

Interviewee Name: Tim McCallum

Interviewer Name: Annie Rolfe

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Transcript

Annie: Tim, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

Tim: Yeah. My name's Tim McCallum. I am a 42 year old male performer. I live in Brisbane. I am married. I have a six year old child and as an artist, I'm predominantly a singer, actor and dancer. Definitely in that order.

Annie: Wonderful. So what do you think we need to know about who you are, where you're from, and what experiences have helped you become the person you are today? To help us understand your work in singing and acting and dancing.

Tim: Sure, sure. Well, I grew up and lived in Geelong, which I believe is one of Australia's great breeding grounds for, for performing artists, purely because of the opportunities that a place like Geelong can offer for, for budding young artists. So I, I got into singing at the age of six alongside my younger sister, who was four at the time. We started singing lessons with a local singing teacher and we fell in love with the arts from day one. We got the theatre bug so they say and, and I've been, I've been singing every day since. We, we got into musical theatre with the local amateur theatre company in Geelong called the Geelong Society of Dramatic Art just so the juniors.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And, and that allowed us to do two shows a year, everything from Wizard of Oz to all kinds of pantomimes and things so we were introduced to the theatre scene fairly early in our lives and, and we just fell in love with it and ultimately it turned into such a passion of mine that that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I just wanted to tread the boards around the world and of course, you know, being a musical theatre fan,

you know, I wanted to be a phantom, you know, on Broadway or as Jean Valjean in Les Miserables on the West End or something. So all of the big musical theatre shows, and so through my early childhood and education, I mapped those types of academic things in a journey to, to lead me into a career in the arts.

Annie: Okay.

Tim: And yes, so throughout high school it was all about theatre studies and media studies and singing programs and I think by the age of 18, I'd performed in over 50 musicals.

Annie: Wow. So it's been a steady progression?

Tim: Yeah. So I suppose for me as, as, as an artist all I've ever known is wanting to be an entertainer and to sing. In 1999, after I finished high school, I was going to, I was accepted into the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts over in Perth to do a musical theatre course for three years and a couple of days prior to studying, I had an injury, a swimming injury, diving accident where I broke my neck, consequently resulting in my current condition, quadriplegia, so paralysed from the chest down with limited hand or finger function and, and I use a power chair and a manual chair now for mobility. At the time it all would have been really easy just to have given up on, on the performing dreams and, but I, I wanted to be, I wanted to be a successful performer, not a champion walker so, so I was lucky enough to be surrounded by a lot of very supportive family members and friends and what you would you call artistic mentors and guides

Annie: Yes.

Tim: That helped me back into my my journey of being an artist. So whilst that was a little life hiccup, it didn't change the direction of my goals and dreams and so now since then so I'm now 23 years post injury,

Annie: right

Tim: I, I've now been able to forge a relatively successful career so far with still some, you know, stepping stones and things that I need to go through and in order to achieve my goals. But I haven't let my disability stop me from pursuing the arts. Mm hmm.

Annie: Wonderful. So that leads nicely into the next question. Are there experiences, events or people that stand out in your memory as really formative in terms of getting you interested and involved in singing and acting?

Tim: Well, I think I can recall, I think at every stage of my life so far, there's always been mentors, guides, teachers, peers that, that have influenced me and my arts journey. So from a young child, I talked about, you know, singing teacher that had a huge influence on my love of, of the entertainment industry and she was really the first one that, you know, showed me what, what an arts life could be like and the enjoyment of singing. I was six years old and all I really needed to, to experience was just having fun and so she was great at doing that. So I'd say my first singing teacher, you know, Deidre Slater in Geelong, I will always remember as the one responsible for for this artist. Yes. But then along the way, you know, then moving further into primary school and high school, there were, there were drama teachers, theatre studies teachers. So in all of my early education, there were great teachers that, that encouraged me. And then outside of school, then there were the directors and choreographers and in amateur theatre companies that were also a huge influence on me.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Then after my injury, I would say the people that had the biggest impact on me at that time were, were still arts creatives. So Derek Bond was a lecturer from the university from from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And the role that he played was basically just offering singing lessons for me whilst I was in rehabilitation.

