



# Tania de Jong – a healing note

*With the voice of an angel, the heart of a lion and the soul of a mystic, Tania de Jong AM leads a varied and productive life. She is a gifted soprano with an entrepreneurial flair and a passion for giving. Having built numerous businesses, performed in countless venues, released many CDs and established three charities, her latest vision is to transform the treatment of mental illness in Australia.*

Words TERRY ROBSON

Tania de Jong has a beautiful voice, not only in the melodious sense, but also in the message she shares. As a singer she has performed in numerous venues globally and released 12 albums (seven with her group Pot-Pourri and five solo efforts). De Jong has also founded three charities, The Song Room, With One Voice and her latest Mind Medicine Australia. She has developed five businesses including Creative Innovation Global, Dimension 5 and MTA Events and Entertainment. There has been recognition along the way: in 2008 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the arts as a performer and entrepreneur and for establishing programs in schools and communities. Yet it hasn't been all smooth sailing — there have been storms in her path — but through it all she has been driven by a passionate belief in the healing power of song, a rich family heritage, a desire to break down barriers of all sorts and a deep thirst for oneness.

## Seeds of song

De Jong has a family heritage that has shaped her in many ways. Her entrepreneurial spirit can be traced to her grandmother, Slawa Duldig, who is credited with inventing the folding umbrella. While this might be an eye-catching detail, the broader family history and a deep vein of creativity have been more determinant in de Jong's life.

De Jong was born to a Dutch father and Austrian mother. Her grandfather Karl Duldig was a renowned sculptor and Slawa Duldig was also a sculptress. De Jong's

mother was a talented tennis player, at one stage being the Dutch national champion, also playing Federation Cup for Australia and once reaching the quarter-finals at Wimbledon. Artistic and sporting talent is strong in the family, but a significant aspect



of the family's history is that both of de Jong's parents had escaped the Holocaust. As de Jong recalls, "My mother's family escaped Vienna when Mum was three months old by the skin of their teeth. My father was moved from safe house to safe house during the war. Dad didn't speak about his experience at all until the last couple of

years of his life, but my mother released a book recently called *Driftwood* that tells the story of my grandparents' escape."

This desperate background has shaped many of de Jong's attitudes. "I have a real sense of gratitude," she says, "for being here and for what my parents and their parents did. I feel a huge obligation to give back to the community and to help people who are suffering, particularly people who are excluded in some way."

Exclusion certainly was an issue for de Jong growing up. She remembers, "I was in an Anglican girls' school as one of the very few Jewish girls there. While I had my friends, I knew what it was like to feel isolated." It was during her school years too that de Jong received a blow to her confidence as a singer. Although she enjoyed singing, when de Jong was 14 a girlfriend who was already having singing lessons heard her sing and told her that she should never bother having lessons. This was one of those seminal childhood moments. De Jong reflects, "As a 14-year-old I thought, 'Well I'm never going to be able to sing.' Then in Year 11, I thought I might audition for the chorus in the school production of *Oklahoma*. I did audition for the chorus and I got the lead role instead. It was so surprising and nerve-racking too, because I had this voice in my head saying, 'You're not good enough.'"

Singing was a lifelong ambition for de Jong, but after high school she won a tennis scholarship to the United States, which she took up for a year. Upon her return to Australia, she studied law at the University of Melbourne, graduating with honours. "I couldn't trust singing to be a secure profession, especially after what I'd been



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told," she says frankly. "I knew I wanted to be a singer, but law was a backup." In addition to her law studies de Jong also undertook postgraduate studies at the Victorian College of the Arts in opera, musical theatre and voice. A life of song was under way but further challenges were to come.

## Song sung true

When she was 23 a singing teacher told de Jong that she was destined never to make it past the chorus as a performer. By this stage though, de Jong was developing the philosophical outlook that has allowed her to achieve so much. She says, "I was hurt at the time, but you have to realise that people have their own agendas for saying what they are saying. They may have unresolved traumas or unrealised dreams — there are a whole heap of reasons why people may be critical or unsupportive. It's important not to take it personally because it's their stuff not yours."

