

# Spirit of adventure inspired lensman

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## William Russell

Photographer, scriptwriter and filmmaker. Born Sydney, 1933. Died Tuggerah, NSW, June 12, aged 70.

**W**ILLIAM Russell was one of those seekers of far adventure and fortune who worked in Fleet Street in the 1960s and won a high respect for Australians as journalists and photographers.

Billy had virtually no previous experience in newspapers. Instead, he relied on an audacious and quick intelligence, both of which were to serve him well all his long and eventual life as newspaper photographer, documentary director and producer and film scriptwriter.

In those days, Fleet Street was a mecca for newspaper workers from across the world, particularly Commonwealth countries. But in 1959-60 it was shrinking. Two morning dailies, the *Sketch* and the *Chronicle*, had folded, journalists and photographers used to the street's lavish expenses and high salaries were roughing it on the provincials or lowly paid local agencies, and many were out of work.

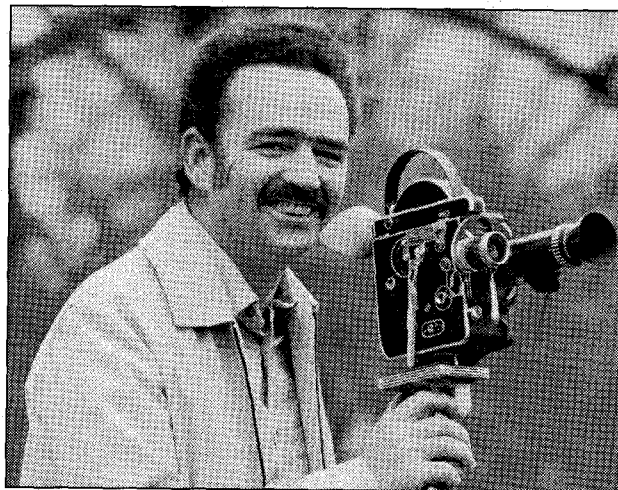
Enter a pugnacious Australian with a cheeky grin as big and ready as his confidence and ambition, nicely tanned from three months in Spain with his bride, Daphne.

Billy's CV was hardly convincing: he left Randwick Boys High aged 15 in 1947, departed home in Bronte a year later, was briefly a copyboy on the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* and a gofer for Cine-sound. Desperate to get overseas, he was a cadet merchant seaman on tankers plying the Arabian Gulf, jumping ship in 1952 in Rotterdam.

He starved in London for two years, working a variety of menial jobs. In 1954, Billy came back to Australia and — in pursuit of money — drove trucks for the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and the Sydney Water Board.

Bankrolled, he married and headed overseas again, determined this time not to be rebuffed.

Billy, aged 27, was not entirely without credentials: he had worked as a street



**Itchy feet:** As a newspaperman, Russell travelled extensively

photographer in Sydney, confronting tourists in Martin Place, snapping their picture, then cajoling them into buying the print. It needed an up-front but genial approach.

He was also intellectually aggressive, honed in arguments with the free-thinking radicals of the famous Sydney Push. And he had pedigree: his uncles Dan and Jim Russell were well-known newspaper cartoonists and illustrators. Jim wrote and drew the still popular syndicated strip *The Potts* from the '30s until his death last year aged 90.

In Spain, Billy had shot photographs of such quality and interest he got a job as a freelance on the now-defunct United Press International, then rivalling Associated Press as the biggest news-agency in the world.

After a year, he went to the front desk of London's *The Daily Telegraph* and, refused admittance, sent upstairs a folio of his agency photographs that the paper had published. He got the job.

Colour photography in newspapers was in its infancy and, having bypassed the black-and-white Speed Graphic for a Leica, Billy was eventually assigned to the *Telegraph's* weekly liftout colour magazine, which used the most talented writers and photographers.

Billy prospered and travelled widely, all expenses paid. But by 1969 their son William was a growing boy and the

Russells returned to Australia, where Billy joined the staff of News Limited, working first on the *Daily Mirror*, then the short-lived but excellent *Sunday Australian*.

Apart from a year back in Fleet Street with the *Daily Telegraph*, he spent the rest of his newspaper career at News Limited, forsaking the road for a desk job until he retired in 1992. He made the move indoors because it guaranteed him night work — and he had found new goals to pursue.

In London, Billy had gone to night school to learn movie making. He caught the bug, and in 1974-75 co-produced, co-directed and photographed a seminal TV documentary about Australian hang-gliders.

*Birdman* was acclaimed and achieved record overseas sales for the time. But Billy was restless again. Working in the daytime from the dilapidated offices of a '40s dental mechanic in Woollahra, he wrote the original script for the movie *Frenchman's Farm* and, after a relentless pursuit of producers, saw it on the screens in 1987, starring John Meillon and Ray Barrett.

He wrote several other scripts. Hollywood producers refuse to deal with writers. They deal with agents, who take 10 per cent, or other producers. Billy solved the problem by introducing himself as the producer of Galaxy Films. He had the chutzpah and knowledge to pull it off, and soon was in regular contact with Hollywood's second-string production companies, the Mini-Majors.

Several of his scripts were optioned but not produced. Undeterred, Billy was working on scripts right up to his sudden death from a heart attack at his home.

Billy went out the way he came in, pushing himself to the limit, sure that, tomorrow, he was going to make it. He was a fine bloke, an absolute professional. He had a strong marriage and he lived an exciting life. He would not have asked for more.