Annie: Oh, really?

Tim: So, you know, that's a rare thing and probably a strange thing for someone to have, you know, so soon after their injury.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And and not common in a hospital setting.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: What was really interesting about that, though, is that there was a piano in the in the staff cafeteria of the hospital. That's where I had my first singing lesson after my injury. And I'll never forget that moment, because after my injury, it was kind of like, what is this going to be like? What's going to be like singing again? Am I am going to be able to sing? And once Derek offered that opportunity and it was it was arranged and organized, then everyone went, this is what Tim wants to do. And I went in there and just started singing. It just felt like home again and it wasn't going to be so hard.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: So Derek Bond probably has has had just equally as been of impact as what my very first singing teacher did.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: You know, and then and then these days, as a as a professional artist now, I very much have I suppose it's quite a large network now of mentors and peers and things that I look up to that that I can talk to about the opportunities that I want to have as a performer. And and the, I suppose the creative juices that are flowing in my mind –

Annie: Yes.

Tim: I bounce off them and, and, and, and ask for their guidance and and, you know, I ask for their funding and and ask for their time and resources in order for me to be able to create and ultimately entertain.

Annie: Yes. Yes. So are there any negative experiences, events or people, do you think, that have helped form you, you know, apart from.

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Tim: Yeah. I think the the knock backs and the and the sometimes the disappointing challenges and barriers that, that I have faced over the years have, have formed who I am now as an artist and a performer and a person not getting a particular role. So when you audition for something and you know, and you get that knock back or I have had moments of, of discrimination throughout my arts journey where I've not been included or chosen to be a part of something because of, you know, access issues for the wheelchair or that disability just doesn't fit this particular performance or probably the most common one that I that I get, especially in the music theatre industry, are the preconceived ideas and stereotyped roles that are cast for a particular production. And you know, it's I'm going to use Disney for an example. You know, I think it would be very tough for a Disney producer to cast a male quadriplegic as the lead role of, I don't know, Mufasa in "The Lion King" stage musical because there's never been one before and it doesn't fit the mould of that already created. So I, I look though at at these types of challenges and these negative experiences as ways of learning. I also accept that this is the industry as well because it's a bit of a dog eat dog world. You know, and, and there just aren't, sometimes aren't enough roles to go around for everyone and you're going to get some knock backs. But it's how you respond to that.

Annie: Yes. Yeah. So what was the motivator for doing your work?

Tim: What was the motivator for doing my work? I love telling stories. I think that's the most important part of why I create art and, and why I want to be a performer and to entertain people is because I enjoy, I enjoy stories. Yeah, I enjoy characters. I enjoy their journeys and, and whether that's telling my own story and my own journey or whether that's taking on somebody else's journey and character either or I just I just love telling stories.

Annie: You were saying before you've missed out on some roles because of discrimination. Excuse me. Have you ever challenged people to think about characters differently?

Tim: Oh, yes, I think so. I feel like I have and I hope I have. I, I'd like to think that there have been times where I have presented at an audition that, that maybe a casting team weren't expecting someone with a disability to actually and a perfect example for me was I remember I auditioned for the role of Javert in "Les Mis" [Misérables] the musical, and I actually presented a, a whole, I suppose, what would you call artistic case for the reason why Javert should have a disability and, and research and picked out all the scripts and parts and things and actually presented that to the audition panel and, and they were they were they took a lot on board, more than what I expected and and then and I got through callbacks and callbacks up against all able bodied performance - performers and they also knew that artistically, I had the ability to actually play the role, sing the part and demand the stage. Ultimately, I didn't get the role, and there were various reasons for that but what I the feedback that I did get was that I challenged the artistic team and also I challenged the other auditionees, the auditioners or the auditionees. I challenged them to, to, to step up and and, you know, show why they deserve the role. So. That actually felt like more of a win than actually getting, getting the part to be honest.

