

MINDS WENT WALKING
PAUL KELLY'S SONGS
REIMAGINED

Curated by
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A WORD FROM THE CURATORS

For many Australians, the songs of Paul Kelly have come to represent tangible links to both time and place: childhood memories, family and friends, first love, first heartbreak, perhaps a reminder of a loved one gone too soon.

These are the spaces where Paul's songs become far more than a melding of words and chords, where a simple line snatched from within a verse or chorus cut like a scythe to lay bare a hidden memory. An instantaneous memory jog that somehow told a story unique to you. Your story. But of course, when heard by another, the same lyrics could tell an entirely different story.

These were the challenges we threw at our talented contributors, who are quite possibly the most spirited and accommodating mob of wordsmiths ever assembled. A huge heartfelt thank you to each and every one of you!

Suitably armed with a Paul Kelly classic, one that spoke directly to each writer, we set them to work. Some coddled their song lovingly, some dissected it with clinical precision, some even grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and sunk a boot in. But in each writer's inimitable style, using the fertile seeds sown over time by Paul, new life blossomed. A reimagining. Fiction, non-fiction, never you mind, for sometimes the line blurs.

As Paul would say, our 'minds went walking'. We certainly hope you enjoy the places, and times, into which they've wandered.

~ Neil, Jock and Mark

WHEN I FIRST MET
YOUR MA
TIM ROGERS

WHEN I FIRST MET YOUR MA

WHEN I FIRST MET YOUR MA

I can't have been the only one who thought it was a lusty paean to the mother of an acquaintance, surely? Even as I write this, I'm not entirely convinced it isn't. Songs, huh? Wily buggers.

This song 'dropped' for me when Paul and I were touring together with Renée Geyer and Vika and Linda Bull. Small houses, hastily written setlists, more cups of tea than I'd ever encountered on tour, and then the requisite, mildly debauched all-nighters. Mid-tour at the Continental in Prahran, nursing a smoky whisky and a smarting heart, I slouched at the bar waiting to join PK onstage when he slid into a version of 'Wide Open Road' by The Triffids that caused me to finally understand its bleak beauty. (Sometimes it takes a new setting to understand a scene.) And then 'Ma'. Simple chords for the intro. G, suspended G ... and a verse that was set in a bar – why, quite possibly the one I was slouching in. He tricked the melody a little, beginning in a lower register. A foolish girlfriend, a beautiful friend, a proposal. And then a chorus that felt trite, and a li'l clichéd, but then as my prickly, pickled brain was passing judgement, we're in Fitzroy Gardens and I KNOW that walk, that giddy perambulation. And then another chorus – birds like love, and I understand now about that chorus. It's a pause, a breath to the

story. One that allows the ‘I know this one!’ audience members a chance to warble along, and for listeners to digest the story they’re now in. And I was IN. In her father’s house, laying with this new love, this wild new story. Walking miles in the Melbourne rain. Rain that never felt as cold or threatening as rain in other cities. But I was new to living in Melbourne then. And even the tap water tasted like a revelation.

Was he talking to his son? His daughters? Well, I’ve never known. We rarely talk about songs. More likely to talk about a tree, or an old South Australian centre half-forward. But that night after the show at the beautiful Continental, I oafishly blabbed to him about ‘Ma’ and how I finally ‘got it’. He gave that impish grin and handed me a dram, and gave nothing away.

The next time we talked songs was twenty years later in a St Kilda seafood restaurant. I could feel the whole joint craning their necks to hear: ‘Bloody hell, PK’s talkin’ songwriting to some idiot?!’ We quickly got back to centre half-forwards.

Melbourne rain still falls softer than any other. You won’t convince me otherwise.

THE FASTEST FORD
IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

JOCK SERONG

TO HER DOOR

THE FASTEST FORD IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

It was a road song, for my road year. I'd deferred uni and resolved to drive around Australia in my HQ panel van with the unglamorous but reliable 173 cubic inch, redblock motor and a box containing exactly 110 cassette tapes. I had no idea how to change the oil, gap the plugs or even find the jack, but I glued a beer tap on the stick shift and tried to keep the water on my left.