Although singing has been the centrepiece of de Jong's life, she recognises that she has had to work to become the singer that she is today. "I feel my voice has always been there but I had to do a lot of removing of baggage and stuff that was in

the way," she says. "I had everything from physical blocks that might be to do with posture through to emotional blocks and a lack of self-belief. I used to sabotage a lot of my auditions when I was younger as well. I'd have a panic attack which is literally the worst thing you can do in a singing audition because it will stop you breathing. It jeopardised a lot of early opportunities."

Having said this, de Jong makes a characteristically philosophical observation, "I think it was meant to happen that way for me because I became a much more self-determined performer. I was able to build what I did around what I loved rather than working for other opera companies or organisations. I was able to create from scratch and then pivot continuously and then recreate. I'm constantly reinventing and I'm able to have a lot more control of who I work with and the final outcomes that way."

Having transcended these early obstacles, de Jong has had a stellar singing career. She has performed to millions of people in more than 40 countries and has sung at the Sydney Opera House, Seoul Arts Centre and *Opera Under the Stars* to name but a few. She

also co-founded a singing group called Pot-Pourri and recently released her fifth solo album called *Solitary Harmony*.

Typically, de Jong hasn't simply seen her talent through a selfish prism of self-gain; rather she has sought to provide access to the healing power of singing for those who might have otherwise been denied its power through the charities The Song Room and With One Voice. Her belief in the power of song to heal is clear and deep.

"Singing is part of our DNA," de Jong says. "Singing together changes the brain. We have sung together as human tribes since the beginning of human existence. There is lots of research that shows that when we sing with others we become smarter, healthier, happier and more creative. Singing connects you to the right-hand side of your brain, the side that is about connecting to each other and to all that is."

If you are reading that and thinking, "But I can't sing a note!", then she has a message for you. De Jong shares, "I personally don't believe that any people are tone deaf. I don't think such a thing exists. I've seen people go from where they thought they could not sing at all to performing in concerts."





De Jong has said that she sees her mission in life as being to help people find their voice and full creative potential, both literally and figuratively. She has done a lot to achieve that mission already, but her new focus could take that to another level. She says, “I believe psychedelic medicines have a monumental role in helping me achieve my goal. In fact, I know they will allow me to scale this mission in a way I’d never dreamed possible.”

The psychedelics de Jong is referring to are the medicines psilocybin and MDMA, and a number of other classic psychedelic medicines currently experiencing a massive renaissance. De Jong believes these medicines can revolutionise treatment of mental health in this country and she is doing whatever she can to ensure that happens.

### Mind medicine

Mind Medicine Australia is a registered charity founded by de Jong and her husband Peter Hunt AM, that aims to expand the treatment options for practitioners and their patients suffering with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental illnesses. The stated aim of the organisation is to enable the development of regulatory-approved and research-backed psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy for the treatment of

mental ill health in Australia, specifically the clinical application of medicinal psilocybin and MDMA for depression, anxiety, PTSD and addictions.

Before going into detail on what psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy can achieve it needs to be said that medicinal psilocybin is not the same as the so-called “magic mushrooms” that contain psilocybin. Neither is medicinal MDMA the same thing as “ecstasy”. The dose and purity of these “recreational” drugs is unknown and variable, whereas the medicinal use of psilocybin and MDMA involves a regulated dose administered in a controlled setting by trained health professionals for specific conditions only. When given in this way, as controlled medicines, these substances are regarded as safe, non-addictive and not required to be used long-term. Mind Medicine Australia is advocating for clinical application of psychedelics and not changes to the law regarding non-clinical use.

Within that clinical context, however, de Jong believes that psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is profound and can help with a huge range of mental and other conditions with trials now underway for eating disorders, dementia, obsessive compulsive disorder, a range of addictions and even cluster headaches.