Annie: yes.

Tim: So hopefully over my many years of experience now of, of, of performing and, and entertaining, I would like to think that I have challenged a lot of the preconceived ideas and and myths and things around artists with disabilities.

Annie: Yes. Yes, it's wonderful. So do we see the influence of that in your later work do you think? These experiences that have shaped you?

Tim: Yeah, I think so. I think definitely the, the artist that I am today is, is, you know, in the work that I create today is has been has definitely been moulded out of the, the challenges that I faced as an artist with a disability and some of the, the negative experiences. I'm probably, probably a lot more determined now but at the same time, I think, I, I think I've found more of a belief in myself.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Because if you continue to believe whatever everyone else. Says about you or tells you what you are. And that's and that's not who who you who you believe you are or what you create. You know, you can get stifled.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And things. So for me, it's it's the self belief that. No, no, I believe in my talent. I believe in the work that I've I've done to get myself to this point. I believe in my ability to entertain and to tell a story.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And. And it's it's a creative process. You know, and that's and the arts is a bit like, you know, not everyone's going to like it or get it or whatever. So just keep plugging away and find your niche. Yes, yeah.

Annie: Yeah. So has your motivation for singing and acting and dancing, has that changed over time?

Tim: No, I would say I would say for me that I've had a very clear vision of of what it is that I've wanted to do with my life. And and that has been to to be an entertainer, a performer. Has that changed? You know, has the way I do it changed? Yes, it has. I'm a classically trained singer and I love musical theatre. But after my injury, I I decided to move down the path of learning some opera and learning from an opera teacher. Singing teacher

Annie: Yes,

Tim: because I had heard that if you can sing opera, you can sing anything. That's a lie, by the way. You can't. You can't rap.

Annie: Good to know.

Tim: But. But it opened my eyes to a new genre. And it helped with my respiratory challenges in order to be able to sing opera. You have to work very hard on your

respiratory abilities. So and that was purely the reason why I looked at opera was was basically out of how do I physically get better as a singer? And then I ended up just falling in love with the genre. So that's a part of my repertoire now. Yes, musical theater is still there. But as I've matured, I've I've now sort of slipped into the crooner jazz swing sort of style as well, which I'm currently exploring and, and so I have changed as an artist for sure, but my motivation hasn't changed since, I think the age of six. Yeah. Okay.

Annie: So where are you currently performing?

Tim: Well, my, when the world is open, I'm very blessed that I do get to travel around and sing at all different kinds of events and occasions, so predominantly as a soloist and, and then I also create my own work. So I currently got a cabaret at the moment that myself and another gentleman with a disability who uses a wheelchair. We're doing a double act crooner's show and we, we premiered that at, at the Undercover Artist Festival here in Brisbane. We premiered our show there and we're now actually getting picked up to do that show more often, which is great,

Annie: wonderful.

Tim: So I'm also a singing teacher and a choir master for a respiratory therapy group with spinal cord injured patients in the Princess Alexandra Hospital. So I actually conduct the choir in the hospital setting, which is which is a nice circle for me, where when I was in hospital and, you know, started singing back then. So I now provide that for other people. And yeah, so I have, I have a few different avenues of, of performing and creating and, and, and then also teaching others. Hmm.

Annie: Okay. Are there other places you would like to be able to present to perform?

Tim: Oh, yeah, yeah. I still see myself, you know, I may not tread the boards. I wheel the boards now, but yeah, I mean, places like the Opera House and Hamer Hall, Concert Hall and, you know, QPAC here and you know, the major theatres and stages. I mean, ultimately musical theatre is still what I love to do.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And I would love to be cast in a musical theatre show that was doing eight shows a week. And, you know, I get to go out there and perform that show, you know, eight shows a week but it's it's really hard to to crack into that that scene and but I would love to be able to do it and I'd love to be able to show that someone with a high level and a high needs disability like my own could do it with the help of support workers and understanding of a production company that could cater to my accessibility needs. It can be done. It's just, I really, I need for producers and artistic teams to to open their minds.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And to, and to be willing to cast someone like myself, be brave enough to cast someone like myself in a production like that.

