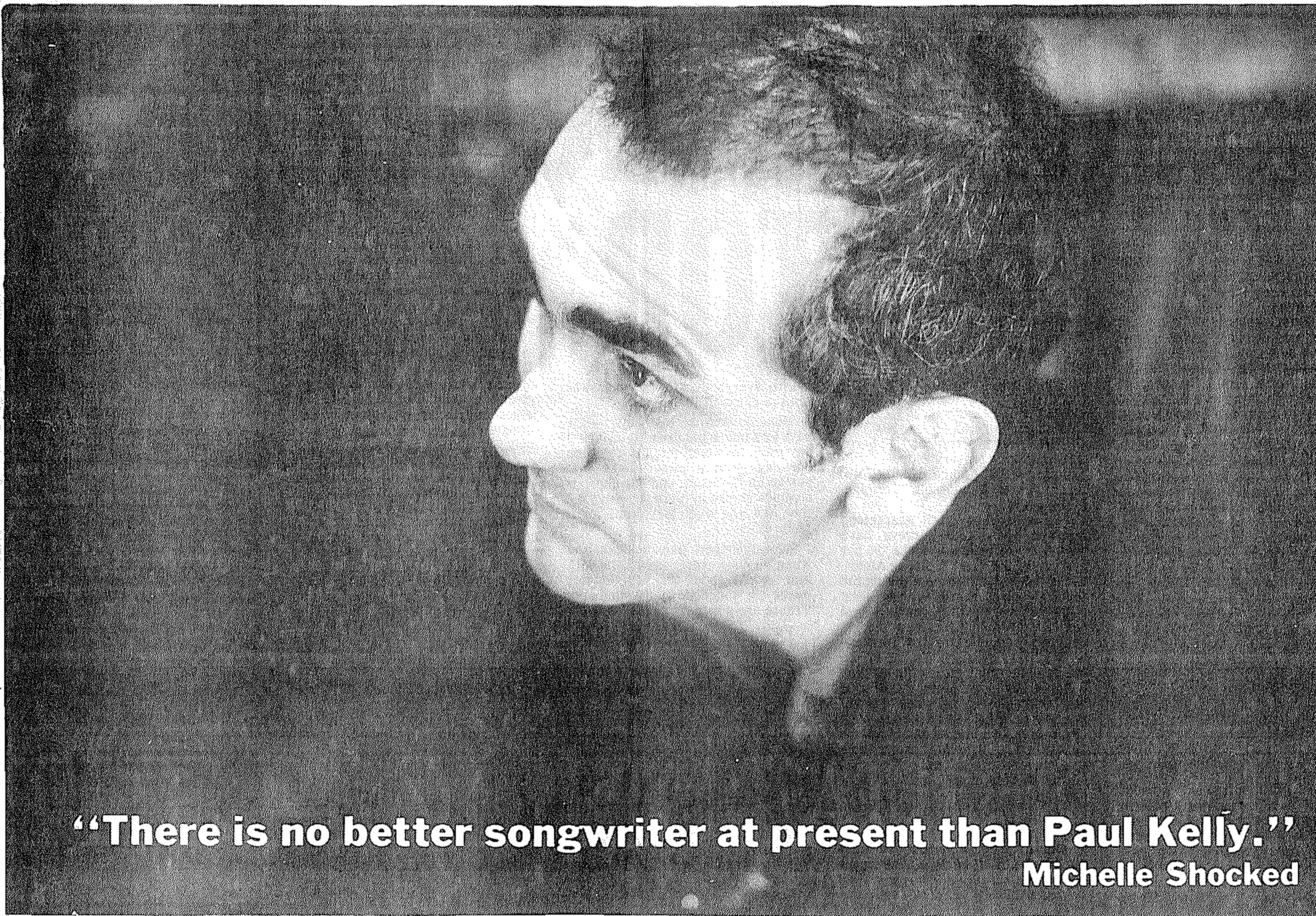


THE PROLIFIC PAUL KELLY



"There is no better songwriter at present than Paul Kelly."
Michelle Shocked

Paul Kelly on the Messengers: "What we've decided to do is to have an indefinite break. We're not shutting the door on working together in the future but it wouldn't be for a while." Picture: CHRISTOPHER

Paul Kelly is one of the most accomplished rock talents in the country. But, as Brian Wise discovers, he would be the last person to admit it.

PAUL KELLY is one of the quiet achievers of the Australian music industry. Reticent by nature, the singer-songwriter has been gradually building a formidable career while somehow maintaining an understated profile that suits his low-key personality. You will never find Kelly boasting about his achievements; more often than not he has to be reminded about a particular success before giving a shrug of acknowledgement.

