

ticket please

It's 10 years this month since conductors (remember them?) last worked Melbourne's trams. For many, it was the best time of their lives, writes Melinda Houston.

Opposite Former conductors Kevin Tierney, Malcolm Just and Roberto D'Andrea photographed at the South Melbourne tram depot.

"There was one little old lady who always gave me chocolates at Easter," says Olga Curley, a former tram conductor sitting at a kitchen table in Coburg with two other ex-connies, Ollie and Marin Cikes. Once they get going, the flow of talk about "the old days" is unstoppable, moving between politics, tram-talk, and 'Do you remembers'. "I still meet people who say, 'I remember when you were pregnant'," says Curley. "A young man said to me the other day, 'You used to take me to school! That made me feel old. I said, 'What did I look like?' And he says, 'You had purple hair.'" She takes a sip of her coffee. "You don't see a lot of purple hair these days. Or mohawks."

It's 10 years since the last conductor, Bernard Lamberty, rode the last two-man tram into Malvern depot, but ex-connies still love a chat – especially about their old job. "I just really love the trams," sniffs Ollie. "One of my strongest memories is being on a W class going down Lygon Street and hearing the ch-ch, ch-ch, ch-ch." Her eyes fill with tears at the memory. Marin passes her the tissues. She swallows hard, dabs at her eyes, blows her nose. "It was a good job," she sniffs. "It was a good job."

Like the trams themselves, conductors – with their distinctive uniforms, their caps and bags and infinite quirks – were the very soul of Melbourne. But as early as 1983, when the Met was formed, marking a new businesslike approach to public transport, their days were numbered. The first major blow came in 1989, when DIY "scratchie" tickets were mooted, a system that would obviate the need for someone to sell or punch a ticket. This was not lost on the conductors and other tramway employees, who launched the strike in 1990 that had motionless trams lined up along city streets for five weeks. The industrial action generated a lot of heat – and headlines – but no real results for the conductors.

The Cain and Kirner governments were determined to slash costs; by 1992, the Kennett Government was determined to rid itself of the responsibility for public transport altogether, and any potential private operators were determined to rid themselves of archaic – and supposedly costly – conductors.

By 1997, even the unions had largely given up on the fight to retain conductors, and focused instead on getting the best deal for the people who remained. The Victorian president of the tram and bus division of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, Doug Brady, says a lot of connies actually stayed in the system. "Some became drivers. Some became revenue protection officers. Some became customer service employees."

But many didn't want to continue if they couldn't be tram conductors. They gradually dispersed into the community, became cabbies, couriers, farmers, bank tellers, went into retail, took a redundancy package or simply retired. In the mid-1990s, there were 700 conductors in Melbourne. By April 1998, there were 200 left. "And of those, 70 to 100 didn't take a job in the industry, they took a package," Brady says. By May 1998, they were gone, replaced by an automatic ticketing system (and, as it turned out, rampant fare evasion).

Like most former conductors, Malcolm Just was fully alive to the realities of the situation. "A small proportion of the workforce went way beyond the call of duty. The bulk of people just did their job. And a small proportion were absolutely bloody-minded," he says. "And people couldn't get sacked. That was the problem. It was very difficult to get rid of problematic people. The right to hire and fire is a right management must have. When you get weak management, weak government, that's when you get problems."

Still, like most conductors, he has warm memories of his time on the trams. "They were a great place to work. It was a whole community in itself, it had its own sporting →



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Goodbye conductors

How it happened

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1987

The first light rail route is opened, from St Kilda Beach to East Brunswick, on November 20. The Port Melbourne light rail follows in December. W2 and SW2 class trams are withdrawn from service.

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Trams block city streets for five weeks from January during an industrial dispute over the scratch tickets and driver-only trams. In October, the National Trust classifies all remaining W class trams.

1993

The first driver-only tram runs from Camberwell Depot on the Wattle Park-Princes Bridge route on February 28. Over the next nine months, driver-only operation is extended to all other depots (mostly after 8pm on weekdays and all day on Saturdays and Sundays), until 85 per cent of services are converted. Conductors retained on peak weekday services.

1996

The first Metcard machine is fitted to trams on the East Burwood route.

1997

The East Burwood-Spencer Street route becomes the first to run completely without conductors on April 27. In October, the Met Tram division of the Public Transport Corporation is split into two business units – Swanston Trams and Yarra Trams – readying them for sale to private operators. On December 8, Camberwell depot loses its conductors.

1998

On January 20, Glenhuntly depot loses its conductors, followed by Kew (March 7); Preston (March 21); Brunswick (April 15); Essendon (May 5); and Southbank (May 12). On May 24 the last conductor returns for the last time to Malvern depot.

