

Interview

“The best year of my life”

WORDS *by* RACHEL SHARP · PHOTOGRAPHY *by* JULIE ADAMS · STYLING *by* REBECCA RAC



She's swapped city for country, adopted animals, married the love of her life, and learnt to take her foot off the accelerator since retiring as the Yellow Wiggle. Now Emma Watkins is sharing her next exciting chapter.



“The Wiggles was a learning experience ... now this is a whole new chapter.”



HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY NICOLA JOHNSON. EMMA WEARS DISSH DRESSES AND PARIS MODE EARRINGS AND RING. PREVIOUS PAGE, LEFT: EMMA WEARS BIANA SPENDER DRESS, ZARA SHOES, PARIS MODE EARRINGS AND THE WHOLE BRIDE SUNGLASSES. PREVIOUS PAGE, RIGHT: EMMA WEARS COUNTRY ROAD TOP, CARLA ZAMPATTI PANTS AND PARIS MODE HEADBAND, EARRINGS AND RING.

Interview

“I have one emotion: smiling,”

quips Emma Watkins to *The Weekly's* photographer who is directing today's retro Palm Springs-vibe shoot at the Berry View Hotel in the Shoalhaven region of New South Wales. “Just don't ask me to smile with my mouth closed,” she qualifies with a laugh.

If smiling, chatting and sailing through photo shoots like a seasoned veteran are the skills Emma has on display today, they're not perhaps the ones she's best known for. They'd be singing, dancing and being a rockstar of the children's entertainment world. That's why countless Wiggles fans – and their gobsmacked parents – were devastated when the now 33-year-old announced in October 2021 she was leaving the iconic troupe, despite being its most popular member. Outsiders might have speculated that she was either eyeing up solo fame, or focusing on recovery after her very public battle with Stage 4 endometriosis. There was even speculation she needed space after her marriage with fellow Wiggle (and for the record, still dear friend) Lachlan Gillespie ended.

The truth, though equally interesting, is far less dramatic. Long before she was Emma Wiggle or her most recent incarnation, Emma Memma (more on that later), she was Emma: scholarship-winning film school graduate chasing altruistic academic dreams. After more than a decade in the same job, she simply wanted to loop back around to her pre-touring passions: film production and sign language. Plus, she knew she couldn't keep asking Macquarie University for extensions on her half-finished PhD.

“I know people were probably thinking, ‘oh, she's going on to something else’, or that I was just having a rest, but it wasn't about that at all,” says Emma, who followed performing arts high school with a scholarship to the Sydney Film School, then a degree from the University of Technology Sydney, before finishing a Masters of Research at Macquarie University, investigating the fusion of dance, sign language and

visual communications, which evolved into a full-time PhD before Wiggly life came calling.

Ten bullet train years later, when the pandemic delivered her first break from relentless travel in aeons, Emma realised something had to give. “My PhD supervisor said, ‘Okay, you're getting to the crux of your research and you need to get serious, so what's your plan?’ I knew I had to focus.

“This is probably going to sound weird, but I initially started the PhD because I wanted people to take me seriously. And I wasn't being taken seriously then – being young, being female, being a performer, being a dancer. Now, I guess, it looks like the PhD is a step down, like ‘you were here’ [holding her hand high] with The Wiggles and now ‘you're here’ [holding hand low], but The Wiggles was a learning experience that provided knowledge for my studies. So, to me, it feels like Wiggles was Chapter 2 [after Chapter 1: Film School], and now this is a whole new chapter to bring some of those skills over and push boundaries.”

Chapter three begins

If Emma Wiggle was the star of her last adventure, then the hero of the next is Emma's newest alter ego, Emma Memma, a dazzling red-haired, apricot-costumed character aimed at two-to-four-year-olds that is her PhD research brought to life. Launched in August, it's the first project to be released by Emma's production company, Apricot Sea, and according to its official bio, “focuses on a new generation of communication, where [Emma Memma] and her friends navigate challenges and adventure using sign language, choreographed dance narratives, gesture, mime, singing, speaking, listening, making craft and drawing”.

