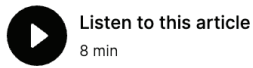


# Philanthropist and music publisher assisted many worthy causes

Deborah Jones

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## ROBERT ALBERT: 1934 - 2024

Businessman and philanthropist Robert Otto Albert, who died in Sydney on February 7 aged 89, was a fourth-generation member of the fabled music publishing house that bears the Albert name.



Robert Albert, pictured in 2012, was a great lover of the arts. EDWINA PICKLES

He was an ardent sailor, fine pianist, wine expert, dedicated follower of the performing arts and selfless donor to myriad causes, but above all came family.

Robert's life was anchored by his wife, Libby, their three children and 11 grandchildren. There were the younger brothers who shared the rigours of boarding school with him, and their children.

The pleasure he took in close connections filtered through to the workplace. "His definition of family was very broad and extended to the many people who worked in the business whose name was not in fact Albert," said former Alberts director and CFO Ronen Ghosh.

The Alberts story started in 1885 when Robert's great-grandfather Jacques Albert, a Swiss immigrant, set up shop in Newtown as a watchmaker. He was also an extremely good violinist and music was soon a family tradition.



Robert Albert (holding yellow umbrella) with members of his family. NIC WALKER

Over the years Alberts ventures included its pioneering radio stations (sold in 1995), co-founding ATN-7, recording studios and film. Alberts sold a number of its copyrights in 2016 but even though it diversified, the association with music was ever-present.

Robert was born on December 14, 1934, to Alexis Albert and his Swedish wife Elsa (née Lundgren). Two brothers followed, Ted in 1936 and Tony in 1939. Alexis was knighted in 1972 for services to industry and commerce.

Robert graduated from the University of Sydney with an arts/law degree in 1961 and joined law firm Allen Allen & Hemsley, specialising primarily in commercial law and conveyancing. In 1965 he became a director of Albert Investments Pty Limited (AIP), the holding company of Alberts. In 1984, along with his lawyer brother Tony, he found the lure of working full time with Alberts too strong.

Sir Alexis, then nearly 80, was still actively involved and Ted had been at Alberts for decades. Robert worked across various parts of the Alberts business including overseeing from 1984 the refurbishment of the historic sandstone building Wyoming, which the company had owned since the 1920s, and remains its headquarters today).



After his father's death in 1996 he became chair of AIP. He held the position for the rest of his life.

Ted and Tony died young, aged 53 and 60 respectively, leaving Robert the sole representative of his generation at the company.



Popular culture was Alberts' focus. In the early 20th century the sale of sheet music was the main game, with Alberts acquiring the Australasian copyright to international hits by the likes of George Gershwin, Harold Arlen's *Over the Rainbow* and a later goldmine, the Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations*.

Older Australians may remember the company's Boomerang Songster, a compendium published for an astonishing 80 years. Alberts sold instruments too, with the humble harmonica one of its hottest-selling items.

By the 1970s the Boomerang Songster was on its way out and hard rock on the way in. The company had started signing bands and Robert's brother Ted made Alberts a powerful force for a new generation. One of the company's highest-profile signings was AC/DC, which became part of the Alberts stable in late 1973 and remains so.



Portrait of David and Robert Albert photographed in a back lane in Waterloo, Sydney. NIC WALKER

After Ted's death in 1990 Alberts took a more conservative direction as competitors crowded the music recording field. The company was always averse to debt and determined to stay family-owned.

Nevertheless, successes over Alberts' near-140-year history, including a last-minute, life-saving investment in Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom*, enabled Robert to become a philanthropist whose generosity, humility and humanity were exemplary. This is where he devoted most of his energies in later years.

It's worth noting that Robert's championing of *Strictly Ballroom* after Ted's death was made essentially in tribute to Ted's vision.



Robert and Elizabeth were married at St. James' Church, King Street, 1968. FAIRFAX

With Libby, whom he married in 1968, Robert was an unstinting donor across a wide spectrum. The Australian Chamber Orchestra, University of Sydney, Sydney Dance Company, the development of the Australian-made Stuart & Sons piano, Mission Australia, Guide Dogs Australia and Sydney Children's Hospital were just a few of the many to benefit. The sponsorship of Taronga Zoo's endangered Corroboree frogs indicates Robert's range.

Alberts always had a strong philanthropic streak but Robert's personal interest was kickstarted when he was in the Naval Reserve, starting in 1955 and ending in 1977. "He would do two weeks' paid annual training. It was tax-free and Dad says he decided each year to give away the money, and always gave it to the Sydney Day Nursery, which delivered early childhood education, child care and other services," said his daughter Jane.

Robert believed committed, annual giving had the possibility of doing most good.

He adored being on the water and enthusiastically embraced causes associated with the sea. He was a devoted member of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron and a long-time committee member.

He gave to the Navy League, the Maritime Museum and Sydney Heritage Fleet and was instrumental in the project to restore the 1874 barque James Craig.

