



David Bowie once yelled on the Young Americans album 'aint there one damn song that can make me break down and cry?' His plea went largely unnoticed. But wait! Here's a true story. I flew to Melbourne a couple of years ago. Well first of all I caught a train to Sydney then I flew to Melbourne.

PAUL KELLY STORY BY JOHNNIE CLOTT

Anyway I arrived late at night and had to find my way to the old stone building near Melbourne University I was staying at. No trouble! I'd found my way around harsher environments late at night before. I was down there to write a few words about a few things and I took the opportunity to catch up with an old friend from Newcastle, Dave Morris, who was riding high on the success of the song *Australia Don't Become America*. His band, Cranky, was performing in Carlton that night and it was a pleasure to see a dedicated Newcastle musician doing so well. All junkets however must come to an end so I eventually got on board the plane and headed back to Sydney town. My train to Newcastle was going to be a few hours late so I took the opportunity to check out the *Real Wild Child* exhibition of rock and roll memorabilia showing at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Now I'd been lucky enough to have grown up through this whole period witnessing many of these famous bands that were displayed here for myself first hand when they were in their heyday. I walked past the fifties exhibition quickly because it meant nothing to me. Much the same with the sixties. Then the Countdown era began. Now we were talking! All those glorious bands that spoke to Australia in a distinctly Australian voice. Too many to name here with most of them far too out of fashion to mention in a magazine like this. As I strolled on I eventually got to the later stages of this great Australian history and lo and behold there was even a display that was dedicated to the Screaming Jets. But wait, here comes the point of this long rambling introduction. I stopped in front of the Paul Kelly exhibit and pushed the little button that gave me access to three selected videos. I hit the one that said *To Her Door* and gazed at the screen as Paul Kelly and his band appeared on the video.

I don't know if it was the plane food or I was tired from all of that travelling or I'd ingested too much of something else but after the shortest time I began to cry, with unstoppable tears rolling down my cheeks. I was absolutely

captured by the story Kelly was evoking about this ordinary bloke caught up in a marital breakdown and his efforts to reclaim his family. And that dear friends is how good I think Paul Kelly is! Any songwriter who can move me to tears even if it's only once in a lifetime is worth every goddamn penny I ever spent on every goddamn record, tape, CD, video or magazine that was concerned with music. And I've spent a lot! It was worth every late night listening session tuning in far away stations on the Am band so that I could catch the latest thing on the turntables of the nation. It was worth throwing my life

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away on the elusive dream of rock and roll travelling up and down the highway in a gear packed van.

Bittersweet moments like that in the Powerhouse Museum are what make life worth living and Paul Kelly seems to have packed quite a few of them into his career for I'm not the only one to eulogise him. His reputation as a songwriter is rock solid and bursting at the seams. Now he's released his greatest hits album.

But life wasn't always this way for Paul Kelly. He wasn't always feted as a national treasure. Like most success stories his starts a long time ago. He grew up the sixth in a line of nine children. He was born in 1955 in Adelaide and attended the Christian Brothers School playing trumpet and probably more importantly for him he captained the cricket team. When his schooldays had come to an end he did what a lot of young Australians did and took off on the road. He wandered around the country for a few years, working odd-jobs and learning to play the guitar along the way. In 1976 he moved to Melbourne, where the thriving music scene was being given a boot up its proverbial by the energy of the first wave of punk. He put together the first line-up of Paul Kelly and the Dots and they quickly gained a local cult reputation signing to Mushroom Records. The

The Balladeer

catchy ska-based tune *Billy Baxter* indicated that Kelly was a developing talent worth keeping an eye on. Then after two albums, one of which was recorded in steamy Manila in the Philippines, the band did the usual thing and broke up. This left Kelly without a band and without a record contract.

So in 1984 he up and moved north from Melbourne to Sydney, from St.Kilda to Kings Cross, ignoring the often unfriendly rivalry that existed between these two major Australian cities. This was a crucial time for him as he needed some success to stay in the game. Moving to Sydney worked a treat because it forced him to take stock of his situation and he set about constructing the *Post* album that was to impress the critics no end. With guitarist Steve Connolly and bass player Ian Rilen, Kelly recorded an album of songs at ex-Sherbert guitarist Clive Shakespeare's studio. It cost all of \$3500. But it did the trick and Kelly was away again. The unapologetically Australian reference-points helped cement this record as a winner especially when they were couched in songs that were mature and reeked of bittersweet melancholia. They also marked a major leap in Kelly's songwriting with Australian Rolling Stone hailing *Post* as the best record of 1985.