Naturally, it's already a hit. The handful of videos unveiled on the Emma Memma YouTube channel since its release have clocked over a million views. But commercial wins,

Emma stresses, were never the focus. “We're fortunate maybe to have experienced a level of fame, but Emma Memma has never been about success or wanting to sell music. The main driver has been the gap we see in the market for media that's accessible for children and families with additional needs. Everyone in the team is enrolled in a Diploma of Sign Language, even Oliver [her new husband, its musical director]. Right now, we're doing free meet and greets around Australia, and we have a television series ready to film, but really beyond that it's about us connecting deaf talent in other regions of the world.”

Ask close friends to describe Emma's work ethic and they'll tell you she's competitive and that rest is not in her nature, two facts long-time bestie Elisabetta Denton happily confirms. So it's little surprise Emma soon filled the touring-spaced void in her life with a series of short but intense work projects. One of these, an original production called *Reef School*, on ABC Kids, combines high-definition underwater footage and scripted voiceovers to tell cute and clever stories centred on a make-believe aquatic community. Emma narrates the series, which also stars *TV Week* Logie award winner Tony Armstrong, Shane Jenek (aka Courtney Act) and the late legendary Jack Charles, along with nine talented child actors.

“It's really well put together and such a clever idea. I am just thrilled to be part of it,” says Emma. “I've appeared on the ABC for 12 years during The Wiggles, but making content in their studios for the first time was a dream.”

Fun as it was, though, *Reef School* hasn't introduced the acting bug. Quite the opposite, Emma says. “My sister Hayley [*Underbelly*, *Home and Away*] is a really amazing actress because she understands the mechanism of connecting with an audience that way but ... it just doesn't come naturally to me.” That said, Emma did dip her toe into

Interview

the family entertainment genre earlier this year when she appeared as Zombie on Network 10's reality competition *The Masked Singer*. Despite a frankly admitted fear of singing that plagued her Wiggles run, Emma covered three well-known mainstream hits, including a rendition of Radiohead's gloomy '90s classic *Creep* that won her rave reviews on social media. While Emma's disappointed she was knocked out early, she now realises she didn't change her very distinctive voice enough to go incognito.

"I can be in a supermarket chatting to Olly and people, especially parents of children, will hear my voice from the next aisle then come round to look. But some of the people on that show – Sheldon Riley for example – have so much talent in terms of being able to manipulate their voice and camouflage it. I didn't change mine enough because I was so stressed about the singing."

Of course, Emma Memma sings – the first album of 10 songs co-written by Emma and her husband was released in September – but her very young target audience and the fact the songs are centred on sign language means she's more at ease performing them. "It was scary but I'm so glad I did *The Masked Singer*. The show's musical director, Gary Pinto, is an absolute genius. He would give me a really hard vocal riff like I was Beyoncé – who I'm so not – which I'd record on my phone and take home to Olly. Then he'd play it on the guitar and slow it right down for me and teach me every note one by one." Her husband sounds like an incredibly patient guy. "Oh he is. He's patient with a capital P."

Domestic bliss

Emma knows her renewed work passion has given her purpose, but it's the love of her life, 34-year-old musician Oliver Brian, who's provided perspective. The couple, who married in May 2022, met on The Wiggles tour (Oliver, who plays numerous instruments, was part of its band). They had their first dinner date on tour, too – right after Oliver checked with her ex-husband Lachlan that he

didn't mind. The latter, then dating his partner, Australian Ballet senior artist Dana Stephensen, of course gave the green light. Before long, the four of them were dining together.

"That sounds strange, but being on tour is very different to being at home going to a nine-to-five job," says Emma. "We were all together, all the time. It would be very difficult if we didn't all get along. And I knew Dana before Lachy knew Dana. She is divine." Even today, the two families stay in touch and just days before our shoot, Lachlan sent Emma a video of his clan (Dana and Lachy's twins, Lottie and Lulu, two, as well as Dana's son Jasper, seven, from a previous relationship) singing her happy birthday, albeit haphazardly. "We lived and breathed that Wiggles experience together, and if I was there without Lachy I don't know what would have happened. We were best mates and he brought out some of the most beautiful aspects of my performing career and probably my personality, so I couldn't imagine not talking to him. That would be weird."