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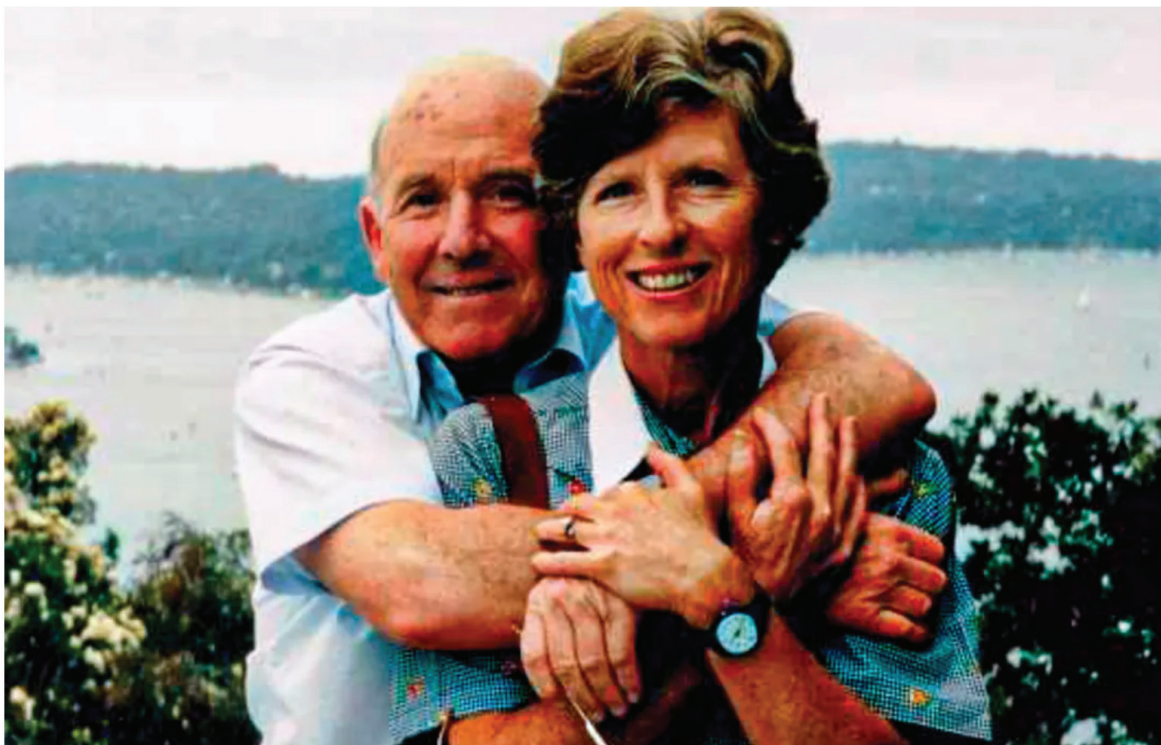
Ian McRae, general manager of the Australian Ballet

He lived at St Paul’s College while at university and kept a close connection with it. Robert was St Paul’s College bursar for 15 years from 1987 and a member of the college council for 21 years.

The establishment of St Paul’s College Foundation in 1977 was one of his most transformational achievements. Among its roles is the administration of a scholarship program and if there wasn’t enough money for all deserving applicants, Robert would quietly make a personal contribution.

At The Australian Ballet, Robert again committed his time as well as his money, serving on the company’s board for 25 years. His and Libby’s donations often related to music, one of Robert’s greatest passions.

“He didn’t seek recognition or accolades. Robert was a direct person but also a very humble one,” said Ian McRae, The Australian Ballet’s general manager from 1991-2002. “I really admired that in him. He was someone I really loved.”



Robert and Libby Albert. ALBERT FAMILY



Robert was not averse to a bit of structure in his private life, possibly attributable to his years at boarding school. Family dinner, for instance, was invariably served at 7.10pm. Every day of his marriage he made Libby exactly the same breakfast, arranged in exactly the same way, a symbol of his unchanging feeling for the love of his life.

He had valued friends across the board and was reckoned to have a dry, mischievous wit. Bowing to Elsa's heritage, the family enjoyed dropping Swedish words into everyday conversation and no Albert gathering was complete without a rendition of the drinking song *Helan Går*, loosely translated as "here goes the whole one".

Robert received the Order of Australia (AM) in 1993 for services to the community and his AO in 2001. The Reserve Decoration (RD) and Reserve Forces Decoration (RFD) were awarded for naval reserve service.

The University of Sydney made him an honorary fellow in 2002 and in 2008 he received the Australia Business Arts Foundation's philanthropic leadership medal. With Libby, Robert was a life patron of the ACO and an Australian Ballet honorary life member. In 2021 the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron made Robert a life member.



Robert Albert gave generously to maritime causes: (from left) Tony, Robert (behind), Sir Alexis and Ted Albert. ALBERT FAMILY

Robert is survived by his wife of 55 years, children Kirsty, David and Jane and his grandchildren. David is currently Alberts CEO, Kirsty an Alberts executive director and Jane a journalist and member of the AIP board.

A celebration of Robert's life will be held on February 27.

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