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Swanston Trams and Yarra Trams are both fully privatised.

2001

Scratch tickets and punch card tickets are phased out in December.

2002

Green W class trams are returned to service along La Trobe Street.

2004

Yarra Trams assumes responsibility for all Melbourne's trams. In July, W class trams return to service on routes 78 and 79 along Church and Chapel streets.



Bernard Lamberty, the last conductor, who finished work on the last shift in May 1998.

clubs, social nights, it was the kind of thing where son followed father into the business. What other occupation do people write letters to the paper about? Who writes to the paper and says, 'The man in the post office was nice to me yesterday?' The role of conductors was seen as pivotal." Just, who joined the tramways in 1989, became heavily involved in the movement to save conductors, most notably as the "tram poet", starting each shift with a poem on the political developments of the day and posting them in the carriages, to the delight of passengers and the government's annoyance.

Like tea ladies or lift attendants – only more useful, and capable of generating income – conductors marked a more civilised time. "I will never forget one woman saying to me, 'When you hand me back my change, your hand is the only hand that's touched mine all day,'" says Just. "It is a helping sort of role. One of the few occupations where ordinary people get service without paying for it ... And if people see you talking with a stranger, it gives them licence to talk with a stranger. If a tram was working well, it was like a cafe on wheels."

And maybe there are traces of that culture left. People still seem more inclined to help each other on trams than they do on trains or buses, to take one end of a pram or a shopping jeep, to offer directions or explain how to use the ticket machines.

"It was all about the shorts, the long socks, the hand of friendship," says Roberto D'Andrea, who became a conductor in 1989. "People love yarning. We love yarning.

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You'd work the whole tram into a chat." Yarning is what D'Andrea does best, which is precisely what made him a peerless tram conductor. In fact, he loved the job so much he just couldn't let it go. In the late 1990s, he formed the Connies, a kind of artists' collective/action group which – right up until 2001 – lobbied to save and then bring back conductors (including standing as candidates in the 1999 state election). The Connies has evolved into a performance troupe focused on the environment and local history, wearing conductors' uniforms and distributing information cards from conductors' bags.

Only a few of the crew are ex-connies these days, but the spirit lives on. "We do what connies do best, which is get dressed in our uniforms and go out and meet people," D'Andrea says. His depot, South Melbourne, was the site of many friendships, and plenty of romance. "There were a lot of characters, there were a lot of eccentrics. South Melbourne was the place where the uniform turned into a bit of a costume."

Although he continued to work as a

"marmalade" – tram slang for a driver/conductor – up to the end, he says memories of those last weeks and months are a bit of a blur. "I don't remember the last ride, I remember it as a clump. The public were talking about it all the time. Say, when old Doris got on at the flats in South Melbourne on her way to the market, and you'd give her a hand up the steps, help her with her trolley, people would say, 'Who's going to do this?'"

Bernard Lamberty actually wanted to be a tram driver, but was prevented by his colour-blindness. He ended up with the lonely honour of being the last conductor on the last tram trip, on May 24, 1998. He was not a showman, or even a "gunzle" (the tram equivalent of a trainspotter). Like most conductors, he was just a bloke doing a job. "I came to Australia from Mauritius in 1989," he says. "I worked in some factories. Then I saw they were taking conductors, so I thought I'd do that. It was long hours, shift work. But the money was good, it was clean work."

For decades, conducting had been the perfect job for new migrants. "You meet a lot of people, I could practise my English," says Lamberty. "It was nice, I made some good friends. The people I worked with were very nice, lots of other Mauritians. That made it easier." And he was understandably sad when it came to an end, more for his customers than himself. "I thought, 'People won't be able to rely on anyone for help any more.' Old people, pregnant people, disabled people. I knew after that, there wasn't any help for them." Lamberty, now a courier, is content enough these days, and clear-eyed enough to know no job is perfect. "Some people →



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Clockwise from bottom left
New conductors on their first day in 1950; Ken Walker and Roberto D'Andrea contemplate the introduction of driver-only trams in 1993; an unbuttoned John Harper, a conductor in 1971 when the retirement of R J Risson as head of the Tramways Board saw a fall in conductors' dress standards; and conductor Christine Zidkowski models the new canary-yellow women's uniform in 1976 – *The Age's* Accent editor, Nancy Dexter, wrote: "Mini-skirts went out at least four years ago. So did long socks for women. But the Tramways Board has caught up at last."

were very nice. But there were bad things too – everyone always saying, 'Where have you been?' 'Why are you late?'"

