

Please me, please me

THESE DAYS, PAUL KELLY wears two hats. To cop a phrase, he 'wears them well'. After a career long tenure with Mushroom Records, Kelly recently drew stumps and headed to EMI. Official word was that Kelly was keen to 're-invent' himself. While his audience await a new Paul Kelly album 'proper', the artist has simultaneously released two new records.

Professor Ratbaggy is the eponymous debut for his funkier outfit. Alternately, Kelly has cut a bluegrass record with collaborators Uncle Bill. That album is dubbed *Smoke*.

Released via his own Gawdaggie label, both albums stretch the artist. Whereas *Smoke* features both old and new Paul Kelly songs, *Professor Ratbaggy* brims with new grooves.

Alongside Kelly, Ratbaggy comprises Bruce Haymes, Steve Hadley and Peter Luscombe. On Kelly's last studio album, the excellent *Word & Music*, the blueprint for Ratbaggy was evident on 'Nothing On My Mind'. A funky jam of a song, the track sounded as if Kelly was fighting to be heard in a pub while a live band traded licks in the corner.

"That's very true," he confesses. "There's a direction we were following and that's been taken much further on *Professor Ratbaggy*. On *Words & Music* there were songs like 'Nothing On My Mind', 'Gutless Wonder', 'Lazy Bones' and 'Melting' which were pretty much grooves where the chords didn't change at all. They just had songs written over the top (of them). That's pretty much how the Professor Ratbaggy songs were written too. They came out of jamming.

"Tease Me' is another one that could have ended up on Professor Ratbaggy. Bruce had the piano riff and we just played that for ages and ages. Eventually I wrote words to it. When the songs on *Professor Ratbaggy* occurred, their starting point was either a keyboard riff, a guitar riff, a drum beat, or a bass line, which was completely opposed to me writing a song at home on a guitar and bringing it in."

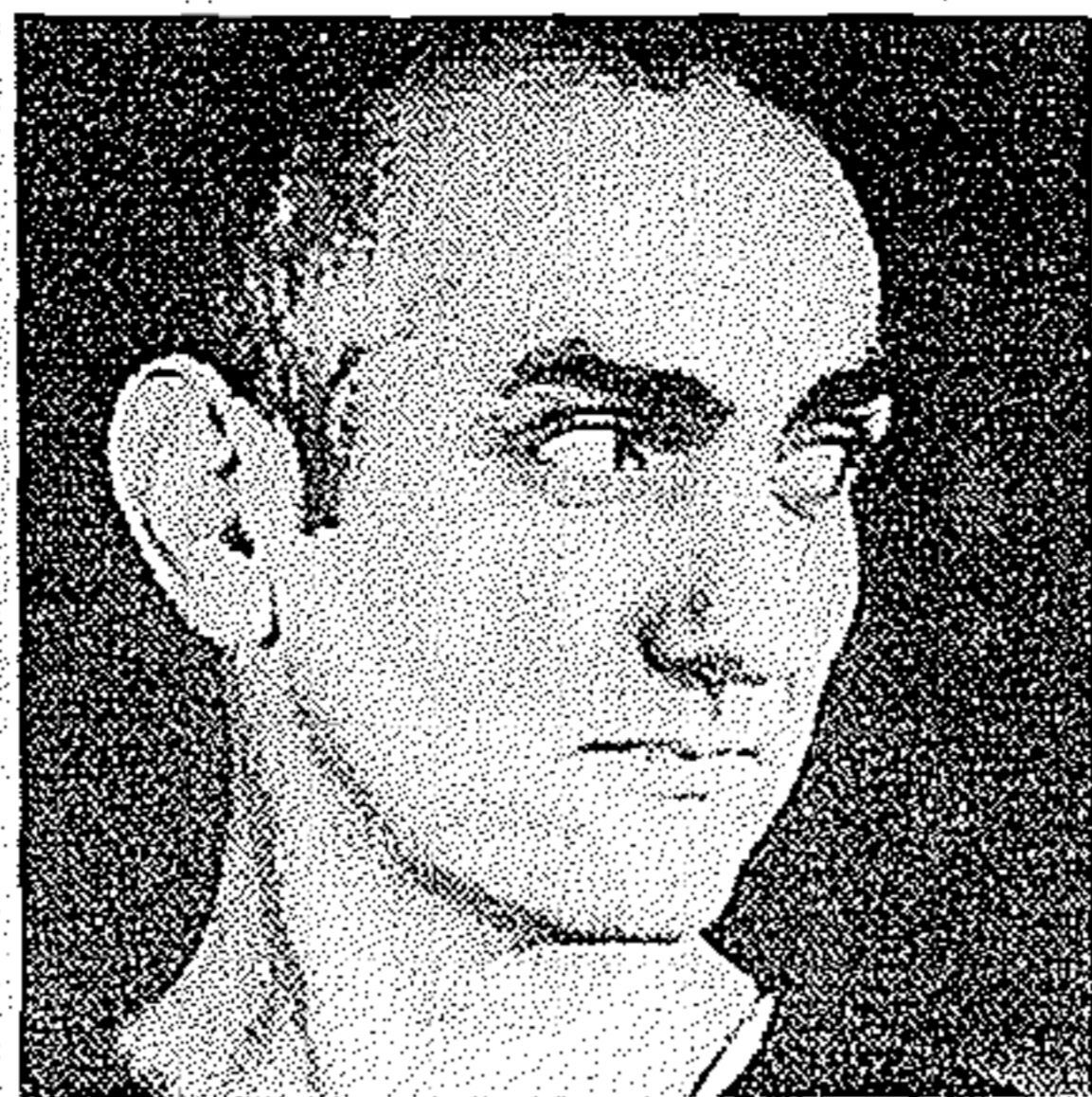
Kelly is well aware that a record like *Ratbaggy* may bring new listeners. Similarly, he's aware of distancing fans who've enjoyed a particular version of 'Paul Kelly' in the past. He admits it all 'keeps life interesting'.

