



## Russell Morris

Russell Morris' high and highly distinctive voice, finely crafted songs and compelling stage presence have been a part of Australian music and our lives for more than forty years.

*Hush* was the second single on W&G's In-house label for Somebody's Image, a young Melbourne group taken under the wing of The Groop after they had debuted at one of their surf club gigs during that year. Fronted by a somewhat weedy, wispy-haired 17 year old who had grown up listening to his mum's Johnnie Ray Live album and had decided that a lifestyle dominated by a mass of worshipping females was most definitely worth pursuing, the band was quite legitimately an instant smash with The Groop's followers, soon finding themselves on more shows, as a fully-billed support. Russell established a strong friendship with his hero Brian Cadd - a mentoring relationship that would shape a burgeoning career on more than one occasion.

With Somebody's Image soon commanding a strong following, word spread to Go-Set writer Ian 'Molly' Meldrum, who was intrigued by the raw potential of the shy, gangly but unmistakably enthusiastic singer. The role of Meldrum in the rise of Somebody's Image went beyond press pieces and personal endorsements. In the second half of 1968 he was instrumental in securing the group a contract with EMI. There, under David McKay, a final single was recorded - a fine piece of well-voiced production pop called *Hide & Seek*, a band original that stopped just outside the Melbourne Top 5.

When Russell departed Somebody's Image, Meldrum swiftly assumed the role of manager and producer and within two months had begun work on what would be - perhaps still is - the most startling Australian rock single ever recorded - a six minute plus witches' brew of whirling, twirling psychedelia that rewrote the rules of how a record could be made and could sound. Conjured up from basic ingredients - a simple Johnny Young song structure and a head-bursting full of incredible ideas, *The Real Thing* had begun life when Young, in the Uptight dressing room, played Meldrum a song on acoustic guitar he'd earmarked for Ronnie Burns. The writer envisioned it in a slow, cello-dominated *I Am The Walrus* style with a guitar line where the eventual "oo mow mamow" would be; but Meldrum had other ideas. Assembling, among others, The Groop, Roger Hicks of The Zoot, arranger John Farrar and singer Maureen Elkner, and with little regard for budgetary constraints, he cooked up a cauldron of electronic noise, mesmeric chants and an Armageddon explosion that so alarmed EMI executives that they would only agree to release it in Victoria.

It took just 3 weeks for the song to reach number one there and, after Meldrum and Morris had driven to Sydney under their own steam to wave it about, it became a national smash and a (then rare) gold single. As it did, Russell became the most adored Australian pop star since Normie Rowe and Little Stevie. As writer Ed Nimmervoll observed: "Russell was very much a star for the kids, only they could appreciate the barrage of excitement". His success took the entire industry (except for Meldrum) by surprise. It was his gawky boyish charm and honest sincerity, combined with a wardrobe of the most absolutely trendy, kinky gear and the constant support of TV's Uptight and Go Set (one whose cover he appeared more than any other artist; one particular banner headlining proclaiming 'Russell To Marry?' resulting in its largest selling issue over its 9 year run) that gave the firestorm particular ferocity. It stayed at number one for a month and was on the charts for a half a year. "The last ten weeks of my life have been like some fantastic dream" Russell told an interviewer around the middle of 1969, when he was headlining the 2UW New Sounds of '69 extravaganza at Sydney Showground over 25 other acts and going out nationally with Masters Apprentices, Johnny Farnham, Doug Parkinson In Focus, Ronnie Burns and the Valentines on the chaotic and cacophonous Starlift tour.

*The Real Thing* was released in the US on the Diamond label and became a New York's critic's favourite, charting there and in Chicago and Huston. Cashbox glowed in its July 15 issue: "Mind-boggling electronic blast, hypnotic spell caster ... compelling at first listen and impossible to ignore. It will very likely explode across the AM/FM airwaves. Monstrous potential." The explosion was more limited than hoped for (Diamond had made the fatal mistake of cutting the track in half and spreading it over both sides of the single) and it peaked at #107 on Billboard (in the same year the Easybeats' *St. Louis* stopped at #100 - cracking Stateside hits was a hard call).