For others, for the gunzles (or gunzels – the jury's still out on the spelling), the pleasure was more visceral. As a kid, Kevin Tierney hitched his bike to the back of W2s as they groaned up High Street past Kew Cemetery. He was fascinated by them, by the look and the sound and the smell of them. And as a university student, he couldn't wait to get a job on them. "I am a tram buff. A gunzle. I could work out the different trams by the sound they made. My favourites were the ones we'd call the growlers. The W2s. The sound they made was the sound of worn-out gears."

He says the film *Malcolm* (with a tram that split in half) was a bible, and some of his colleagues were so fanatical they'd turn up at the depot on their days off just to be around the trams. That was in the '70s, when aspirant drivers had to do six months as a connie first.

Tierney ended up as a marmalade (again, no one knows where the term comes from, though everyone has a theory). "You never knew what you were going to do. Both could get stressful. The heat, packed trams, crazy drivers. And you didn't have a steering wheel! But I was on for six years, and I loved it."

His route of choice was Chapel Street. "You'd start with the ladies of the night on the 5.10am, coming home from work. You'd ask them how business was, they'd say, 'How do you reckon? If business was any good you reckon we'd be coming home on a tram?'. By 7am, you had the waterside and the factory workers. Eight o'clock the office workers and the schoolkids. Nine-thirty it was

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the pensioners. Then there'd be a lull until 2.30, when all the pensioners would head home – the discount only applied until 3.30. Then the schoolkids, the waterside workers. The people from the factories in Richmond. Then the office workers. And the ladies of the night again, heading off to work. That great cycle. Whenever I could work that route, I did."

One of his most vivid memories, though, is of one day outside Prahran Market when he glanced out the door and saw a woman's legs sticking out from under the – thankfully, stationary – tram. "At first, I thought the worst, but then this voice calls out, 'Right love! Got them all!'" Her bag had broken, and she'd crawled under the tram to collect her bits and pieces. He also remembers – how could he not? – kids laying detonators on the Victoria (Street) Bridge. "The sound! And the smoke! You really had people ducking for cover. None of that these days, of course ... Back then, you never knew what to expect."

Tierney eventually moved to the United States, where he lived for 20 years. Back in Australia, he came across the Connies at the Commonwealth Games, and couldn't resist. "I thought, I'd really like to be part of that.

Now I love working with Roberto. We take along old tickets as well as (the information) cards, and people love them. It's a period in people's lives that they remember so fondly."

Paul Bateman was a law student in 1993

when he discovered that conductors were only being employed on six-month contracts. As a budding novelist, he'd long harboured a desire to work on the trams, and realised it was now or never. "Whatever I wrote was always going to be about Melbourne. And I thought connies had such an extraordinary insight into Melbourne and its people."

So, to his mother's horror, in 1994 he deferred his law degree and took on two six-month contracts as a connie. "And it was all that I imagined it would be, and more. I loved the authenticity of the experience. Life is so raw, so unscripted, so unfiltered on the trams. You don't get that experience anywhere else."

He loved the changing mood of the tram, the freshness of the morning commute, the collective fatigue in the evening. "People were very open and talkative. But you also became aware of the immense loneliness and solitariness of some people," he says. "For a lot of people, the trams were moving hostels, shelters for the day. And I knew that some of the conversations I had with people would be the only conversation they had that day."

Bateman, now events co-ordinator with the State Library, lives in St Kilda and loves the 96 route, but as a conductor, his favourite was the 1. "It runs from Coburg right down into South Melbourne. It was like crossing continents. Extraordinary." The book is still being written, and Bateman has an extensive

collection of anecdotes he eventually hopes to formalise. "The thing that made me saddest of all is that connies are the repository of so many significant stories. We lost an enormous cultural resource when we lost the connies."

The stories are still out there, of course. And in Coburg, Olga, Ollie and Marin are still talking. All three joined the tramways in 1989, just before the big strike. They were all kids: Ollie 18, Marin 19, Olga 21. Conversation in the depot was passionate, relations with management fraught, and within 12 months all three were engaged in the most headline-making industrial disputes of the decade.

"People were donating food at Brunswick depot," remembers Olga. "People brought money for us. And these aren't tram people. These are just people who thought there should be conductors." Marin remembers driving around the northern suburbs in the small hours, begging bakeries for bread – and being richly rewarded. He turns to the women. "How many times do we sit upstairs here and talk about it? Do you remember this, do you remember that. It makes me want to cry."

One of his fondest memories was the time a couple struggled on board with kids and prams, and dropped their keys into the innards of the tram. "They fell right onto the centre of a bogey on a B class," Marin says. These days, the protocol is to direct people to the toll-free number on their ticket. Back then, the conductor notified the driver, who radioed the maintenance crew, and the tram was parked in an inconspicuous spot. "A truck came with the maintenance guys and they pulled it all apart, got the bogey out, found the keys. The couple couldn't believe it." (m)