PAUL KELLY *and his songs*

MURRAY BRAMWELL

Look around you; we're living in amazing times
They are not so important—your little crimes
'Keep it to Yourself'

Things sometimes have a habit of going full circle. Take Paul Kelly for instance. In Adelaide, his home town, he began writing in his teens, poetry at first and then prose. For a time in the late 70s he coedited the magazine *Another One For Mary*. Now he has a book of lyrics due for publication by Angus and Robertson in October.

What is exceptional is that in the intervening fifteen years and especially in the last decade, Paul Kelly has achieved eminence, not in the literary circles that in another epoch he would have been destined for, but as a leading singer-songwriter not only for a tenacious local audience but in the United States and, increasingly, Europe. Since 1981 he has recorded nine albums, each one surpassing its predecessor. He has led several bands—first the Dots, then the Messengers (nee Coloured Girls), one of the more legendary associations in recent Australian music which ended last year when Kelly began performing solo.

It is a hoary platitude to say that songwriters are the poets of the age. People began proclaiming that when Adam was a teenager and the list was usually compiled from the early 60s folk boomers—Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and, a little later, Joni Mitchell and Paul Simon. The Beatles' artier work got attention, especially anything identifiably by John Lennon. There was also belated mention of Chuck Berry and, since he was a real writer already, Leonard Cohen. Popular music has flourished for a full twenty years further, but the status of the huge variety of recorded work is still unclear. Everybody listens to some aspect of it and as time goes on, each of us is carbon-dated by our favourites.

But despite the enormous impact of pop music, it remains a kind of guilty pleasure and its commercial self-reliance is seen as proof of its philistinism. Occasionally someone like Camille Paglia will say something fatuous about Madonna, the way the English music establishment used to patronise the Beatles, but by and large the genuine eclecticism of the community is ignored. Instead there is a schizoid stand-off between the subsidised arts and what is called commercial entertainment and (despite the efforts of postmodernism to hijack the vocabulary with a no-blame patois of its own) the weary perpetuations of high and lowbrow remain. The result is that a major aspect of contemporary culture is disenfranchised and our notions about late twentieth-century art—witness our arts festivals—remain substantially denatured. Perverse romantic notions persist about the incompatibility of creative integrity with wealth and fame despite the examples of Picasso and Pavarotti. And the upshot is that many of our finest artists—like Dickens and Puccini in their day—are so prominent as to become invisible.

In the present literary landscape, that could describe Paul Kelly. He is not alone; there is plenty of Australian-based songwriting talent about—the Finn brothers, Deborah Conway, Kev Carmody, G W McLennan, Joe Camilleri and others. But there are few who can touch Kelly for the thrift and flair of his writing and the alchemy of lyric and melody.

Although Kelly began recording in 1981, it is his third album, *Post*, recorded in 1984, that marks a consolidation of recognisable styles. In an interview with me late last year Kelly observed:

"That record was a turning point for me—with songs like 'From St Kilda to Kings Cross' and 'Incident on South Dowling'. When I first wrote that one I thought: how the hell am I going to sing this ? I laughed when I wrote it because it seemed so black. But I did go ahead and sing it and I learned something from that: you can sing anything. I think I got some idea of the distance of the writer and the song from that one. I thought: I'll just put the song out there and sing it. It felt strange singing

it at first because it seemed a sick joke but it freed me up to write about really anything."

My baby was dying
Turning so blue
Four feet from me dying
My head was like glue...

I was watching a movie
where someone looked dead
Now people they whisper
Now people they stare
They say I couldn't save her
Even though I was right there
We lived on the first floor
We lived in two rooms
Now my poor baby
She lives with the worms.

'Incident on South Dowling'

Typically, in trying to extrude a line or two from Kelly's sinuous lyric you end up quoting nearly all of it. What can't be evoked is Kelly's dirgelike vocal set against Chris Bailey's doleful harmonica and the jaunty counterpoint from drummer Michael Barclay.

While Kelly is not the only one to use particular locations in songs, his evocations of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide are distinctive and convincingly achieved.

