

PAUL KELLY talks about the oldest story in the book! - story by Johnnie Clott

Ladeeeeeez and gentullmennn!!!, (fanfare blares out), this man needs no introduction (crowd goes wild) ..so, I'll give you one anyway! Like Dean Moriarty being on the road is his middle name. Like Bob Dylan he's been on a never ending tour, and like the Japanese poet Basho he's taken a narrow road to the innermost being of his own country's heart and soul. Who could I be talking about??? Well folks, none other than our very own... Paul Kelly!

Kelly's back out on the endless highway promoting his new 'Ways and Means' album, his nineteenth release since he started recording in the early eighties. In that time he's worked his way in and out of Asia, Europe and North America, a number of limes, and America keeps calling him back.

"We've been going over there fairly regularly over the last ten years and built up an audience," Kelly explains on the phone from his home in Melbourne. "We mainly play small clubs and this last tour was probably our best one yet in that we seem to be getting more radio play there from the last couple of releases. This is on what's called national public radio - NPR. So we're played on quite a few radio stations. The gigs are all pretty well attended so, yeah, there's an audience there which is enough to be able to go there and tour consistently. That's the beauty of America. It can support all kinds of music that are outside the mainstream. It's much harder in Australia just through sheer weight of numbers. It's much harder for band's to make a decent living here."

Not only has he toured the U.S.A. constantly but he's drawn on all sorts of American music from blues to rock'n roll to funk. American artists are among his favourites, Bob Dylan being a major one. Kelly is now in the enviable position of meeting and working with some of his own heroes.

"About four years ago in Australia," Kelly clarifies, "we did four shows with Bob

Dylan. Which was great. He was Bob! I also actually played with him about fourteen years ago in 1989 when he toured with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. His show wasn't really that good then. He wasn't really firing. But he was in good form for these other dates. It was great to see him up close and play. I didn't jam with him but had a couple of short conversations with him... I think he's pretty shy. He's very polite and friendly and he seemed like a good guy."



Like Bob Dylan, one of the lesser know influences on Paul Kelly's work is the material he draws on from the world of literature. "I'm a keen reader," Paul reveals "but I don't read as much as I'd like to. I get time to read on tour though. You know when you're travelling in planes or on buses. In America we tour in a big bus. Or hire cars, you know, the Tarago. I'm lucky that I can read in a moving vehicle. I don't know how I would've survived all these years if I couldn't do that. I have a good vestibular system! (laughs)."

On the new album his songs, like his older ones, are peppered with references to writers. Raymond Carver is an obvious favourite of his. Kelly also mentions Jack Kerouac's famous novel 'The Dharma Bums' on the new album in the song *The Oldest Story in the Book*. Like the short story, 'Alone on a Mountaintop', that the Kerouac novel was drawn from, the simple version has far more resonance. Many of Kelly's songs follow a similar style. *The Oldest Story in the Book*, like *To Her Door* or *From Little Things Big Things Grow* or *Deeper Water*, is a condensation of a fairly big story that simply draws

sketches. In this way Kelly's work is similar to the zen poetry form of haiku. Haiku is written in the simplest type of language and avoids literary and highbrow language which make it possible for ordinary people to latch onto the profound ideas embedded in the direct images it uses. Much like Paul Kelly's songs.

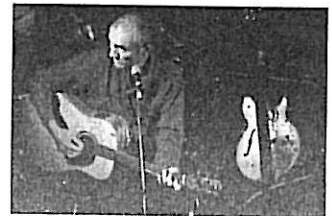
"In my time I've read haiku. I love short poems probably more than long ones (laughs). I think it's got something to do with my attention span (laughs). But I remember when I was much younger reading Basho's 'Narrow Road to the Deep North'. Poetry and short stories are obviously very similar to songwriting. If you're telling a story in a song then you don't have much time. So you've got to get as much across in each line as you can and write fairly succinctly. That's what I was trying to do in that song *The Oldest Story in the Book*. You're right, it's a long story but a short song. A lot happens."

Paul Kelly seems to have taken the opposite tack with the amount of music he's produced over the years. Working in the one area for a lifetime, he's produced an incredible array of songs in an incredible array of styles. This latest album is no exception. It has about twenty one tunes on it which makes it a broad brushstroke of styles and ideas. Much like his breakthrough album 'Gossip' it's reminiscent of other successful double albums. For instance the Clash's 'London Calling' album or the Stones' 'Exile on Main St'. With those masterpieces it's very rarely you'll listen to the whole thing in one sitting but there are particular sides you listen to by themselves.

"We've split the new album into two CD's," he says. "although you can make CDs longer than vinyl. It may be that I'm so used to it but I find that the best length for a record is around forty to forty-five minutes which is the old capacity of vinyl. Lot of CDs have sixteen tracks and when I put on a CD at home I find I never get to hear those last few tracks. Life happens. Other stuff comes along. So I decided pretty early on that I would split this new album into

two roughly forty to forty-five minute discs. Once we'd made that decision that gave us the scope to include extra tunes. It's also so that people can treat it as two separate records. They can play one record for a while and maybe at some stage get onto the other one. And they're also sequenced so that they're quite different moods. I know people can flick around songs on CDs or put it on random play but I'm still a bit old fashioned. I still sit and try to take the listener on a journey. The first disc is more of a Saturday night side and the second disc is more of a Sunday morning feel. Like the Stones 'Tattoo You' album. 'Tattoo You' and 'Black and Blue' and that seventies period of the Stones was a bit of an influence probably for all of us in the band. From 'Exile on Main St' onwards to 'Some Girls', 'Black and Blue', 'Tattoo You' - they'd all be fairly popular records with most of the five of us. And a lot of stuff gets filtered through that listening. Dan Kelly's also a huge Pavement fan and there's a lot of Steve Malkmus in his playing. He's listened really widely to a lot of things so there's a real interesting brew going on. It's the same with the others. I wanted to work with people that are always listening always interested in new music and listen widely and everyone in this band does."

Which is a good thing for both musicians



and listeners. Most people don't live within marketing categories or even within the genres and styles that music tends to get put into. The terms become meaningless after a while. And Kelly has an opinion about this as well. In the 'Love is in the Air' documentary on popular music, which ABC TV aired not so long ago, he took the idea of 'rock' music to task, going so far as to say, 'I hate rock music'.

"Did I?" he laughs in surprise. "I think what I was trying to say was I hate the term 'rock music' not the actual music. I kind of like 'rock'n'roll' as a term but 'rock' sounds stiff to me. 'Rock'n'roll' has got a bit more 'sway' to it. But as I said on that program if I'm asked to describe what I do it's pop music and the beauty of pop music is that it's a really wide term. Yeah, I mean, pop music's always stolen from all over the place. It steals from experimental music and underground music and anything else it can get its hands on. Often people, when you say pop music they think of manufactured pop or boy bands and so on but popular music takes from everywhere. That's my understanding of pop music. That's the field that I work in and that's what I love!!"

Catch Paul Kelly at The Civic Theatre on Tuesday May 18th. Tickets available now from the venue.

Johnnie Clott