Somewhere in there, among the 110 TDKs, was Paul Kelly's 'To Her Door', released three years previously but still at the forefront of my understanding of relationship breakdown. The rest of the box was almost all raw meat from the suburban pub rock oeuvre: Chisels, Angels, Oils. The Crawl, the Tatts, the Divinyls and the Hunnas. Knowing neither shame nor nuance, I was a devotee of dad-music a full decade and a half in advance of being a dad.

Paul Kelly has never been a notorious mangler of his own lyrics like, say, James Reyne is. Indeed, part of his appeal lies in the utterly convincing, conversational tone of his singing. Undisguised emotion, evidence of lived experience. Not for him the banshee howls of Garrett or the horny tomcat purr of Hutchence on a ballad. So it's been interesting to discover, on re-reading Kelly's words

recently (in the excellent *Don't Start Me Talking: Lyrics 1984–2012*), that I'd somehow misunderstood him on several fronts.

It turns out that the bit at the end of the first verse in 'To her Door' where the guitar is louder and you can't hear PK's voice, is the declaration, 'Shove it, Jack, I'm walkin' out your fucking door': a necessary piece of scene setting, since the rest of the song is about getting back in the eponymous door.

I'd missed that, in my screaming on the empty Nullarbor, so I hadn't strictly misunderstood it. But error followed swiftly in its wake. In a rainswept carpark above the kelp of Albany, I shoved the tape in the Kenwood's hungry mouth and I thought, just after she 'thought he sounded better', that *she said I'm underfed*. It turns out that 'she sent him up the fare', which accords much better with her resilient, get-on-with-it attitude than does a throwaway comment about not eating enough, given that by this stage she's been without him for a whole year, and that should have freed up plenty of food money.

But the sending up of the fare, obscured by the imagined complaint about nutrition, led me further into error. I thought his response to her gesture of forgiveness was downright odd: why did he travel *on a limerick* to her door? I've had travelling companions like this and they're insufferable. The Melbourne to Warrnambool train is three hours of social waterboarding: seats that face each other so the guy who does the parts-ordering for the guy who services the shire's auxiliary fleet of executive vehicles can tell you about his junior footy career, down to the formative disappointment of an after-the-siren torp falling agonisingly short in front of the netball team's wing-attack who was wearing a *No Fear* hoodie and a look of timeless, bottomless pity.

So for something like thirty-four years I have wondered at the affection in which Paul Kelly is held as a lyricist when he had been responsible for this lazy instance of shower-whistling, ear-wormery about limericks. Yes, of course I can see now that it was a bus reference, thank you. Travelling 'on Olympic' was a perfectly sensible way to get home.

I pulled into Carnarvon, halfway up the Western Australian coast, low on money and looking for work. Even through my industrial-grade naivety I could see that a job on the prawn trawlers wasn't the answer: along the wharf, scruffy heads appeared in hatchways to tell me I could have a 'tucker trip' (read: we'll feed you and that's all), or I could get fucked.

Thinking the industry was right but the offers were a little short, I took a gig at the town's prawn processing plant, along with a room in the staff quarters out the back. And that's where I met Darryl (not his real name because he might hunt me down) and Ken (also not his real name, and ditto). Darryl and Ken were my next-door neighbours in the staff huts. Darryl was around twenty-five, tall and lean, dark mullet, speed-dealer sunnies. Ken was older, short-cropped silver hair, no teeth and the build of a Staffordshire terrier. He was covered in home-made tattoos, the layout of which reflected his DIY ethic: there were none on his back, and the ones on his thighs were upside down because he'd done them to himself while sitting and drinking. These ones were incomplete (*Fuck the Pol—*), presumably because he'd passed out before he finished. Ken was a trawler skipper, currently between boats. The two of them drank long and hard every night, and their rooms were either side of mine. They alternated venues, and there was no escaping it.