"It's straight from Chuck Berry," he notes. "We get bombarded by these places all the time, especially American places. I love the way that some of Chuck Berry's songs are lists. He uses brand names, subjects at school, names of towns. I wanted to map out my territory the same way. I like using place names as a short cut, a quick way of describing something. Rather than say there is a road that goes along the beach with palm trees on it and a big hotel where people drink on a Friday night, you say The Esplanade.

"A lot of people will know that and if they don't know it, it doesn't matter anyway. It's just a bonus to the emotions of the song. You don't need to know what the name means. Whatever the name means The Esplanade becomes a mythical place just like Memphis was to me. Kansas City—I've never been there in my life but I certainly knew what that song was about. I knew what Memphis was about—not about the town but about a father who's lost his daughter. People ask: how will Americans get your song? Well I've been getting American songs for years without living there."

It is not hard to spot influences on Kelly's work. Despite the fact that he emerged out of the punk and power pop of the late 70s—epitomised in Australia by bands like Jo Jo Zep, Radio Birdman and the Sports—Paul Kelly's songs belong to the strong narrative tradition of balladry and the American populist folksingers who adapted the form directly as a political call to arms.

But it is his capacity to vary points of view that makes his songs rich and intriguing. 'South of Germany' is told from a woman's perspective in the fragmented style of English Napoleonic war balladry. In 'Everything's Turning to White' Kelly builds a song out of the Raymond Carver short story 'So Much Water So Close to Home'. The disconcerting indifference of a group of hunters, who find the violated body of a young woman and leave her in the water while they go fishing for the weekend, is intensified in the song told from the perspective of the wife of one of the men.

I went to the service a stranger;
I drove past a lake out of town
There's so much water so close to home
When he holds me now I'm pretending
Nothing is working inside
And behind my eyes, my daily disguise
Everything's turning to white .

"I've got widespread likes in music," says Kelly,"and I like to expand the way I write. For some reason writing

narrative ballads is one of the things I can do. I'm sure that comes from folk music from Woody Guthrie and early Bob Dylan. In that tradition there is no surprise, there is nothing special in swapping points of view; men singing from the view of women and vice versa, young people singing from the point of the old, people not working singing from the point of view of a miner. It's accepted that if you sing a song you sing it from inside that person's character. It's never become a part of rock and pop. That's more an expressive form where the I is close to the actual person singing. You don't assume that there is a big jump from the person singing and the voice of the song."

It is exactly that capacity to make the jump that has made Kelly's work so much more substantial. It has also broadened his range immensely. For instance, his commitment to and involvement with Aboriginal land rights developed from the song 'Maralinga (Rainy Land)' on the 1987 *Gossip* album. Kelly explains:

"I wrote Maralinga straight from the newspaper, the old *Nation Review*—an article by Bob Ellis on the Royal Commission into Maralinga. I'd had Rainy Land as a title in a notebook for a long time. From poems by Baudelaire—'I'm the king of the rainy land', a poem about a bored prince. I thought it was a good title for a song, I didn't know what sort. I read this article and thought— Maralinga, Rainy Land. A lot of the phrases in the song were straight from the article, like "the big black mist began to roll." Yami Lester was quoted and so was Milli Puddy. She didn't speak English but her husband did. They were separated and the way he proved he spoke English was to sing this old Bible song he'd learned at the mission."

My name is Milli Puddy
They captured me and roughly washed me down
Then my child stopped kicking
Then they took away my man to town
They said do you speak English
He said I know that Jesus loves me so
Because the bible tells me so
I know that Jesus loves me so
Because the bible tells me so
This is a rainy land
This is a rainy land
No thunder in our sky
No trees stretching high
But this is a rainy land

'Maralinga (Rainy Land)'

"I didn't know Yami Lester or any of the other people when I wrote that song. But I've stayed friends with him since. He liked the song."

The song connected Kelly to the Nunga community. He was already friends with Bart Willoughby from the band No Fixed Address based in Melbourne and got drawn into playing benefits and Land Rights concerts. We met Kev Carmody and, when they first toured the US with Midnight Oil, Yothu Yindi. Later he co-wrote songs with them.

