



# Paul Kelly

*June 1991*

**H**IS FRIENDS, HIS EX-MANAGERS, HIS sister, his cousin, even his mum, all warned me: Paul Kelly can turn a short lunch into a long silence. He can answer in monosyllables, or not at all. He can be inaudible. A chat with him can be like extracting a tooth. It can make you reconsider your career as an interviewer. Even the publicist from Mushroom Records seemed to expect the worst. 'Did he clam up on you?' she asked shortly after our meeting.

Paul Kelly admits he's not a talker. 'I don't talk very freely at all,' he says. 'That's why I write songs.'

Indeed he does. Says Toby Creswell, editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine: 'I think he is one of the great songwriters of the '80s and '90s. There are times when Paul Kelly songs touch you at the deepest emotional level. I could think of half a dozen tracks which I sometimes find too painful to listen to. When I first heard his song *Careless*, I wept.'

The idea of Toby Creswell, cynical rock world veteran, weeping over a song, any song, might surprise certain people, except that Kelly has that kind of effect. Stuart Coupe, his ex-manager and former editor of *The Edge*, concluded when he first heard Kelly back in the '70s: 'I've seen God and this is what it sounds like.'

Michelle Higgins is no less reverent. A former labels manager for Mushroom Records who now runs an independent music promotions company called Boomerang Pty Ltd out of New York, Higgins is one of the most successful Australians in international rock. When she first listened to Kelly, she decided 'he was the most important songwriter I had ever heard in the world'. Today, she puts him in the genius class. 'When he sits down to write a song, he is like Van Gogh, Mozart or Bob Dylan.'

## The Whites of their Eyes

So why do so many people still ask ‘Paul who?’ when you mention his name? Either that or they assume you’re talking about *The Australian’s* chief political correspondent: ‘I didn’t know Paul Kelly wrote songs as well as political commentaries,’ they’ll say.

It’s partly because Paul Kelly singer-songwriter, defies all sorts of unwritten rules—like self-promotion. Give him top billing at a concert and he’ll insist on having his name and that of his band, the Messengers, buried in the list of performers. Put an advertising banner over a stage that he’s about to appear on and he’ll demand its removal. Charge ticket prices that he thinks are too high and he’ll refuse to perform. Send him a cheque payable to Paul Kelly and he’ll literally take out the calculator and divide the money up five ways.

Coupe recalls: ‘You’d say to him, “Paul, you wrote the songs, you’re the lead singer, you’re the main man,” and he would say, “Doesn’t matter, if it wasn’t for the band . . .” Frequently the conversations would end up: “Paul, as your business manager I think you’re a fucking idiot, but as a human being I respect you no end.”

‘Basically, Paul Kelly doesn’t give a fuck. He doesn’t knock success back, but if someone said to him, “If you write a song that sounds like this, you’re going to sell a quantity of records,” he would say, “You’re joking.” He sees himself as an artist.’

**Y**OU WOULD BE HARD PRESSED to find another Australian rock musician with a musical pedigree as distinguished as Kelly’s. His maternal grandparents set up the first Italian grand opera company in Australia in the early ’20s. His Argentine-born, Italian-speaking grandfather was the Count Ercole Filippini, a leading baritone under contract to the acclaimed La Scala Grand Opera Company in Milan. When he toured here, he fell in love with the country and a young girl called Anne McParland. Within a short time they were married.

Together, Paul Kelly’s grandparents transported opera to the music-starved Italian canegrowers of north Queensland and pioneered the teaching of operatic singing in several States. Contessa Filippini became the first woman to conduct symphony orchestras in Australia. And when the age of radio dawned, she was asked to sing the role of Marguerite in ABC Radio Perth’s 1928 production of *Faust*. (She also conducted the orchestra!)

Pointing to the bridge of his nose, Kelly says: “‘Sing up here’ she would say to me. “Bel canto [beautiful singing] and breathe with your diaphragm.””

## Paul Kelly

Paul Kelly's mother, Jo, is also a singer and would almost certainly have followed in her parents' footsteps had she not worked instead on raising nine children (one of whom died in infancy of meningitis). Her husband, John, was a lawyer and a classicist who loved music, too, although he couldn't play an instrument. He died when Paul was 13.