It all started when de Jong read an article by Michael Pollan called “The trip treatment” in the *New Yorker* magazine

that described psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. Based on more than 120 current and recent trials there is evidence that psilocybin and MDMA could be described as circuit breakers disrupting stuck, rigid thought patterns and allowing real breakthroughs in therapy to take place. De Jong says, “Incredible remissions have been occurring in the range of 60 to 80 per cent of cases in phase 2 and now phase 3 trials in the US after just two to three medicinal doses. That is why psilocybin and MDMA have been given ‘breakthrough therapy status’ by the US Food and Drug Administration, which is only given to medicines considered vastly superior to existing treatments.”

In Australia currently psilocybin and MDMA are listed under Schedule 9 of the *Standard for the Uniform Scheduling of Medicines and Poisons Act* (SUSMP) which means they are prohibited substances. Through Mind Medicine Australia, de Jong is seeking to have them moved to Schedule 8 which would see them regarded as controlled medicines. This would allow psychiatrists and physicians to use the medicines to assist therapy for mental conditions such as depression and PTSD. De Jong makes the point though that what is more important than the psychedelic medicine encounter itself, is integrating the experience into your life. This is done through work with a trained therapist, and

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Mind Medicine Australia has established a Certificate in Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy to train those therapists.

“The end goal is that these medicines and treatments become a part of the mental health system in Australia. If you go to your practitioner and you’ve got a mental illness or are experiencing trauma then, depending on what the patient is presenting with, the practitioner will say that there’s three types of treatment: there’s psychiatric medications like antidepressants, there’s psychotherapy and there’s MDMA or psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy,” de Jong explains.

For de Jong there are definite links between what singing and psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy achieve. She says, “One of the reasons that we have so much mental illness and depression is that we are so disconnected from ourselves, from others and from our planet. The wonderful thing about singing with others is that it connects you to others. The wonderful thing about psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is that it connects you with everything, and what better medicine is there than that?”

Establishing that sense of connection lies at the heart of everything de Jong

does, and to understand that better it helps to return to where we began.

### Unity consciousness

De Jong’s spiritual journey has been strongly impacted by the Holocaust experience of her family. She says, “I was not fully aware of that background until I was about 12. When I became aware of what happened in the Holocaust, I decided I wasn’t going to be an adherent of any religion. Having discovered how humans have behaved over the centuries in the name of religious beliefs, I turned my back on formal religion and became more interested in a universal spirituality.”

When pressed on what this has meant for the way she has lived de Jong reveals, “It has meant that I’ve always been seeking a unity consciousness and non-duality. Everything I’ve done in my life has been about removing barriers between people. Acknowledging that our greatest gains as human beings are when we connect with people who are different to us rather than being stuck in echo chambers with people of the same religion or same political party, or same financial background. Many diverse voices coming together as one creates a beautiful tapestry.”

This philosophy has been made manifest through the Creative Innovation Conferences that she runs and the more than 25 With One Voice choirs that rehearse weekly in locations around Australia. “Unfortunately,” muses de Jong, “the world has never been more divided than it is now. We need to be kind, generous and thoughtful and build a shared, collective understanding across the divisions that are occurring in society. We also need to celebrate our diversity in what I call ‘positive human collisions’ and build understanding though that. Rather than rejecting diversity we actually have to search for ideas that we don’t necessarily agree with. The greatest gift for a human being is to be taken outside of their comfort zone. We need to seek those positive human collisions. Yes, they feel uncomfortable but that’s where we start to perceive the world in a different way. It’s where creativity and innovation comes from, and it’s where we grow.”

With her deep passion and innate talents, it’s certain that Tania de Jong will positively collide with whatever she attempts and that the results will be as harmonious as they are profound. *You can find out more about Mind Medicine Australia at [mindmedicineaustralia.org](http://mindmedicineaustralia.org). To access Tania de Jong’s music go to [taniadejong.com](http://taniadejong.com).*

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