"Yothu Yindi invited me up to Arnhem Land in 1990 when they were working on songs for their second record. They'd done the first one with one side traditional and the other side more Western rock 'n' roll. With their second album they wanted to mix the two together more. They asked me to come up and work on some of the arrangements and preproduction. We had a week or so in the bush just sitting around with guitars, didgeridoo, clapsticks, congas. Then we went into the rehearsal room in Darwin and most of the songs ended up on the record.

"I also wrote a song with lead singer Mandawuy Yunupingu. He asked would I write a song about the treaty and he quite definitely wanted to write that song with me. It was a definite plan on his part. He has what he calls the philosophy of the two ways—the white way and their way, the traditional way. It is the way he runs his school. The children learn traditional culture and Western culture as well. Even his band is set up that way with black and white members. He was very keen to write a song about the treaty because the issue had been in the news in 1988 but was put on the back burner. He wanted to write it with a prominent songwriter and also a white fella. I was the man !

"It was funny because we approach songwriting so differently. He comes from an educational, didactic philosophical viewpoint. He has a very coherent world view. I don't write like this. I write about characters. I write from a little detail or what someone has said. I've never been able to write a propaganda, teaching song. But that's where Manduwuy comes from."

It may not have been his express intention but nevertheless Kelly has written songs that are already etched in current consciousness. Songs such as 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', co-written with Kev Carmody, which chronicles the dispute at Wattie Creek between the Gurindji people led by Vincent Lingiarri and the Vestey company—

Vestey man said I'11 double your wages
Seven quid a week you'll have in your hand
Vincent said uhuh we're not talking about wages
We're sitting right here till we get our land
Vestey man roared and Vestey man thundered
You don't stand a chance of a cinder ln snow
Vince said if we fall others are rising

From little things big things grow

...Eight years went by, eight long years of waiting
Till one day a tall stranger appeared in the land
His name was Whitlam and he came with great ceremony
And through Vincent's fingers poured a handful of sand

From little things big things grow

The melody has more than an echo of Dylan's 'Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll', especially garnished as it is with rudimentary harmonica. But the song is a classic with an assurance that, far from being derivative, indicates one in complete command of the idiom. Another song is based on a newspaper article from Derby, Western Australia quoting a pastoralist complaining that Aborigines were getting special treatment. With a

characteristically blithe tune Kelly ironically catalogues the history of special treatment—

My father worked a twelve hour day
As a stockman on a station
The very same work but not the same pay
As his white companions

He got special treatment
Special treatment
Very special treatment

Mama gave birth to a stranger's child
A child she called her own
Strangers came and took away that child
To a stranger's home

She got special treatment
Special treatment
Very special treatment.

The apparent simplicity of the lyric is deceptive. Kelly wrings little ironies and wry ellipses with increasing fluency in his work—especially evident in his *May 1992 Live* set where, unplugged, unadorned and often slowed down, many of his standards were given refreshed, sinewy new readings.

But while Kelly proves his abilities and considerable stage presence as a soloist he continues to diversify with collaborations. His association with Archie Roach, including as a producer of his album, has been mutually fruitful. He has also written for and with Jenny Morris and Vika and Linda Bull, vocalists with The Black Sorrows. A more radical departure has been his involvement as composer, musical director and actor in Funerals and Circuses, Magpie Theatre's project for the 1992 Adelaide Festival.

Paul Kelly first met the director Steven Gration who was then based in Darwin with the Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre group. Gration recalls the occasion:

"Darwin is an informal, outdoor place, especially in the dry season and you often bump into visiting rock stars in the coffee shops. I introduced myself and talked about the storytelling quality and sense of character in his songs. I asked him if he'd ever thought about writing for the theatre. He said not really but if I heard any songs of his I liked to let him know and he'd give me permission to use them."

Gration had more in mind than that but it wasn't until he moved to Adelaide and began preparations for a play with a Nunga theme—to be written by Roger Bennett, a playwright he'd known in Darwin— that the director contacted Kelly again.