*Dad's hands used to shake but I never knew he was dying/I was thirteen,  
I never dreamed he could fall/And all the great aunts were red in the eyes  
from crying/I rang the bells, I never felt nothing at all/And all the king's  
horses, all the king's men/Cannot bring him back again*

From *Adelaide*

**T**HERE IS MUSIC IN THE Kelly blood, but what's curious is that Paul, the sixth-born and least extroverted child, was the one who became the professional singer. As a young boy growing up in the hills of Adelaide, he had learnt to play the trumpet, piano and bongos but, as his sister Sheila points out: 'No-one ever thought he had a voice.'

Michelle Higgins still remembers the day Jo Kelly came to her place in Melbourne, about the time her son's career was threatening to implode. 'She sat in my living room with tears in her eyes, saying, "Paul can't sing."'

Today, Jo Kelly still has her reservations: 'I think it's the quality of his songwriting, because I don't think he is any Caruso.'

But even the late, great Caruso was a slow starter. He launched his career from outside public baths. In Paul Kelly's case, it started in the late '70s with a band called the High Rise Bombers and pub appearances on the Carlton rock circuit. Reviews of the day recall a skinny young man dressed in black, standing on a stage with his guitar tilted, his feet spread, crooning love songs for street kids. Even then, he reminded many people of Bob Dylan.

Within 18 months he had formed a new band called the Dots. That band was followed by the Coloured Girls, who in turn became the Messengers, after it was made clear to them in America that they would have to change their name if they wanted to avoid a race riot. (It didn't matter, they were told, that the name derived from the famous line in Lou Reed's song *Walk on the Wild Side*. Americans wouldn't understand the warped humour of a white, all-male band calling itself Coloured Girls.)

### The Whites of their Eyes

But that succession of bands is about to end—the release of his new album, *Comedy*, marks the beginning of Kelly's solo career.

Over the past six years, Paul Kelly has become one of the most admired poets of Australian rock. In 1985, he won *Rolling Stone's* best album of the year award for *Post*. In 1989, he won two Mo awards for best male performer and best band. The same year he was *Rolling Stone* readers' and critics' choice as songwriter of the year. Two of his albums, *Post* and *Gossip*, made the magazine's list of the 100 best albums of the 1980s. His two subsequent albums, *Under the Sun* and *So Much Water So Close To Home*, went platinum and gold respectively.

He has also written songs for Jenny Morris, Joe Camilleri, Peter Blakeley (co-written) and Mary Jo Starr (the alter ego of Kaarin Fairfax, Paul Kelly's girlfriend), and co-produced *Charcoal Lane*, the award-winning debut album of Aboriginal singer Archie Roach.

To many people's astonishment, Kelly has also made forays into acting, appearing in *A Country Practice* and on Channel 10's comedy show *Col'n Carpenter*. (In *Col'n Carpenter*, Kelly appeared as himself when one of the characters Julia, believing she had only a short time to live, asked to meet her idol. In the episode, Kelly walked into her bedroom and delivered his only line, 'I am so sorry to hear you are not feeling well,' at which point Julia fainted. She survived, but subsequently the character moved to Canada and was replaced by a young nurse from New Zealand played, coincidentally, by Kaarin Fairfax.)

But all the recent accolades make it easy to forget that Kelly once seemed like a man programmed for self-destruction. His first two albums, *Talk* and *Manila*, were huge commercial and—as far as Kelly is concerned—artistic flops: he flinches when you mention them. The recording of the second album in the Philippines turned into a complete fiasco when the equipment malfunctioned and the studio blew up. Eventually another studio was found, but there was little chance the record would be promoted successfully—Kelly had had his jaw broken in a Melbourne bar and could barely talk, let alone sing.

And then, of course, there was also the small matter of his heroin habit, which Kelly describes now as 'a long period of occasional use'. All the world seemed to know about it, not only because he appeared on the cover of *Manila* looking like an archetypal junkie, but also because he was writing about it and paying a kind of homage to it in public. One night at the old, famed Manzil Room in Kings Cross, Kelly jumped off stage when he saw Brett Whiteley in the audience. Still playing his guitar, he made his way through the crowd, stopped in front of the artist and began singing *Alive and Well*. In a way it was a tribute to both of them.