Annie: What do you think audiences think of your work?

Tim: I think the initial reaction to seeing someone like myself on stage is, is of, oh, you know, that guy's in a wheelchair. You know, I wonder how he got in the wheelchair and, you know, I wonder what he's going to, you know, perform like. I wonder what he's going to sound like. I know that I get that from, from a probably a large majority of audience members. The challenge for me, though, is to change that thinking in the very first few lines that I speak or sing.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: To show them that it's actually, it's actually my art and my talent that that's, that's going to to change that mindset. And for them to go, oh, wow, this guy can sing and or, or act or whatever it is. So I see it as my challenge. Would I like audiences to not have that train of thought? You know, as soon as someone wheels out on stage, yeah, their minds shouldn't be thinking about the disability, but about the art they're about to create.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: I think we've got a long way to go before that's a reality. So I choose to kind of embrace the challenge of that.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And go, I'm going to change your mind within 5 seconds of me starting my art. Yeah, sometimes I nail it. Sometimes I don't.

Annie: Ok. So what do you think that people in the past, when you were early career, were aware of your work and your peers work, this type of work?

Tim: Prior to my injury?

Annie: Probably after your injury.

Tim: After injury, yeah. So we're talking 20 years ago.

Annie: Yeah. 20.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. My experience with, with disability arts, I was probably very blessed because I grew up in Geelong where the world renowned Back to Back theatre company was constantly performing and they were rehearsing in, you know, performance spaces next door to you. So I grew up watching the work that they created and so when I had my own disability, I knew that there was a space and a place for me.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And I knew what disability looked like on stage. Admittedly, though, there wasn't a lot of it.

Annie: No.

Tim: 20 years ago, you know, you wouldn't have seen someone in a wheelchair on stage, you know, in certain types of roles or on TV. You know, we weren't that heavily represented in those kind of mediums.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And I still don't think we are as much as what we should be.

Annie: Has it improved?

Tim: Slightly? Yeah. Yeah, slightly.

Annie: Yeah.

Tim: I don't think on on any grand scale.

Annie: No.

Tim: And I think there is a there is a positive movement which is good. If we were if we were just plateauing and we were happy with the status quo, that would be a danger and a worry. But but, you know, you've got to look at it. You know, one in five people in Australia have a disability.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Do we have those kind of representations in mainstream media? No, we don't. So we, we, we don't see ourselves as much in your TV soaps or on stage in musicals and so we have a long way to go before I think real equality is reached and that it becomes the norm that we start to see what's represented out in the community is the same on stages or on TVs or on radio or in print or whatever. So. Yeah.

Annie: Interesting. What besides your work is the best example of singing, acting, dancing. So.

Tim: Hmm.

Annie: Or artists over the last years?

Tim: Mm hmm.

Annie: And do you think. What do you think people don't know about but should?

Tim: That's a really good question. What was the first part of that question?

Annie: Again, sorry, that's a bit long. That's okay. So. Asides from your work? Yeah. Who's the best artist in this space?

Tim: For. I know of. I know I follow some wonderful artists, you know. Mark Brew is someone who I, he's a dancer, actually, and I'm far from a dancer, but I admire his, his work. And and more importantly, I admire where his work has taken him from a professional point of view in that he's working overseas and, you know, he he's being contracted to choreograph, you know, both able and disabled art. He he mixes that really well. And he I feel like he's in that upper echelon of of artistic creatives that happen to have a disability. There are there are some other wonderful singers that that I follow. Obviously, you know, other people with disabilities like, you know, Andre Porcelli, I suppose, is probably the, the, the, the most prominent and well known vocalist with with a disability with the vision impairment. I suppose the thing for me is that I don't see many of myself in, you know, with a high level quadriplegia doing doing what I do and I'm not saying that because I'm saying I'm the best at what I do either and I'm sure they're out there.

Annie: Yeah.