Darryl owned the Fastest Ford in Western Australia. He told me so, many times. I don't know how he could be so certain of this, given we were pre-internet, and in a state the size of Western Australia there were a million places you could hide a slippery Ford. How did he know there wasn't someone with a street-legal GTHO in Meekatharra, or Broome? Darryl's Ford was a '75 XB coupe in a bluey-green colour that had oxidised in the weather, and I couldn't tell you anything about the engine note or even verify how fast it actually was because *it never moved*. The Fastest Ford in Western Australia was as emphatically motionless as the WACA: in fact, it sat on blocks at the end of our row of huts.

Over many long nights drinking beer with Darryl (I can explain: it seemed safer than declining the invitation) he lamented that all he lacked was a new carby, whereupon the coupe would be restored to its mythical status as the FFIWA. He just needed the money. In the meantime, every payday he and Ken would buy themselves a slab-mountain of Emu Export in the handy 750 ml king-brown format and grimly chug their way to oblivion, night after night. The carby would have to wait. *But you should see how fucken quick this thing is, mate.*

So to return to Paul Kelly's argumentative drunk asking himself if he could 'make a picture', well, yes sure – he's trying to visualise his reunited family life. But it was the next bit that led me astray: instead of 'and get them all to fit', I heard *and get the motor fixed*. This made perfect sense to me, as (a) you might recall that in my understanding, he hasn't travelled home on a bus (to wit, 'on Olympic') because he's got a head full of limericks instead, and (b) it follows that what he must be doing is waiting for a carby, like Darryl, so he can drive. The hard towns of remote coastal Australia

must be filled with Darryls, composing humorous five-line verse while they worry about the cost of genuine Ford parts.

But then came the fateful day.

I'd avoided the previous night's binge, I don't remember how. But it must have been a classic of the genre, because I was woken in the small hours by a tremendous crashing of glass and a prolonged scream. Now call me a coward, but my immediate response to this was to stay exactly where I was.

Under the blinding lights of the prawn plant early the next morning, among the stainless steel and the dizzying smell of bleach, all was revealed.

Every night, at the end of their binge, Darryl and Ken would carry out a touching act of domesticity. They would stack all their empty king browns just inside the door of the hut, presumably for later transfer to a bin somewhere. On this particular night, Darryl had decided on one last long, sighing horse-piss before bed, to be delivered as always on the lawn outside my window. But on his way out the door he tripped and fell into the assembled ranks of empty bottles and sustained a gigantic laceration to his right arm.

On face value, this was no more than another reason why the FFIWA wasn't going anywhere for a while. But the problem was bigger than that. Darryl's role at the prawn plant was a thing called 'knockout', and it was indispensable to the production process. Only one person did knockout, and that person was Darryl. Knockout entailed standing on the concrete floor in gumboots in front of a steel table with a thick rubber mat on top of it. Every so often a conveyor belt would send down a large steel tray, essentially an ice-cube tray, the contents of which was four deep-frozen blocks

of prawns, straight off the trawler. Darryl's job was to swing the tray over his head and slam it on the rubberised table so that the blocks popped out of the tray (anything to get away from Darryl) to be thawed and the prawns sorted. The tray was heavy – I'm guessing about ten kilograms – and Darryl prided himself on his prowess at lifting dozens of them all day long and slamming them with enormous force on the table. It was a job that lacked variation, but he was fond of his biceps.

Such was the bang he made every time the tray hit the table, that every other employee in the place would jump involuntarily. Not knowing precisely when Darryl was going to slam down a block made the torment worse, that, and the endlessly looping *Classic Love Songs* tape on the PA system overhead that carried, like a viral load in its bloodstream, Belinda Carlisle's saccharine horror show 'Summer Rain'.

I got the explanation about the king-brown attack from Beverly, the factory's floor manager. It was seven am. We were meeting in Beverly's office, because under her hairnet she had been doing some thinking.