On the home front, a second solo single, released in August on Russell's 19th birthday, shot straight to number one as well, remaining on the charts for four months and also earning a gold single. On the surface *Part 3 Into Paper Walls* was *The Real Thing* revisited but it was an engaging record in its own right, combining an extension of the first hit's chanting mantra with a pretty semi-song of Russell's called *Paper Walls*. Excitement was there by the truckload but radio was more inclined to flip it over and play Johnny Young's gentle ballad *The Girl That I Love*. This, sung evocatively, was a valuable credibility builder for Russell, proving that he was capable of being more than a utility voice inside an aural extravaganza.

By the end of 1969 Russell in England, was trying for a breakthrough, and there his association with Ian Meldrum concluded. He returned home to still more mayhem; his first show of a national tour, in Brisbane, saw 5,000 fans in a state of advanced hysteria with more than a hundred being carted off by ambulance crews. It was a level of popularity unable to be sustained, particularly without focused management. To compound his woes a re-recorded version of a British song he had first cut in England, *Rachel*, had the misfortune to be released while a 7 month-long radio ban on major label local artist releases was crippling Australian music and charted at only Top 23.

With little remaining interest in being a scream-dream sensation or in singing other people's songs, Russell set about developing song writing skills and forging his own singular entity. Working with producer Howard Gable he came up with *Mr. America*, which enjoyed strong reviews, won him a Composer of the Year Award and reached the Top 10. There was an also a completed album that was shelved because the singer believed that his ideas had been "misinterpreted and the whole thing was fouled up."

Early in 1971 a vitally important change came into Russell's career with the return from England of his original mentor - Brian Cadd, fresh from the Axiom split, who took Morris' recording career firmly in hand and even formed a live backing group (Cycle) for his national support stint to the Bee Gees later in the year. Quite a tonic was the hirsute keyboard commander. With seeming ease he was able to gather the very best Australian rock musicians around Russell to create the album he was hearing in his head. With musical contributions from Cadd, Rick Springfield, Beeb Birtles, Marcie Jones, Chain, In Focus and others, *Bloodstone* stood as one of most polished, textured and proficient rock albums made in Australia to that point. Certainly it was an imposing achievement for the Australian music industry in 1971.

The first taste of the album came in June with the release of the striking *Sweet Sweet Love* single, which made Top 5 in Melbourne and was Top 10 nationally. In April 1972 Russell the charts again with the sprightly *Live With Friends*, a No. 13 national hit, and turned quite a few heads at the Mulwalla Rock Festival. But there was not a lot to hold him here. Australian rock was confined to dank discotheques and drafty dance halls, there was no healthy pool of competent backing musicians and the sound of the day was stupefyingly heavy. It was not yet the era of Billy Joel, Jackson Browne or even Richard Clapton.

Australia bade virtual goodbye to Russell late in 1972. He left us with a soaring, some say classically beautiful single, *Wings Of An Eagle*, which shot straight into the Top 10, as he journeyed off to England once more. He recorded another shelved album and then found his way to New York and then Los Angeles where he fitted well into a growing 'gumleaf mafia'. More comfortable creatively in this environment, he set about recording again and, finally, gained release with a second album - a self-titled effort early in 1975 that picked up a Billboard 'Album Pick'. In Australia he had a Top 30 hit with *Let's Do It/Don't Rock The Boat*. A second American album appeared in 1976 (titled *Russell Morris 2* there and *Turn It On* here) which yielded a moderate local hit in *Running, Jumping Standing Still*. Desperately keen to work and live in America he was stymied by the absence of a US Green Card and forced to service fire extinguishers and sell subscriptions to the L.A. Examiner door to door to survive while the I.N.S. were making up their mind.