Tim: But. But do we really know of each other? Hmm. I think one of the best things that I saw for the 2016 Paralympic Games in London was when they did an advertisement called 'We Are the Superhumans'.

Annie: Right.

Tim: And and my dear friend Tony Dee, who I met after that, but he was the main vocalist. But all of the musicians on that ad had a disability, okay? And they were the music that they created for that ad and the performance that they put on was just absolutely world standard.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: You know, and and I just looked at that ad and just went on one hand, it's just extraordinary and inspiring. And on the other hand, I went it's just also so normal. It should be so normal. You know, I kind of looked at the ad and just went, it's great music, it's great entertainment. You know, it's and they're all top of their game. They just also happen to have a disability

Annie: that's right.

Tim: So so I yeah, I think there and then then there are, you know, Australian, Australian performers and artists that that are doing some great work. And I, I think I see them occasionally, but I don't see them enough if that makes sense. You know.

Annie: Yeah.

Tim: Are they, are they touring with the, you know, like the Melbourne Comedy Festival, are they doing the tours with them? I don't know. I don't see enough of people with disabilities represented in that or at least advertised or spruiked.

Annie: Yes,

Tim: in that way. Are there are there many in musical theatre circles in Hamilton at the moment, in Mary Poppins, in all of the shows that are touring around Australia at the moment?

Annie: Yes.

Tim: No. So for me that's a really hard question to answer. I feel like because I don't see enough of us in that top, top of the profession.

Annie: Yeah. So. What do you think the public would say are the key milestones or big major happenings in the history of disability arts in Australia?

Tim: That is an interesting question. Well, I think. I think. I think there's certainly been some some key milestones lately around the, the inclusivity of, of audiences. So festivals, for instance. So we look at Ability fest that Dylan Alcott has started and created a huge movement and and there's about to be another one here in Queensland very soon and so and that's going to grow. So inclusive participation to attend festivals and events I think have been, have been big milestones. From a, from a performance point of view there's been small moments. Reality TV has probably been one because that's just such a, a, a large portion of Australian TV at the moment, you know, a reality shows.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And every now and then we get a glimpse of some an artist with a disability and I'll put my hand up and say I was one of those in 2017 when I went on The Voice and I had my, I had my 5 minutes of fame and and I didn't shy away from my disability, but I also didn't use it to, to in any sympathy or anything but, but then we get, so we get those stories. We get some singers that might have a vision impairment or that have a disability or a health issue that they're going through. It seems like a good platform for us to be able to showcase our art.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And tell our disability story but the problem with that is, is that it's still only 5 minutes.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: It doesn't guarantee us any further work or anything. So audiences, I think, get used to seeing us in that environment. I'm not too sure if I have any other comments on what what other key milestones I. It makes me sad in a way, in a little bit, because I would love to be able to say or be able to think off the top of my head. What were some what were some major moments in disability arts in Australia? Sad, isn't it, that I. And it might just be me. And I hope that other people have been able to, to see what those key moments are. Maybe I'm expecting a bigger bang. You know, what I'm thinking, though,

is, is that I'm thinking that there are going to be moments in the future, though. I can see what they will be in the future.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And so I'll use the the London Olympics as an example of setting up Unlimited UK that worked alongside the Olympic bid and the Olympic program and matched dollar for dollar. So every dollar that was spent on sport, every you know, it was matched in the arts.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: I feel like we have the opportunity to do something like that now here in Australia in that we're going to have an Olympics coming up here in Queensland in 2032, which means that there'll be a Paralympics attached to that.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Now, if if the disability arts sector don't demand centerstage for that particular occasion, then, you know, then we're not helping ourselves much.

Annie: Yes,

Tim: we we need to take advantage of those types of moments and world stages so that we can actually show what skills and abilities we have. So that's just one that's just one that I can think of a couple of others, but they're the types of things that us with disabilities need to be able to go. We need to be seen. We want centre stage, you know, give us this moment. Yeah.

Annie: That leads into the next question about whether your art is political and by that I mean whether it creates change in how people think that.