Much like Dana, Emma's publicity-shy husband of seven months has a delightful everyone-who-meets-him-loves-him charisma. "Oliver is now my favourite person in the world," agrees Emma's friend Elisabetta, who is head of communications at Apricot Sea. "I've ditched Emma as my best friend for him. He's so wise, so great at explaining things. He should have three PhDs."

"Oliver is the favourite with everybody," Emma confirms. "He's quiet, collected. Just knows everything

about everything. He reads more than me." More importantly, explains Elisabetta, Oliver is a calming influence. "Both of them are very peaceful together," she says. "They've created their own little bubble in the country and it's really nice to see Emma so calm. She takes a moment to actually be at peace with him. And he makes her more creative."

"That's true," Emma admits. "I must come across as an extrovert and can be very confident, but usually I'd much rather be at home not doing anything. That's never happened to me before and it's been cultivated through being with Olly, because we can just be with each other and be happy. After all of the drama with my endometriosis

Left: As Emma Memma, Emma is connecting with children and families with additional needs. Below: Emma and Oliver (pictured on their wedding day) are relishing slowing down together.



INSTAGRAM: EMMA WEARS CARL KAPP DRESS, ZARA SHOES, AND THE WHOLE BRIDE SUNGLASSES.



"It's lovely to have the time and the flexibility to consider new things."

town 145 kilometres south of Sydney. "My parents live in Sydney, but they bought a property near Robertson a few years ago which we loved visiting, so Olly and I started looking at places in the area and fell in love with the first one we saw." As well as having space to build both a studio and vocal recording booth, it meant they could live in between both sets of parents. "Olly's parents are retired and have a caravan, so they've been up through our way a few times already this year. One of the reasons we left The Wiggles is because we weren't seeing our families enough, so it's been really lovely."

Robertson has also given animal-lover Emma an excuse to expand her menagerie, though her two beloved miniature goats, Strawberry and Cream, are currently housed at a rescue sanctuary down the road until they have a sturdier fence built. "I go to these guys twice a day, let them out, feed them, brush them, then at night I put them to bed. They're only 10 months old, and their mum passed away sadly, so they follow me like I'm their mum and it's really sweet. We have a co-dependent relationship."

Unlike Strawberry and Cream, the couple's four dogs live with them at home. Ditto the rabbits, chickens and cats, however their six rescue horses are on a nearby agistment farm. Life, in short, is busy but her version of bliss.

"The Wiggles was my whole twenties and my everything during that time, but I've learned more about myself in the past year than the rest of my entire life. It's just lovely to have the time and the flexibility to consider new things. I've been able to say yes to things I could never have done before. Now I'm like, 'we're ready, what's out there?' Honestly, it's been super beautiful. A beautiful year. Life is good." **AWW**

Reef School premieres on ABC Kids and ABC iView on November 14.

surgery in 2018, there was some stern advice from health professionals that I needed to slow down. I was never resting, the adrenaline was never off and my body was breaking down. But when you grow up dancing and doing a million things, you don't worry about pain or exhaustion, you just go on."

She's hardly put her feet up and chilled for the past year but ending the relentless touring then moving to the NSW Southern Highlands has made a world of difference to Emma's physical health. "Life is more restful and that has changed everything," she notes. "My body is processing food better, it's detoxing better, and I'm learning to settle a little bit, even though I'm the kind of person who needs to be doing something all the time."

Even their picturesque wedding, celebrated with family and friends on an historic estate near Oliver's

hometown of Warrnambool in Victoria, was a laid-back affair. Oliver Senior, the groom's father, drove the bride to the venue in his pride-and-joy black vintage hot rod car (the same one he loaned his son to drive his wife-to-be to a beautiful riverside spot for the proposal many months before). "Olly and I aren't very party-esque. We don't drink alcohol, so for our wedding we all had lunch and a cup of tea. Obviously, everyone had a great time, but the best thing for me was seeing everyone I cared about there in the one spot after not seeing them much for 10 years." The only friends missing were her Wiggles ex-colleagues who were – case in point – away on tour.

A new adventure

Both sets of parents factored into the newlywed couple's decision to move from Sydney to Robertson, a historic