

Kelly's Heroes

Profiles in Courage

by Chris Bourke

Paul Kelly's *Gossip* didn't make the front pages, but people are still talking about it. The double album by Australia's most eloquent songwriter was full of sagas and confessions, and struck a chord with everyone who heard it. In turn they passed the word on down the line.

In March last year Paul Kelly toured New Zealand with his band the Coloured Girls. Over his three nights in Auckland the Gluepot crowds got bigger and bigger as word spread about these assured players and their unassuming, earnest frontman with his songbook of gems.

While in town Kelly delved into New Zealand writing, emerging from second-hand bookshops with works by Baxter, Frame, Duggan, Gee, Fairburn, Sargeson, Morrison, Hulme.

But the literate songwriter proved a reticent interviewee, his answers rife with pauses and almost never complete. He didn't find stage patter or interviews easy, he said: "I don't have ... my convictions are ... I sort of doubt things too much ... most of my songs are ambiguous anyway. I always wished I had the ability to talk. To bring an audience into a song more, and give them the key to it. I'm a bit better than I was a year ago!"

He opened up when the tape clicked off and the conversation turned to topics other than himself. He articulated his enthusiasm for the intensity of Robert Johnson, the writing skills of Hank Williams and Bob Dylan, the passion of George Jones's singing. He'd watched Jones record a TV show in Nashville, and sent a tape of his songs to the country legend.

Eighteen months later, Kelly is back here for another tour, and in that time the word has spread further afield. He's been back to the States twice, and done a lengthy tour there. 30,000 Americans bought *Gossip*, and *Under the Sun*, its more focused followup, has just been released there. He returned

to Nashville for another pilgrimage, but hasn't heard back from George Jones.

Big Country

The songwriter with the vivid portrayals of Australia hasn't been disappointed by the big country that produced most of his idols: "America is a country that doesn't let you down, it's larger than life. I think it's got something to do with the fact that we're so familiar with it. It's not like you're going somewhere totally new. Every place you pass through reminds you of a song."

Nashville reminded Kelly of his hometown, Adelaide. "You have an image of Nashville as being just a country and western town. But there's much more going on than that." However it lived up to its reputation as a music Mecca, every bar and restaurant featuring aspiring songwriters. The Coloured Girls were impressed by Desert Rose (with ex-Flying Burrito members) and Delbert McCClinton, and they supported Gregg Allman — "most of the audience had beards." They'll probably record their next album 200 miles southwest in Memphis, where their record company A&M have a studio. The intended producer Scott Lipp is currently working there with REM.

You would have heard the song 'Memphis in the Meantime' by your A&M stablemate John Hiatt ...

"Yeah, I'm not that crazy about him," replies Kelly. "People rave about him a lot."

Current listening? Ahh ... the Latin salsa king Willie Colon. Reading? American writers Saul Bellow, Tom Wolfe, Raymond Carver and Ethan Canin.

"You don't read to confirm your own ex-



Kelly and Coloured Girls: Michael Barclay, Peter Bull, Kelly, Jon Schofield, Steve Connolly.

perience, but to learn about someone else's. My experience over there isn't from an American perspective at all. That's one of the reasons I want to record over there, to be stuck in one place for more than a few days."

Hello, Possums

Current hype says there's a passion for things Oz in the US, from INXS and crocodile jockstrap Paul Hogan to Olivia Newton John's koala bear shop ...

"They've been talking about America's love affair with Australia for the last 10 years. I think it's had its day now. There is a fascination, and there have been waves of it in the past. Before, there was Little River Band, then Air Supply, then Men at Work. But it all focused on one band. Now there's more of a general awareness that there really is something going on down here, not just 'Here's this wild and wacky band from Australia'."

Since March, Kelly's been laying low in Sydney, catching up with his reading and

writing songs: "I've written one called 'Cities of Texas,' which is based on the impressions of Texas from a bus window. I've also been writing a few songs for women that I've been singing on stage. Songs from a woman's point of view: 'Hidden Things,' and one called 'What Makes a Sweet Guy Turn So Mean.'"

This shift came about when New Zealander Jenny Morris asked Kelly for a song. "She intends to record a song of mine at the end of the year, with one of the Farriss brothers [INXS] producing. It's called 'Beggar on the Street of Love.'"

Strine

In America, *Under the Sun* comes with a glossary to explain such Strine colloquialisms as *the Barcoo* (Western Queensland river), *the Buttery* (where alcoholics dry out) and *station* ("can mean a railway station or a ranch"). In the most unaffected way, Kelly's songs are as quintessentially Australian as the writing of Eric Bogle or Banjo Paterson.

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