bands and singers. Drink-driving laws also killed the regular pub circuit, making it even harder for talented youngsters to develop a fan base.

Little wonder, then, that the wannabes are lining up at Bartlett’s door.

The difference between great celebrities and the unknown is the former failed and yet went at it again; the latter gave up in despair. **Anon** ★

By the time Bex Murray met Gray Bartlett, her career had had a few stuttering starts caused in part, she admits, by her own lack of commitment and determination.

Her parents tell how the then 15-year-old boarder at Christchurch’s posh Rangitapu Girls High School wagged lessons with Dame Malvina Major in favour of a more social fifth-form year. Murray recalls going in for lessons as Hayley Westenra was coming out.

“Everyone said she was a wonderful wee singer,” recalls her mother Carolyn, “and she absolutely loved performing.” At six,



Bex Murray rehearses with Gray Bartlett for her Telethon performance.

she sat in her bedroom recording songs on a cassette tape.

She remembers driving the precocious 10-year-old 90 minutes each way to Timaru from Tekapo each Monday after school for ballet, tap-dancing and singing lessons.

Even then, says singing teacher Vicki McLeod, Murray's strong, perfectly pitched voice persuaded her to take her on at 10 when she made other pupils wait until they

were 15. "She was a busy little girl but she could handle it because she loved it."

"I wanted to be famous," says Murray. "I knew I could sing and I was always a real showoff." But it took years before she gained the maturity and grit to harness her talent. "I was a little brat probably. I wasn't getting into trouble; I just liked to go out with my friends – a lot. I'm dyslexic, not that I can use that as an excuse, but I did struggle quite a bit. I'm not the most intelligent cookie in the jar."

At 16, she got through to the second round of *NZ Idol*, before the judges told her that her voice lacked maturity.

At 17, she spent four months working on a dude ranch in Wyoming, waitressing at the ranch restaurant and helping with the horses. She returned home to university to study music and tourism, but left after a year. "I didn't think university was me."

An accomplished hunter and diver, she helped her father when he ran Air Safaris, flying tourists around Mt Cook and the glaciers; he also chaired the Mackenzie Country Tourism Development Board. Now he's a driving force behind moves to establish the world's first starlight reserve in Tekapo – a love of the night sky that's rubbed off on his daughter.

The first song Murray wrote with Caitlin

Smith includes the lines: "Do you remember trying to count stars as we watched the black sky; making wishes as the satellites flew us by..."

Bex Murray's path to Bartlett had an unlikely beginning. She'd been mustering and tailing sheep at Queenstown's Branches Station, managed by her brother, when she sang for the station's co-owners, who mentioned her to a relative who knew Bartlett.

They met in Auckland in February, when Bartlett resolved to take her on. "Are you in?" he asked her. "Are you ready to be a star?" "I said, 'Yes.'"

Committing to the dream meant leaving her family in Tekapo and boyfriend in Wanaka and moving north, taking jobs from being a nanny to a barista, and performing free gigs at rest homes while Bartlett worked his contacts.

He first ran her songs past his friend and sounding board Morrie Smith. Smith, owner of Rajon Music Group, is a former general manager of RCA in Australia where his legacy was signing Abba. If Murray cuts a disc this year as planned, Rajon is likely to distribute it. She has, says Smith, "an incredible, totally commercial voice".

But, says Bartlett, there has to be determi-

nation, personality and looks to match. "I make them into an artist who can deal with all aspects of the business, so when they are ready to launch, they're prepared for that moment."

*Fame is a bee.
It has a song – ★
It has a sting –
Ah, too, it has a wing.*
Poet Emily Dickinson

6pm, August 19, 2009. Sean Fitzpatrick tribute night at Auckland's SkyCity Convention Centre. Sporting legends are wall to wall in this lounge-suited scrum of 700 rugby blokes and business types. Meads, Whineray and Lochore are here and, thanks to Bartlett, so is Bex Murray. He hopes tonight will expose her to the corporates who could be lucrative sources of work.

The gig, he tells her, will be one of the hardest she will ever do. She won't get paid and there won't be much applause. "You have to play to people who are not here to listen."

It's OK, Murray assures him. She's done weddings and no one really wants to

listen then, either.

Murray and the act before her, singer-guitarist Andrew Mockler, will be working while the crowd eats. "Pay attention," says MC Ian Fraser, "because we are going to be hearing more from them."

Little attention is paid.

Murray, spray-tanned and sequined, steps on stage at 9.40pm as the remains of the Moroccan roasted lamb rack are being cleared, but the Yealands Estate is still flowing freely. The crowd is cheerful but well-oiled. Bartlett is right – this is hard.

"She's great... fantastic," says one diner, who's facing away from the stage. But at least he's aware Murray's singing a Jewel cover, *Foolish Games*, and is sounding sensational.

When she completes her three-song set there is warm applause amid a barely perceptible pause in the hubbub.

Bartlett is thrilled. "That was really great," he tells her. "There were pockets of real enthusiasm for you."

Murray hands out her business card to diners who approach to thank her, then tucks into reheated Moroccan lamb.

Duco Events promoter David Higgins, who's organised the event, is pleased, despite the chatter during the singing. "It's rough for performers. You could put Frank Sinatra up and they would ignore him." +

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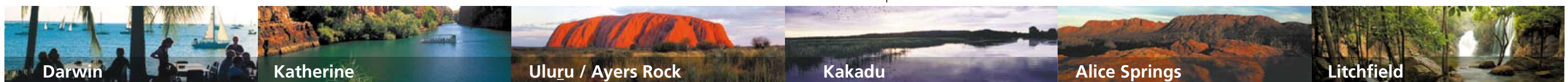
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