

Wanted Man

Paul Kelly

Paul Kelly's first gig in New Zealand was at a doomed rock festival in Palmerston North in March 1987. The headliners were the Damned, who were an overpaid joke blown off the stage by Kelly and his band the Coloured Girls, the Dance Exponents and Herbs.

Kelly then played three nights at the Gluepot in Auckland. Word had got around about his remarkable double album, *Gossip*, which seemed to cover Australiana, childhood, romance, tragedy and the history of rock 'n' roll and cricket in a few deft, clear strokes. Each night at the Gluepot the size of the crowd grew as the buzz spread about this songsmith and his no-nonsense pub-rock cohorts, the Coloured Girls. He left Auckland with a lot of new friends - a singalong with Al Hunter covered the Everlys, Beatles and Dwight Yoakam - and a bag of second-hand books of NZ Lit.

Ever since, he's made regular visits, sometimes alone, usually with a band of increased skill, always with a recently completed album of his trademarked mix of dirty realism and romance: Banjo Paterson on the same AFL team as Raymond Carver, Slim Dusty and Hank Williams.

In the last 10 years, Kelly has firmly taken residence as the poet laureate of Australian rock 'n' roll. This month, he's back in New Zealand on tour, celebrating the release of his compilation *Songs from the South* - a career retrospective which went to No 1 the first week it was out in Australia.

"The record's hit a chord," he says, with characteristic laconic understatement.

Although Kelly has had few actual chart hits, his songs have entered the consciousness and lives of the Australian public. Some of them seem to take on a life of their own. "Songs like 'Little Things', 'Bradman' and 'Everything's Turning to White'," he says, "songs that weren't hits when they came out, or even get much radio play. But they're popular songs, which people call out for in gigs. They're songs I can still find a way to play."

His songs, with their stark images of everyday lives, love affairs both alive and stale, and snapshots of recognisable scenes of urban Australia, enter the lives of his audience like a personal diary. "I watch people when I'm playing a show, and I see couples come along, singing together all the words to a song. Then I imagine them a few years later. They may not be together any more. They'll be singing along to another song."

With such realistic characters - the wife who kicks out an alcoholic husband, then takes him back; the ex-girlfriend who finds a new, wealthy lover; the ex-girlfriend who becomes a prostitute; the couple who never leave the sack - inevitably, many in the audience think he's writing about them. "I get that a lot. People come up and say, 'How did you know to write my song? How'd you know that story about me?' I get some strange letters."

Have the songs ever got him in trouble?

"Not for a long time. The last trouble was 'All the great aunts are either insane or dead', but that was 10 years ago [from 'Adelaide', his paean to his hometown and childhood]. I had some eccentric aunts in Adelaide. But eccentric didn't scan - so they became insane in the song. I explained to the family that I was making it up."

'Adelaide' didn't make the final cut of the compilation, despite his mother's best efforts. "I told her I was making up a greatest hits record, or a selection. Everyone had an opinion about it, even total strangers. The guy in the local bottle

shop started the thing up in the first place. He'd say, you really should put out a greatest hits. It's been bugging me the last few years.

"So everyone had an opinion about the songs. When I first told my mother, she asked if she could make a list of her favourites. Sure. Next week I got a letter: she'd sent 61 songs. 'Oh, I just started writing and I couldn't stop,' she said. That was really nice."

Kelly wanted a couple of songs off each record, to get a broad spread of his career. He wanted to cover recent albums such as *Deeper Water* and *Wanted Man*, which aren't as well known as his masterly Australian trilogy of the mid-80s, *Post*, *Gossip* and *Under the Sun*. "I wanted to represent those records, and the most well-known songs. Not necessarily my favourites, or what I thought were the best, just the most popular. I guess I slipped in a couple of things - 'Wintercoat', 'Everything's Turning to White' - but they're generally the songs that are called out for at shows."

The arrival of the low-fi, acoustic *Post* in 1985 was like the second coming of Paul Kelly. With his band the Dots in the early 80s, he had put out two albums (*Talk* and *Manila*) which have none of the flair and assured songwriting of his later work. He was dropped by Mushroom, and many assumed that he'd had his chance in music. But the stark, confessional - and self-financed - *Post* (included on the compilation is the evocative 'From St Kilda to King's Cross') won him back an audience, and another contract with Mushroom.