"I didn't even have a script at that time," Gration recalls, "I just had an idea. Paul asked me to send a booklist of the sort of things I like to read. I sent a wide list ranging from Latin American novels right through to sporting books. I think the one that really got him in was one of my favourite, *The Complete Leg Break Bowler.* I was a leg-break bowler as a kid and it turned out he was too."

The combination of the theme of the play, the opportunity to perform in the Adelaide Festival and the masonic handshake of a fellow cricketer brought Kelly in. He wrote sixteen songs for the production and played the part of Tony, an aspiring musician stuck in a country town running his father's petrol station. The project was deservedly one of the critical highpoints of the festival. Gration notes not only the singer's generosity and patience in teaching the songs but his astute suggestions for developing and clarifying the script.

Kelly, for his part, is full of praise also.

"I went into it not knowing how it would turn out. We all did. Steven Gration had the vision and the confidence. He pulled all the elements together and they were pretty disparate—the people he chose and the styles. For me it was a really enjoyable experience. It helped my songwriting even further. I got to write some funny songs. The songs were part of a larger theatrical effect—that was the thing I enjoyed most, that feeling after opening night. It was like being part of a giant clock."

Since its first season Kelly pledged to make himself available for a further run and now in September and October of this year *Funerals and Circuses* will play in Melbourne and Canberra. With the release of his book as well as theatrical appearances Paul Kelly is in danger of becoming a renaissance person.

But while these diversifications may suggest some gentrification, Kelly's achievements are centrally in popular music and with audiences who are largely unaware of literary and theatrical coteries. While Kelly does not foster the kind of common-bloke appeal of someone like Jimmy Barnes, nevertheless his perceptive, direct songs have attracted a diverse and loyal following.

During his solo tour last year it was clear that his audiences know the canon well and are responsive to the subtleties of interpretation, his nonstandard approach to standards, even the occasional self-parody. Armed only with a guitar—acoustic or electric—and some basic piano chords, Kelly is hardly the virtuoso. His raggedy strumming is reminiscent of concert buskers like Billy Bragg. Enthusiasts for the Messengers could not be blamed for the occasional yearning for the quartet's strong driving rock sound. Fortunately they are well represented on disc. Nowadays Kelly is very much out front, making it new, owning the songs and giving them full measure. It is a risk that has worked.

Paul Kelly has probably recorded fifty songs that could be called first-rate, a high strike rate in the one-hit-wonder world of popular music. In the recent solo *Live* set the range of his work is strongly apparent. I've already mentioned the Nunga songs. Others— like 'When I First Met Your Ma' and 'I Can't Believe We Were Married'—wistfully capture past relationships. Love songs like 'Randwick Bells' and 'Wintercoat' have a clarity and emotional focus that is memorable. Kelly always knows how to pitch things, never cloying, never glib. He has a poet's instinct for economy and understatement. Even the more confessional songs are both rueful and generous to others—'Dumb Things' for instance:

I lost my shirt, I pawned my rings
I've done all the dumb things
I melted wax to fix my wings
I've done all the dumb things
I threw my hat into the ring
I've done all the dumb things

or 'Careless':

How many cabs in New York City, how many angels on a pin?
How many notes in a saxophone, how many tears in a bottle of gin?
How many times did you call my name, knock at the door but you couldn't get in?
I know I've been careless
I've been wrapped up in a shell nothing could get through to me
Acted like I didn't know I had friends and family
I saw worry in their eyes, it didn't look like fear to me
I know I've been careless (I lost my tenderness)

There are indications of new approaches in recent songs like 'Just Like Animals', in the playful wonkiness of 'I Was Hoping You'd Say That' and the airy lyricism of 'Invisible Me'. Kelly has never sounded better and while plenty of people have been alerted to his singular talent he deserves more. The publication of his lyrics is a good move—especially if it brings more people to his recordings. On the page his writings can seem slight, just scraps of rhyme. But they are magicked into considerably more in performance. That is Paul Kelly's uncommon gift. And you can find him at a store near you.

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