Late that year, having been finally granted the elusive card, he returned home to open for sensations Ol'55 at a series of Sydney Christmas concerts and play one headlining Melbourne concert. Many were amazed by what they saw - a full-on theatrical performance which included a tribe of extras, battle scenes, roll plays, rare film footage, supreme self-confidence and some crackling, tough rock 'n' roll. Critics were not sure what to make of it and, inevitably, many fell back on pointless comparisons to his pop star past. He slipped out of the country a couple of weeks later uncertain of just where to take himself and his music.

With the momentum of his American albums now abated, Russell chose to return to Australia, which, in 1978, was a very different country to the one he had departed a half a decade before. He formed the Russell Morris Band, worked up some harder-edged versions of his catalogue of songs (hits and should-have-been) and hurled himself into a thriving Melbourne (and then national) pub rock scene - which has sustained him for the past thirty years. The following year he signed with Mushroom Records, had Top 50 hits with *Thunder Ground* and *Hot Love* and charted a Top 40 album with *Foot In The Door*. During 1979 Russell and his band supported overseas visitors Santana, Eddie Money, Hall & Oates, Dr. Hook and Bob Marley.

A major live draw as the 80's dawned, Russell changed about musicians, rebilling himself as Russell Morris & the Rubes - the name under which a second Mushroom album, *Almost Frantic* (produced by Little River Band's David Briggs), was released in 1981, following a Top 40 single (Top 15 in Melbourne) with a new treatment of his old Somebody's Image hit, Joe South's *Hush*. In 1982 the band was enthusiastically received at the Mushroom Evolution Concert, with their performance of *Heat Of The Night* and *Roar Of The Wild Torpedoes* appearing on the triple album set. The single *Get It Right* followed and, after a split with the Rubes early in 1983, the solo single *I'll Stay With You/Turn To Stone* appeared. During the 80's Russell returned to the pub circuit with a new Russell Morris Band, took up the role of Riff Raff in a Melbourne stage production of *The Rocky Horror Show*, played for fun with 60's covers band The Lonely Boys and went out for a time as Russell Morris & the Word.

The 90's saw Russell return to recording with the Festival album, *A Thousand Suns*, produced by Mark Moffatt of The Monitors. The single *Tartan Lines* got him into the Melbourne Top 30. In 1992 he joined John Farnham, Kate Ceberano, Angry Anderson, Jon Stevens and John Waters in the massive Australian arena revival of Jesus Christ Superstar, participating in the show's No. 1 album. After that project John Farnham recorded Russell's *Diamonds* on his *Then Again...* album.

A new Russell Morris Band opened for a reformed Billy Thorpe & The Aztecs at a Myer Music Bowl concert in November 1994. By 1996 Russell had joined forces with old comrades Ronnie Burns and Darryl Cotton (of Zoot) as Burns, Cotton & Morris that cut an album and, with Jim Keays of the Masters Apprentices taking over from Burns in 2000, has become one of the most consistently popular and successful live drawcards in this country. That Olympic year also saw the film *The Dish*, starring Sam Neil, prominently feature Russell's original recordings of *The Real Thing* and *Wings Of An Eagle* on its soundtrack, greatly reviving interest in both classic songs (Morris music also having been heard in *The Castle* in 1997). *The Real Thing* was also named AFL 2000 Song Of The Year and was sung by Kylie Minogue in the film *Sample People*, which also included a couple of new renditions of *Sweet Sweet Love* by Russell (one a Paul Mac remix). To top off an extraordinary run of attention, Midnight Oil (on one of the rare occasions that they chose to cut a cover) used their take on the song as an album title track.

Russell's enduring talent, as a singer and a songwriter, has been recognised by the likes of Rod Stewart, John Denver, Joe Cocker and, particularly, Elton John who rates him as one of the finest talents in Australia. He has not ceased making music since 1967 and is prepared to take it to wherever there are ears open to it. In 2007 he and Darryl Cotton performed spirited sets for Australian peacekeeping forces in the Solomon Islands. He is presently out on the road with Brian Cadd, in support of a live collaborative CD - enchanting audiences of stories of the music that has, so very often, in so very many ways, touched their lives.