

Paul Kelly Interview

Adelaide, Australia 1992

By Marc Librescu

Paul Kelly is regarded as Australia's leading contemporary singer-songwriter. Originally from Adelaide, his recording career began with the release in the early 80's of the albums *Talk* and *Manila* by his band, **Paul Kelly and the Dots**. A solo acoustic album, *Post*, was released in 1985.

Gossip was released in 1986 with a new band called **Paul Kelly and the Coloured Girls**. His next album, *Under the Sun*, reached number 15 on the Australian charts and the band toured Australia, New Zealand, America, and Canada.

So Much Water, So Close to Home was released in 1989 under the band's new name, **Paul Kelly and the Messengers** and it went gold within weeks of its release. The band's latest album, *Comedy*, was released last year in Australia and has just been released (late May) in the U.S. on Dr. Dream Records. The Messengers have recently parted ways and an album of previously unreleased material, to be called *Secret Things* is forthcoming.

Paul has produced an album for **Archie Roach**, and has written songs for and with other Australian artists including **Kev Carmody**, **Mary-Jo Starr**, **Yothu Yindi**, **Nick Barker**, and **Deborah Conway**, and has appeared with **Tracy Chapman**, **Hunters and Collectors**, and **Michelle Shocked**.

I caught up with Paul at Theatre 62 after a performance of the play *Funerals and Circuses*, which ran as part of the Adelaide Festival.

Who would you consider to be your musical influences?

I guess when I first started to learn to write songs and play guitar my first influences were American: Hank Williams, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, Velvet Underground, The Beach Boys, and The Beatles.

What bands are you listening to now?

A lot of Australian bands. My favorite record this year is from a Sydney band called The Cruel Sea. They have a record called *This is Not the Way Home*. There are many Australian bands I admire. Dave Faulkner is a singer and a songwriter, Ed Cooper, The Hoodoo Gurus, Died Pretty, The Go Betweens, and The Triffids. A lot of those bands aren't going any more but they were really good bands.

Is there an emerging Australian musical identity?

I think the identity's been there quite awhile now. I've certainly been aware of it for some time. Australian bands get influences from both England and America, then there's our own thing that we throw in as well. So there's been a pretty distinctive sound for quite awhile. I don't know if I can really articulate it.

How would you describe your music?

Well, I just try to keep things clear. I try to make music that stands up to more than a few listenings but at the same time is still clear. So I like the music to be clear on the surface but to still have some depth so that it doesn't get used up in a just few listenings, so you can still find something new in it each time. That's the kind of music I like. I don't like pretentious music (laughs). I like simple music or apparently simple music that's got something else going on as well.

From listening to your songs, I get the sense that you're equally interested in the lyrics.

Yeah, I think lyrics are important but the most beautiful lyrics in the world are going to be no good unless you've got a decent tune. So I'd have to say the tune's more important. You've got to have the tune first, otherwise people won't ever listen to the lyrics.

You wrote the music for the show, *Funerals and Circuses*.

Yeah, I wrote the songs. There are also couple of traditional Aboriginal songs, Pitjantjatjara (pronounced *pit-in-ja-ra*) songs, in the show that we got permission to use. Pitjantjatjara is a language group from the country north of South Australia. I wrote the rest of the music. How did you enjoy the show?

I really enjoyed it. I haven't experienced theatre that takes you from tragedy to comedy and back again so adroitly. It seems hard to pull that off.

Most Aboriginal people have a great sense of humor. You notice that humor is always there in the way people talk and what they say. So many bad things happen in this play—there's a rape, two deaths, a couple of people break down at the end. That's a fair whack for one night at the theatre, but there are jokes all the way through it.

I've noticed that people who have suffered, have had hard lives or suffered oppression, come out of it with a good sense of humor. I think that's the reason that Jewish humor is so strong, because of the circumstances they found themselves in. Sometimes humor is the best way to cope when your life is threatened or so many dangers are pointed at you from outside. Humor is a way to cope. That's why Jewish humor is so strong and that's why Aboriginal humor is so strong as well.

Do you plan to pursue acting further?

It's something I'm open to but I'm not going to go out and pursue it. This whole thing came about from someone (director Steven Gration) approaching me and saying, "Do you want to be involved?" and I thought it sounded interesting so I got involved.

How did the songs for the play come about?

It all came together collaboratively. The director and Roger Bennett, the writer, had a few long sessions where they came up with the characters and some of the events. Then they went to the actors and started improvising scenes. I was involved from that point as an actor. We also contributed to the development of the characters in the story.

I started to get an idea about everyone's character and set myself the goal of writing a song for each character, whether it would be used in the play or not. One of the characters, a policeman, has a song that he sings to himself. There's a whole song there but he never gets through it. Another character, the young black man from the city has a song—he never gets through that. I kind of like the idea of having people sing songs naturally, like they would in real life.

As opposed to a Broadway musical where people spontaneously burst out into song.

We try to get the songs to arise the same way they do in life. People do sing songs. We often forget how much we sing. People sing as they do housework or they sing as they walk down the street. They hum a tune to themselves. Some people sing as they work. Workmen whistle when they work. So there is a lot of music in our lives and I think there are ways to put that into theatre without having to go the Hollywood route.

We did have a couple of Hollywood moments. One was when the character Julie comes out and addresses the audience and sings about her feelings inside. That was more of a typical musical thing.

But there's a balance and I think the balance really works because it's not so obvious. You don't think, now *she's breaking into a song*.

Yeah, she slips into it. And we don't have an orchestra start up, we just have the piano in the back.

You don't necessarily think of this piece as being a musical, but it's full of music. I think that may be a result of an unselfconsciousness about the music.

Yeah, that's exactly what we wanted to get. I mean we have as many songs as a normal musical has, it has 16 songs in it. But you wouldn't walk away thinking you've just seen a musical. It's a play with music. That's good, I'm glad you said that because that's exactly what we're trying to get. You walk away and think, hmmm...there's a lot of music in there.

You had done some work with the Aboriginal band, Yothu Yindi.

Yeah, with the album *Tribal Voice*. I went up to where they live which is East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and worked on the arrangements of a lot of their songs before they went to record, so you can call it kind of pre-production. I also co-wrote a song called "Treaty" which was their single that was a big hit. I co-wrote it with the band, with Mandawuy, the lead singer. Then a few months later, they got into the studio and made the record with a producer. I wasn't involved at that stage, just early on.

I heard that Tribal Voice is due to be released in the States next month.

Yeah, Yothu Yindi just signed up with Hollywood Records. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. I mean, it's good because Hollywood's got a lot of money but I don't know how long they're going to last.

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