'You're nineteen, right?' And she was right. 'Wanna make three extra bucks an hour?'

And so I was allocated the hallowed role of knockout. Up till then, I had been assigned a station further down the line from Darryl on knockout: I was responsible for a large steel vat filled with aerated seawater, into which the knocked-out cubes of frozen prawns would slide. I had to stir them around and break them up with my hands so they thawed faster, then sieve them out and send them somewhere else – your barbecue, I guess. The only break from the crushing mundanity was the 'by-catch' that occasionally spun

to the surface of the water – spiky juvenile flathead, tiny flounder and crabs.

For this task I was issued white gumboots and a pair of pink dishwashing gloves. The fingertips on these were punctured by dozens of prawn-horns, which would break off in the flesh of my soft suburban fingertips and immediately turn them septic. After a fortnight in the prawn plant, I had lost multiple fingernails.

But by five minutes to eight that morning, my world had opened up. I was standing at the holy of holies, the rubber-matted table, flanked by conveyor belts: one belt to deliver the trays, and one to whisk away my slammed-out cubes of spikes and tails and antennae. And between those belts I saw – or I imagined that I saw – the eyes of my co-workers, sceptically awaiting a new chapter in the deafening history of knockout.

The first tray arrived.

I took it and hefted it overhead. Shit, it was heavy. I smacked it flat on the rubber and it made a deeply unsatisfying thud. Nothing moved. I panicked and swung it again: still nothing. The factory was all a-twitch at the silence. While I stared dumbly at the tray, fingers gradually freezing on its frosty sides, another one came flying down the belt. Backlog. Now I was really in trouble. I thought of home. Through the ammonia I could smell home cooking. I thought of my father making a scotch and dry at our kitchen bench, primary school artwork on the wall behind him. Mum, twisting the ice cubes out of the freezer tray ...

Twisting.

I picked up the first tray again and tapped it on one corner. It flexed just enough, and all four cubes fell out. Just like that. I felt like I'd split the atom. I grabbed the second one and the same thing

happened. Not even Belinda Carlisle could trouble me now.

By the time Darryl got his stitches out and returned to the floor, I was on record-setting pace. Despite this, there was never any question that my promotion to knockout might be made permanent: everyone understood that this was Darryl's *raison d'être*. He certainly hadn't used the time off to track down a new carby.

He stood beside me at the rubber-matted table and there was a handover of sorts. No, 'Thank you for covering for me during this period of reflection upon my self-defeating behaviours,' but more like, 'Yeah, right, I got it now.'

'But Darryl,' I said, savouring the moment. 'I've discovered the most brilliant thing – you can just tap the corner of the tray and it puts a little twist in it and the cubes just *fall out* – look!' And serendipity delivered a tray to my waiting hands. I gave it a tap and the magic happened.

I don't know what I expected him to do or say. But he grunted and I stood aside and he took up the position. A tray flew down and he grabbed it by the near end with those powerful arms, one bandaged and one not, and he swung it mightily over his head and I saw in that instant his face was contorted in a savage tableau of rage and pleasure as he slammed it flat on the table and the cubes burst from within, and the factory collectively clenched its teeth and Belinda Carlisle went on wailing and wailing about the summer rain.

Like Kelly's star-crossed lovers, Darryl has never aged. They don't have locked-down grandkids. Darryl doesn't have a Prius. He is out there somewhere. Maybe he found that carby and it fed fire to the V8 as he roared away from a stick-up in a swirl of dust and bank notes. But more likely Daryl has ossified, has become a rare

constant in a madly shifting world. An entire generation having passed him by, his face still contorts with fury as he slams an endless stream of steel trays on a rubber table. Hundreds of casual packers and sorters have come and gone, lived their lives and raised their children. The Ford still waits on its blocks, cataracts on its headlight-eyes, and dugites coiled in the shade underneath.

The infernal workshop of knockout clocks grimly on, bleach and frost in place of fire. And Daryl is there at its centre, every muscle aching. Walking in slow motion, like he's just been hit.