

# Screen hero

Life Stories



Entrepreneur Roy Mustaca has been instrumental in safeguarding the future of independent cinemas, not just locally but across Australia.

Story by Rosamund Burton

PHOTO: Rosamund Burton

Meeting Roy Mustaca in the grand foyer of Warriewood Cinema complex, with its arched ceiling dotted with twinkling stars, is like being transported to another world. This compact, impeccably dressed man, sporting an immaculate quiff of black hair, built the cinema centre 22 years ago. He is the Founder and Chairman of United Cinemas, an independent chain, which has 10 cinemas. However, he started life as a singer.

Born in Calabria in the toe of Italy, at the age of eight he was taken under the wing of a poet and musician, Antonio Morosini. Morosini played with a 48-piece orchestra with Maestro Errigo, and at weekends his troupe would travel to fiestas in different

Calabrian villages, and Roy would sing.

"That was the best thing that ever happened to me," Roy says. "He was my teacher and he was such a beautiful man. I was good on stage. It just came naturally, but he gave me so much courage. I sang with him for five years. I was very lucky."

Aged 13 and a half, Roy travelled to Australia with his younger brother on a ship. It's difficult to comprehend a young teenager making the 33-day voyage with a younger brother to look after. But his father was already here, and the now 78-year-old says: "I was a man at 13 and a half. I thought like a man."

He explains that he comes from an astute family; his grandfather and father were both businessmen and after the

Italian Lira was devalued post-World War II, his father came to Sydney and went into real estate.

Roy attended Marist Catholic College in North Sydney. Although he was Christened Rocco, his school mates called him Roy, which he's been known as ever since. Father and son lived at Chatswood and five nights a week his father would take him to the clubs all over Sydney to sing.

By age 18 he and his family bought a property in Chatswood and Roy made it into a restaurant. Again, I'm taken aback at his entrepreneurialism at such an early age.

"I did tell you I was a man at 13 and a half," he says.

Roy became an opera singer, which took him back to Italy. It was there that he met

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his wife, Josephine, and they married in 1976. They have two sons - Peter, who is a lawyer, and Sam, who is CEO of United Cinemas - and eight grandchildren.

"I'm so lucky to have my wife, who loves what I do. She is my best audience and we have such a beautiful life."

Forty years ago, they moved to Collaroy and Roy built a house with expansive views over the ocean. It was soon after coming back from a stint of recording overseas that he saw the Collaroy cinema was for sale and heard that a builder was going to demolish it. The agent told him that the exchange was scheduled for 2.30pm that afternoon, to which Roy asked:

"*Could I buy it before then?*"

"*I don't see why not,*" replied the agent, so Roy offered to write him a cheque.

"You don't have to pay me the lot, just

give me 10 per cent," he said, and Roy exchanged there and then.

The Collaroy cinema was dilapidated. It had an asbestos roof, no air-conditioning and no floor. Roy replaced the roof, installed air-conditioning, new carpet, reupholstered the seats and had plans to make it into a studio, because he was recording with EMI at the time and needed a large space for an orchestra. But before that happened Josephine suggested they screen movies for a few months.

Roy approached film distributors, only to be told that independent cinemas weren't supplied with new films. He spoke to several independent cinemas owners and discovered some of them had lost their homes because of not being supplied current films.

"So, I formed United Cinemas and all

87 of the independent cinemas joined me, and then I went to the ACCC [Australian Competition and Consumer Commission], and eventually got the code of conduct which changed the whole industry. I worked on it for nine years, and instead of going back to Milan to sing, I stayed in cinema."

Roy made Collaroy into a twin cinema; it became very popular and was always full. Then in 1992 he bought Avalon cinema. For six months he drove between the two places, past a block of waterlogged land in Warriewood, and he always wondered if he could fill it in and build a cinema there. The land had been for sale for a while, but it was zoned industrial. It took a couple of years for the re-zoning to be approved by the then Pittwater Council, and 22 years

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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Roy in the foyer of his Warriewood Cinema complex; Avalon Cinema circa early 1960s; the suave young crooner; his family loves a movie premier; the stars come out for Roy - here he is with Jennifer Lopez; with Rachel McAdams; in Venice; with wife Josephine and John Travolta; with the late Robin Williams; with his cinema ushers; and here the extended family gathers to celebrate Josephine's birthday.



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ago the Warriewood Cinema Centre was opened.

"I designed it myself. I wanted to make something very beautiful and I worked really hard."

We walk to the far end of the foyer to the main auditorium, which he explains has capacity for 1,200 seats for concerts and 920 seats for films.

"If you told me in January last year that we would have something like COVID, I would have said it's impossible, that will never happen - but the cinema was closed on March 23, and the other nine United Cinemas we own were also closed. It was like the light had been turned off, and it was dark, and we didn't know when the light was going to come back on."

Cinemas were closed for four months due to COVID in 2020, and he admits it has been difficult, but the Mustaca family has used this time to refurbish. His son, Sam, has coordinated a complete makeover of the restaurant downstairs.

At the beginning of 2021, Roy signed a deal with American actor brothers Mark and Donnie Wahlberg and their brother chef Paul, founders of the 'Wahlburgers' franchise, to own and operate 15 Wahlburgers in Australia and five in New Zealand. At the front of the Warriewood Cinema Centre Roy has plans

for a Wahlburgers drive-through and large restaurant, with the opening planned for 2022.

"Chef Paul and his team are going to teach our chefs how to make the burgers, because they're not just another burger. But we're waiting for them to be able to travel here," Roy explains.

He tells me he usually finishes work and leaves the cinema at midnight. Then most nights he spends a couple of hours in his home studio, writing songs and singing, and is up again cooking breakfast at 7am. At that moment, as we speak, his tenor voice can be heard from the auditorium near the bar. On the large screen is Roy dressed in a silver suit standing in front of the Opera Quay Cinema, which he bought in 2010, singing God Kill the Coronavirus. He wrote this while the cinemas were closed, and within days had over 44,000 listeners on Facebook.

"God bless all the doctors who save lives every day. God bless all the teachers who care for our children in every way," he booms from the screen.

Roy Mustaca truly is an extraordinary man. Clearly he is an extremely astute businessman, having accumulated property holdings in addition to his cinemas, and in 2018 he bought the Max Brenner café chain. In 2009, he was awarded an OAM for service to the

community of Pittwater through support for health, service and multicultural organisations. Inherent in him is the desire to serve - to give to his family, to those in need and to his cinema-goers.

Now he is being called once again to fight for the cinema industry. There is an agreement between cinema owners and film distributors that cinemas have a three-month window to show new films before they appear on television or are streamed online. However, some distributors have broken that agreement and are going straight to streaming, so he is lobbying the Federal Government to maintain this three-month window.

"Unless we have this small window, cinemas won't survive."

Roy Mustaca is hopeful there will be legislation in the cinemas' favour, because otherwise it will not be financial viable for them to stay open. We look at the group of elderly women drinking coffee at the long table beside us and their animated faces as they discuss the movie they've seen. No doubt they first came to the cinema as small children and over their lifetimes have been mesmerised many times by the magic of the big screen.

"I love to be here and to talk to the people who come. It's a beautiful life. I love this theatre. I don't want to have to close it."

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