

The blindside attacker

PERHAPS it's his dark fascination with the strange and unusual. Perhaps it's his passion for painting the big picture, or his uncanny knack of saying the things most people prefer to remain unsaid.

But Paul Kelly seems to be making a career out of attacking pop music on its blindside with devastating results.

While lesser singer-songwriters have contented themselves with trying to come to terms with that old evergreen, lurrve, Kelly's dealt with violence against women, prostitution in Darlington, extramarital affairs and bigger issues such as Aboriginal politics, custody deaths and nuclear testing in the outback.

Ask him where his motivation comes from, however, and he looks decidedly uncomfortable and shrugs off any analysis with a mixture of modesty and embarrassment.

Take the song *Everything's Turning to White*, which gave Kelly's new album *So Much Water So Close To Home* its name. It tells of a fishing party who discover a woman's body but because they're so far from home, opt to finish their two days fishing before reporting their bizarre find.

"Comedy and tragedy are always mixed up," he says. "That song just happened. I have a love of Raymond Carver and since I discovered his work I have read all I can lay my hands on.

"I really like this collection of short stories and I would say he's been an influence on me for a long time. I always thought it would be good to write a song based on one of his stories, but I didn't know which one.

"It was an idea I had carried around with me

for a while but that song just jumped into my head suddenly. It must have been one of those times when I'd been working on a song without realising it."

So Much Water So Close To Home is Kelly's most ambitious album to date, sweeping wider geographically than in the past, acknowledging the time he spent with his band The Messengers in America.

KELLY says while his writing has been affected by the time spent out of Australia, the American influences were always there.

"More so than British ones," he says. "I always loved American music from the 50s, so it's hard to tell how much I have been influenced recently.

"Being in a studio is very similar anywhere in the world and also in my case it takes a long time for influences to go through me and come out.

"But at the same time there are obvious references. There's a line on the record about how many cabs there are in New York and I wouldn't have used that three years ago before I'd been there.

"*Cities Of Texas* was written after our first trip and we visited Dallas and Houston."

Kelly spent about eight months in America between his last album *Under The Sun* and the new one, touring, recording and visiting relatives. He enjoyed the experience.

"The studio was good to work in. Lots of good records were made there and while we were there Aaron Neville and Linda Ronstadt were duetting on some songs and Isaac Hayes was there. We had confidence in the studio and it somehow felt good.

"We toured over there with The Smithereens and found that audience-wise

it varied dramatically city to city. Sometimes they would be really into what we were doing and at others they would stare blankly at us. They would get fairly serious about it all."

So Much Water is likely to help Kelly reach his biggest global audience so far, though he's quick to stress that isn't because it's less Australian ("our best known song in America is *Dar-*



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ing It Hurts and that has a very specific Australian reference," he says).

It's no preconceived step into the commercial market however, relying instead on some of Kelly's most subtle and enduring songs to date.

HIS penchant for the unusual remains unaltered too, with three of the songs written from a woman's viewpoint. Kelly says he was unsure whether he should sing them or not at first.

"I wrote them and it didn't seem hard to sing them myself, but I couldn't decide whether to get someone else in.

"I was thinking about doing a record using different voices as well as mine but the band told me to sing them myself.

"It's done a lot in folk music. Go to a folk club and men will often sing as women and vice-versa. It's quite acceptable to take on a different personality for a song. I can't see why it should be any different in pop music."

Throughout his career Kelly has made a point of questioning white attitudes to Aboriginal politics, and on his last album, wrote a strong anti-bicentennial song.

This time he focuses on a story from Aboriginal legend, telling the story of Jundamarra, who fought against the British invaders in the late 18th century.

KELLY says the positive outcome of the bicentennial celebrations has been a greater awareness of the Aboriginal issue and a corresponding increase in the amount of literature which delves into history and uncovers stories the colonialists tried to keep untold.

Jundamarra, or pigeon as he was known to the white settlers, is one example. Pemulwuy is another.

"I think there has been a big lack in our education and white Australia has really ignored Aboriginal culture and history to its detriment," he says.

"But a lot of people probably didn't think Aboriginal politics was an issue, and it's a big issue. The bicentennial helped to focus that.

"I think there's still a long way to go but a lot of books are coming out. Pemulwuy was an Aboriginal in the Sydney area who fought a war

against the settlers but the Government at the time wouldn't acknowledge it happened.

"We've always been fed this myth that Aborigines didn't resist and the Maori and Aborigines were very different because the Maori were very warlike and the Aborigines weren't.

"I think that's a load of rubbish. In Australia it's very hard to fight against superior weaponry because of the terrain.

"Jundamarra is actually a very interesting character because he worked for the police at one time and that's when he was called pigeon.

"Then one day he had a political conversion and he went back to his own and got a small army together and harrassed the settlers for three years.

"He was very hard to catch because he knew the country so well. He was badly shot one time and they thought he had been killed but he recovered and then people began to attribute supernatural powers to him; that he could change into a spirit and was immune to white man's bullets.

"Some people think he planned the whole thing, working for the police because he realised there was no future for his people unless they fought the whites and the way to do it was to learn how to use guns and get access to them."

Kelly returns for a tour of New Zealand next week, a year on from his last visit, ending with shows at the Powerstation next Friday and Saturday. He's looking forward to returning.

"I always enjoy playing there," he says, smiling. "We'll be featuring a lot of the new album but we'll have a large repertoire so we'll vary the set each night. It'll be a case of calling out again."

— Dominic Roskrow