Kelly put together a full-time band consisting of Steve Connolly, drummer Michael Barclay, bass player Jon Schofield and keyboard player Peter Bull. They named the band the Coloured Girls after a line in the Lou Reed tune *Walk on the Wild Side*... and the coloured girls go doo doo doo! "It was a joke name that stuck" Paul has said since but it wasn't the only thing that stuck. They went into the studio with producer Alan Thorne in March 1986, emerging a month later with a collection of 24 songs which cemented Kelly's reputation as a songwriter with few peers. The range of material on the double album, *Gossip*, was again extremely broad and its inside sleeve depicted some of Kelly's more obscure influences

such as Woody Guthrie and Howling Wolf. But it was full of surefire hits that woke Australia up to this major talent. It was edited down and released in America on the A&M label and Paul Kelly and the Coloured Girls were off and running. One thing though. They had to change their name for America. So they became Paul Kelly and the Messengers. Pity!

America nonetheless thought they were terrific and so they were because they were road-ready and seasoned troupers fresh out of the pub wars in Australia. Bill Flanagan from *Musician Magazine* was among the many critics who were highly impressed describing the *Gossip* album as 'striking' and commended the songwriter for his 'fresh ideas and startling images'. In May 1987 they returned to the studio with Alan Thorne to record *Under The Sun* then took off for their first big tour of America. They traversed the continent twice in two months by bus and when they made it into the Big Apple the *New York Times* music critic said 'Mr. Kelly sang one smart, catchy three minute song after another - dozens of them - and the band played with no frills directness,' after catching their performance at the legendary Bottom Line Club. Then they headed home again and recorded *So Much Water So Close To Home*. Paul Kelly was now starting to write songs that captured a narrative style where his song were becoming

populated by more fully-realised characters. Both the album's title and the song *Everything's Turning To White* were based on a short story by the American detective author Raymond Carver, a master of pared-down prose.

"I'd like to make clear that my records aren't autobiography." He has been quoted a saying form around this period "I'm not trying to tell my life and my experiences. The first thing I'm trying to do is write songs, rather than make confessions or bare my soul. Writers create characters." A debatable point but one that he has stuck with since.

The Messengers days were numbered as Kelly was keen to explore new territory and with the release of the dark and misappropriately titled *Comedy* album Kelly was beginning to explore other avenues. "The Messengers were the first band I'd had that became an entity," recalls Kelly, "and I liked that about them. We forged a style together. But I felt if we had kept going it would have got formulaic and that's why I broke it up. I wanted to try and start moving into other areas, start mixing things up." And sure enough he did! He helped co-author Yothu Yindi's major hit *Treaty* and produced *Charcoal Lane* the breakthrough album for Archie Roach.

A flurry of diverse projects followed over the next two years. Kelly's songs began to appear more regularly on albums by other artists, both in Australia and overseas. In early 1992 he was invited to write songs for 'Funerals and Circuses' a Roger Bennett play about racial tensions in small-town Australia. The play was acclaimed by critics when it was staged at the 1992 Adelaide Arts Festival, and also marked Kelly's acting debut in the role of a petrol station attendant. Later that year he signed a contract with publishers Angus and Robertson for a book of his collected lyrics, contributed songs and vocals to the soundtrack of the television series *The Seven Deadly Sins* and sang a duet with Mark Seymour, *Hey Boys*, for the film *Garbo*. He has continued to record and release albums and appears to be unstoppable in his development of his songwriting skills.

"I've always wanted to bring different kinds of music together", he has said recently, looking back at the divergent paths his career has taken in recent years. "I have very Catholic tastes, which perhaps hasn't always been reflected in my own music. I still write with a guitar and pen and paper and I'm happy to call myself a singer-songwriter, but I don't like the tendency to put music into boxes - for instance, singer-songwriters in one box and dance music in another. I love it when those distinctions start to blur."

As Kelly has said himself, 'Beauty ever walks with cruelty,' and none more so than in sport, a passion of his. His comments on it could just as easily refer to his own career. "As spectators, we yearn to witness tragedy as much as triumph. We are thrilled by the careless workings of chance - the sudden, shocking, twisted knee that ends a career, the doubtful LBW decision that causes a player to be dropped and lose confidence or the spilled catch that gives him a let-off on the way to a century. Destiny is often determined by an inch or a second. We were there, we say, at the telling moment."

Paul Kelly's Greatest Hits album *Songs From The South* is out now on Mushroom.