## Paul Kelly

*Tell the nurse  
You're through the worst  
Yeah cancel that hearse . . .  
Anyone can tell you're alive and well*

But there were others who didn't survive. After his marriage to Hilary Brown ended and his record company, Mushroom, dropped him, Kelly moved to Sydney in 1984 to be near his young son, Declan, and to try to resurrect his life and career. He shared a flat in Elizabeth Bay with Paul Hewson, keyboard player and songwriter with Dragon. Kelly ended up dedicating *Post* to Hewson after the musician was found dead in a car in New Zealand. Most people believe he died from a drug overdose.

'Paul [Kelly] certainly seemed to be in love with the mythology of the tortured artist then,' says Stuart Coupe. 'He was fixated by Rimbaud, Baudelaire, the gloom-and-despair French poets. And he always had a passion for the real losers or hard-done-by figures in the blues world . . . the old "live fast, die young" mentality which, for a number of years, he was intent upon doing himself.'

Kelly is not impressed with this observation. 'For every hero you throw up who died a premature death, I can throw you another one that didn't. Paul Cézanne lived to a very old age. Alan Border is still alive. Lou Reed is still alive. Yami Lester is still alive.'

*My name is Yami Lester  
I hear I talk I touch but I am blind  
My story comes from darkness  
Listen to my story now unwind  
This is a rainy land . . .*

From *Maralinga Rainy Land*

(Yami Lester is an Aborigine who was blinded by the British atomic tests conducted during the 1950s at Maralinga in South Australia. The 'rainy land' reference comes from the first line of a Baudelaire poem: 'I am the King of a rainy land.')

**K**ELLY HAS AN ENORMOUS NUMBER of heroes—literary, musical, artistic, sporting (particularly cricket)—and like any good songwriter, he has begged, borrowed and stolen from most of them for his inspiration. Listen closely to his music and you'll hear the Kelly heroes in there

### The Whites of their Eyes

somewhere: Muddy Waters, Buddy Holly, Sunny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, Hank Williams, George Jones, Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed . . .

His sound is a blend of black blues, white blues, folk, country and high-voltage rock, behind a voice that pitches somewhere near Dylan and, as we've learnt, nowhere near Caruso. Kelly described his voice as 'a bit nasal, a bit dry'.

But the uniqueness of Paul Kelly lies not so much in the sound he and his band, the Messengers, create, as in the stories he writes. They are stories made exceptional by their lack of glamour, their absence of pretence, the sheer ordinariness of his characters' lives. Certainly he has written Woody Guthrie-like salutes to legends such as Sir Donald Bradman (with whom Kelly corresponded after he wrote the song *Bradman*), but for the most part, his songs are ballads for the little man—journalistic sketches of dead-end lives which betray, on the poet's part, a literary gift and a deep concern for the dispossessed.

This too, seems to run in the Kelly blood, as his grandmother, Contessa Filippini, mentioned shortly before she died in 1987. 'If there is any common denominator among them, [her 18 grandchildren] besides music, it might be that they all care about people,' she wrote in her autobiography.

Most of Kelly's brothers and sisters work as teachers or in social service-related fields. His mother works with the homeless. 'It has been,' Jo Kelly says, 'a trait in the whole family, looking out for battlers.' She also acknowledges the importance of her children's Catholic education, which inspired a deep commitment to the poor and powerless.

Kelly's characters wake up with all their clothes on. Their homes are often in shambles; their coffee is cold. They are characters who forget who they are. They're not 'good looking, well-built or tall'. Sometimes they are friends, old lovers, next-door neighbours. Sometimes they are people who break laws or hearts or both. Mostly, they are characters whose luck has run out. Lately, some of them have been women—an aunt reflecting on her life in the south of Germany; a mistreated wife; or a character from a Raymond Carver short story.

Kelly is a devotee of Raymond Carver, a writer whose narratives have been described as 'word perfect' for the way they convey with simplicity and brevity the barrenness of the average, uneventful life. As Kelly believes, if you have a story to tell, tell it sparingly. Don't linger. The more economical, the more powerful.

Paul Kelly went for economy during this interview.

At one point, when asked about certain musical influences in his life, he replied: 'Oh God, these questions.' At another point, when I alluded

## Paul Kelly

to the influence of his former wife, Hilary, on his writing, he replied: 'I'll keep that to myself.'

Who was the song *You Can Put Your Shoes Under My Bed* based on? 'Can't remember.'

You were once quoted as saying: 'People tell stories to relieve their suffering.' Is that why you tell stories? 'I think people tell stories to get love.'