Tim: My art's not deliberately political. I. I suppose I have a more subliminal way of trying to change people's perceptions and trying to, to have influence that way.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: I, I dabble more in, in advocacy and, and change in other ways in sort of off stage roles so committees and all kinds of advisory groups and and things. So I still champion the arts in other ways, but my art in general isn't necessarily used to, to push a particular agenda or issue, not as yet, it might be. There might be something. I'm not opposed to it.

Annie: Yeah.

Tim: In that I believe that there actually is a place for, for that type of art. It's just that I suppose I've never used that platform, but get me in front of a microphone and that's always a great way to be able to, you know, spruik something, isn't it? So, yeah.

Annie: So do you want to identify or be identified as a disabled artist?

Tim: I think so, yeah. I'm happy to, to have that as a part of of who I am. It's not what defines me. I feel like if, if I am labeled in that way, there is a risk of of being pigeonholed in in just being that. So for me, I need to be really careful that, you know, that there are other elements, you know, descriptive elements of who I am as a person and mainly as an artist that isn't just disability related but it's not something that I shy away from. I'm happy to and proud to say that, you know, I'm I live with this disability.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And sometimes I use it as a creative tool. Yes. And other times, it's got absolutely nothing to do with my art.

Annie: Great. Do you think that there is a commonality or consistency in how artists who the public would identify as disabled think about these things?

Tim: Well, I certainly think that visible disabilities are the ones that audiences identify with. You know, so wheelchairs or, you know, vision impairment, you know, aids are probably the obvious things that audiences, you know, identify as, as disability. There are some some, yeah, I think I think invisible disabilities are probably the hardest ones

that audiences will be able to recognize and identify and relate to. And so how we represent that in our art is going to be a challenge. But there are there are some great artists out there that have invisible disabilities that are championing that cause.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Yeah. So I think. Yeah. Did that kind of answer that question a bit?

Annie: Yeah, I guess do you think artists themselves, how would they identify.

Tim: Well. Well, I think I think there's a I don't know the numbers, but I believe that there's probably a proportion of artists with disabilities that, that don't want to identify or have their, have their disability labelled as what kind of artists they are. Yeah. And then I think there's very much another part of the disability arts sector that embrace it and only dabble in disability arts. I think that's just going to always be the case. Me personally, I, I, I sit on the fence with that and as I said before, sometimes I use my disability and, and incorporate that into my art and other times it has absolutely nothing to do with my own.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: And I think that's probably a good snapshot of the disability arts community. I think I don't know what the percentages are. I just know that there are two different parties.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Yeah and, and, and I think that that's a good thing. There needs to be space for both. Yeah.

Annie: Is there something we haven't asked about that we should. Do you think.

Tim: Maybe about arts governance.

Annie: Okay.

Tim: I think, I think educating artists in helping them into leadership roles so on, you know, on arts councils and, and, and especially state body so, you know, state operas. State orchestras.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: State ballets.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: Whether they. Yeah the artists with disabilities should be included on, on those kind of boards and committees and leadership roles. But what I would say about that is that it can't be tokenistic. It can't be just because you have lived experience. I look at it these days as you must have lived expertise. So, yes, I live as a quadriplegic. Do I have the skills to be on a board or an executive committee or a or in a leadership role? I believe I do, because I've I've worked hard to upskill my own professional abilities and professional development but I don't ever want to get given a board role just because, you know, I fill a quota.

Annie: Yes.

Tim: But I believe, though, that we need to be able to educate and give opportunities for artists to learn how to professionally develop their skills to a point where they are eligible and worthwhile having on these types of, of, of leadership positions so that we can have influence on on how art is delivered and what is included and what is considered about equality and, and things. That that's just a little thing that I've I would like to see an improvement on. We need the education there first to help artists upskill their professional abilities to then be in leadership roles. And then I think we would see greater change when we're in those kind of positions.

Annie: Yeah. Tim, thank you so much for your time. It's been wonderful.

Tim: Thank you. Pleasure.