"I just pretend those first records don't exist, I ignore them. I want Mushroom to delete them, for Walt Disney to bring them out in 50 years. They were like me learning to write songs and be in a band and make records."

What brought about the sudden improvement?

"There were no big steps, I was just starting to get better at it. When you start writing songs, at some point you feel you're onto something that's yours, that's not sounding like someone else. That's what *Post* was for me, I felt like, there's a little vein here I've got, I can dig here for a while. That's all. It just comes with time, unless you're like Elvis Presley at the age of 20. Most people don't find it that quick."

A mentor at the time was Don Walker, who, since being the songwriter of Cold Chisel, has developed his own brand of stark Australiana. "I knew him through family connections, and went up and stayed in Sydney with him for a while. Nothing very complicated. He just told me I was a good songwriter, probably at the time I needed to hear that. So I kept writing."

In 1987 Kelly and his Coloured Girls toured the United States as the support act for Crowded House, who were then at their peak in the US after 'Don't Dream It's Over'. The Coloured Girls became the Messengers; the do-de-doo name had been a last-minute joke that had struck, but it was a joke the Americans weren't likely to get. The Messengers and the Crowds bonded on the tour, sharing heritages of music and upbringing. Each night, Kelly would walk on stage and say, "Good evening - and welcome to the South Pacific invasion."

The tour finished in Washington, with both bands, their families and roadies, on-stage singing the Hunters & Collectors perennial, 'Throw Your Arms Around Me'. Late that night, the two bands had an extended singalong, surprising each other



with their shared repertoire of old Irish drinking songs, Beatles and Beach Boys hits.

Crowded House would occasionally perform Kelly's ode to Melbourne, 'Leaps and Bounds' ("I'm high on the hill, looking over the bridge, to the MCG / And way up on high, the clock on the silo, reads 11 degrees"). And one time at a benefit gig in Melbourne, Kelly returned the compliment by singing 'Into Temptation' with Crowded House as the backing band.

Kelly built up a small fan-base in the US, and made his next few albums in Los Angeles. In 1989 I was lucky enough to witness him record songs for *So Much Water at Oceanway Studios* in Hollywood - and will never forget the naked emotion of his singing as he recorded his vocal tracks. The band had already done their work, which Kelly was singing along to on headphones. The guitar lines of his close friend, Steve Connolly, were equally moving. Sadly, Connolly - who was the musical backbone of the Messengers - died a couple of years ago, in his mid-30s.

Reviewing *Under the Sun*, the New York critic Robert Christgau said, "Problem's those four-square Messengers, the rock 'n' roll band of a wordsmith's dream ...". He had pinpointed the dilemma of the traditional songwriter: how to keep the musical creativity evolving. Since 1991, Kelly has worked with a variety of musicians, including Randy Jacobs, the Was Not Was guitarist. For nearly four years now, Kelly's band has featured the leading Melbourne rhythm section of Peter Luscombe and Steve Hadley, formerly of

the Black Sorrows.

"What I'm trying to do now is change musically - that's why I broke up the Messengers. With the band I've got now, the songs I'm writing are coming more from collaboration. I've always worked fairly collaboratively anyway - just writing the bare bones of a song - but even more so with this band."

Seeing Kelly and his band back Renee Geyer in Melbourne last year (in the same club where he'd performed 'Into Temptation') showed how he's finally found the perfect vehicle for his music. Their mix of R&B and country-rock astutely complemented his songs; it was like hearing a South Pacific version of the great *Dusty in Memphis* band.

Kelly's noirish torch song 'Lately' brought out the soul diva in Geyer. (He produced her *Difficult Woman* album, and wrote many of its songs; he has also contributed to albums by Vika and Linda - co-writing a song with Tim Finn for them - and Christine Anu.) But it's another singer's singer who the songwriter's songwriter would like to have interpret his work: Frank Sinatra. "It's always been a fantasy for him to do one of my songs. 'Wintercoat', or 'Lately'."

The Chairman of the Board currently hospitalised, as his lifestyle catches up with him. With Sinatra's health becoming as unreliable - and as secretive - as Boris Yeltsin's, it better be sooner rather than later.

In the meantime, we have Paul Kelly himself, the bard of the South Pacific.

CHRIS BOURKE