Despite the modern feel of *Professor Ratbaggy*, Kelly was reticent to spend too much time in the studio making the album sound modern.

"I'm a bit wary of making things sound too contemporary," he admits. "If you make things sound contemporary, they quickly sound out of date. I listen to a lot of modern music, just because I'm interested. I think it's a really exciting time in music. A lot of the sources for *Professor Ratbaggy* are old things like James Brown, Booker T, Augustos Pablo, Lee Perry and reggae stuff that's been around for a long time."

Kelly is adamant that in 1999, it's an exciting time for music.

"I like the hybridisation that's going on," he continues. "I always think that makes music exciting, when two things meet that haven't met before and create something new. I think there's a lot of that going on now. I like the way dance music has influenced pop music. Dance borrows from rock, and visa versa. I like the way things are really get-



Paul Kelly - exploring new territory

ting mixed up. Everything's up for grabs. Music is just organised noise, really. You take bits from everywhere and try and make something up."

The polar opposite of *Professor Ratbaggy* is *Smoke*. In the past, Kelly has

made no secret of his love for bluegrass, country and 'roots' music in general. Making an album like *Smoke* had been slowly gnawing away at the artist for three years.

"Why do you do things?" he ponders out loud. "I guess there's a combination of a whole lot of little impulses. Over the years I've talked to Graham Lee of The Triffids about doing a country record. I always thought I should do a country record.

"Three years ago, Graham put together *Where Joy Kills Sorrow*. Graham came to me with an Ernest Tubb song and said 'Why don't you record this with Uncle Bill'. That worked out well. A year or so later I got asked to be on a tribute album for Slim Dusty, again with Uncle Bill. That band had been going for a few years, and I would send them songs from time to time. I sent them 'Sunshine', which is the first song on the record. They recorded three of my songs on

their first record, about two years ago. There was a relationship that was building up.

"Then I heard a record by a guy called Tim O'Brien from America. He's a bluegrass musician. He did a whole album of Bob Dylan songs called *Red On Blonde*. I thought 'I could do this kind of record too'. That record made perfect sense. Many of Bob Dylan's songs go back to those hillbilly sources. I knew I had songs that would work perfectly like that."

At the end of the day, Paul Kelly is just out to make records that obviously move him.

"I'm not on a mission," he explains, "and I don't have an agenda. I'm just trying to play music that brings me pleasure."

Paul Kelly and Uncle Bill play *The Waterloo Hotel* on Saturday November 20 and Sunday November 21. *Professor Ratbaggy* and *Smoke* are out now on Gawdaggie/EMI.

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