Why do you tell stories? 'To be loved.'

How important is that to you? 'It must be very important.'

Are you getting it? 'Yeah, I get it.'

What do you think about the Gulf War? 'I don't want to talk about the Gulf War.' Silence.

Why not? 'I hate entertainment personalities talking about current events. I choose not to.'

What about Aboriginal land rights (a cause which Kelly has publicly identified with increasingly over the years)? Silence. Then, 'You've trapped me there, haven't you . . . I am not a good arguer.'

Deborah Conway, a close friend of Kelly and former lead singer of Do Re Mi, believes Kelly has a 'natural fear of soapboxing. He is just not gregarious. He is the quietest one at the dinner table. That makes him a great listener, a great observer, but it's unnerving for a lot of people.'

Yanni Stumbles, who managed Kelly for five years, either with Stuart Coupe or on her own, says she finds it easier to talk to a complete stranger than she does with Kelly. 'It's like "Hello, how are you?" and then he's gone. There is no warmth there. I get the feeling he is as fond of me as he is of a computer. I'm sure a lot of people feel like that.'

'But then he gets up and does one of his songs, and it moves you because he is such a great songwriter and artist. He is one of the few people who has ever sung a song and made me weep.'

**K**ELLY PEERED OVER THE PRECIPICE in the early 1980s and didn't like what he saw. He stepped back and wrote the award-winning album *Post*. But even then, many people were still not convinced he could deliver.

When Michelle Higgins implored her Mushroom Records boss, Michael Gudinski, to spend \$2,000 on a video of Kelly, Gudinski became so incensed that he put his fist through his own boardroom table. 'He thought Paul Kelly was a loser,' says Higgins.

But even Gudinski's rage didn't stop Higgins. The following year, she turned the tables. She had just heard a track from Kelly's new album,

## The Whites of their Eyes

*Gossip*, and had been told he was about to sign a contract with Regular Records. Her response was to book into Sydney's Sebel Town House and declare a state of siege.

'I called Michael and told him Paul Kelly was about to sign with Regular and that I was going to live at the Sebel until he signed him. I realised *Gossip* was the record of his career and I said, "I am not moving until you stitch up this Paul Kelly contract." I also said that [with *Before Too Long*], "Paul has the hit of his life."'

Two weeks and \$4,000 later, Kelly was back with Mushroom Records. 'I love him,' Gudinski says now. 'He is the longest-term act on the label. He hasn't looked back since *Gossip*.'

And it's true. Kelly's songwriting and singing have matured with each album, although there are some critics who believe his latest album, *Comedy*, is patchy.

But fires burn in improbable ways. Kelly is no Caruso; he is no hip-wiggler shining a spotlight on himself; he is no bon vivant setting a dinner party aglow. You have to find the richness and the warmth in other ways—and most of the time that's through his songs. Occasionally, though, you might find it in a letter, as his grandmother did one day shortly before she died. Only then might you begin to think that you'd caught a glimpse of the real Paul Kelly:

*Hello Nonna*

*The weather is warm today—I'm on the balcony catching the sun. A blues record is playing and that is what makes me think of you. Singing. Thinking about singing. All the different ways of singing . . . And singing for me meaning not just singing, but moaning, crying, pleading, praising, whooping, shouting, talking, whispering, calling, cajoling, defying . . .*

*Anyway, things are OK with me and I've formulated a maxim which probably makes you shudder with horror—you have to shout before you can sing. I'd like to sing like John Lennon did in his early days and to do that you have to shout . . .*

*Then again, your kind of singing—the kind that doesn't break the rules—can send shivers up my neck, precisely because of its purity . . .*

*So what am I trying to say in this roundabout fashion? That there is more than one way to open your mouth. That I'm glad I come from a long line of singers. That I hope to live up to my inheritance in my own crooked way, trusting instinct before training. That I hope you can forgive such arrogance. That I love you and thank you and hope that one day you can be as proud of me as I am you . . .*

*Paul*



## Paul Kelly

### Postscript

*In 1997, after 21 years as a performer, Paul Kelly finally scored a national number one album with his greatest-hits compilation, Songs Of The South. That same year he was presented with an ARIA award as best male performer and inducted into ARIA's Hall of Fame. In 1998 he repeated the feat by being named best male artist of the year.*