Paul Kelly's reputation has grown over the past decade to the point where he might lay claim to being the nation's finest songwriter. Chosen by the readers of 'Rolling Stone' as songwriter of the year in 1989, with a Mo award in the same year for best male performer, and two albums named in 'Juke' magazine's list of the 20 best albums of the '80s, Kelly's credentials are impeccable in his home country.

Successful forays into the United States, with album releases and tours, have ensured that he is as highly regarded on the other side of the Pacific. The performances with his band The Messengers are polished and highly entertaining feasts from the Kelly songbook; the acoustic dates that I have seen have been absolutely riveting.

There are few singer-songwriters who can hold an audience the way Kelly can these days. When Michelle Shocked toured Australia earlier this year she insisted on using The Messengers as her backing band and gave her own rendering of Kelly's 'Everything's Turning to White'. Shocked's effusive-

Apart from the critical acclaim, there has been the commercial success — not always concomitant — that has greeted his more recent albums. With platinum and gold awards for 'Under the Sun' and 'So Much Water So Close To Home' and a solid performance from his latest album, 'Comedy', which topped the independent charts, Paul Kelly is no longer an artist struggling to hold down a record contract.

And as if his own career has not been demanding enough, Kelly has found time over the past two years to co-produce the highly rated Archie Roach album 'Charcoal Lane'; write songs for friend Kaarin Fairfax's recording under the pseudonym Mary Jo Starr; play and sing on albums from Grant McLennan and Nick Barker; and spend some time writing with Debra Conway, Peter Blakely, Kev Carmody and Yothu Yindi.

IT has been more than a decade of musical journeying for Kelly since he formed his first band, The Dots, back in 1978 and released their first tentative, self-financed record a year later. The four-track EP still sounds surprisingly fresh, given its roughness, and if Kelly's vocal style has altered somewhat in the intervening years it remains just as distinctive. Early albums such as 'Manila' and 'Talk' laid the groundwork on which the Kelly talent would build monuments, such as 'Post' and 'Gossip' in the mid-80s, which established his career.

Along the way he has picked up a plethora of musical influences — Hank Williams, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson — all of which eventually become apparent on song titles, the albums or the special 'B' sides that Kelly has a habit of releasing.

The most important part of Paul Kelly's musical persona is the fact that people can identify with his songs: he is a storyteller writing about real people and real situations. "Dad's hands used to shake but I never knew

Even the title 'I Can't Believe We Were Married', a song on the latest album, seems to encapsulate Kelly's ability to come up with the knowing phrase, the perception of someone who has been through the hard times. "Now the kids are grown and we talk on the telephone if one of them is sick or needs some money," observes the lyric, "Our words so measured and polite."

"I think it's easier for me to write about things or actions," explains Kelly, in what appears to be a typically nervous, softly spoken fashion, "Whatever feelings there are will come out if you are talking about something else. I know I write fairly visually so usually I'll write about something that I see".

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Kelly is quick to acknowledge the work of American writer Raymond Carver as being a prime influence on the development of his skills. "I liked him because he was so economical as a writer. That appeals to a songwriter because in a song you don't have a hell of a lot of time. He seemed to be able to express a wide range of feelings with few words."

So attracted was Kelly by the work of Carver that he based 'Everything's Turning to White' on a Carver story which was to later provide the title of Kelly's 1989 studio album, 'So Much Water So Close To Home'. The other attraction of Carver's work might have been the fact that he dealt with the lives of ordinary people leading

tion for events.

"I don't start from an idea," says Kelly, "I don't start from a philosophy or a political point of view. I start with an action, with something I can see. The other thing I do when I write a song is I imagine I'm somebody else. I write from inside a character."

'From Little Things Big Things Grow' deals with Aboriginal land rights and was co-written with Kev Carmody. Kelly married an image of Mexican immigrants culled from Woody Guthrie's 'Deportees' with Vincent Lingiari's battle with Vesty's on behalf of his people. It is almost a companion piece to Vothu Vindi's 'Treaty', a song on which Kelly collaborated during a trip to the Northern Territory.

"I'm interested in Aboriginal issues and culture and history," explains Kelly, "I went up there for a few weeks and worked on their songs, trying out different arrangements." But writing about political issues has never come easy to Kelly. "The treaty is a fairly complex, dense issue and I didn't know how to write a song about the reasons why we should have a treaty." The answer came when Mandavuy Yunupingu told Kelly about his image of the confluence of two great rivers.

KELLY'S commitment might further be seen in his involvement, along with Messenger guitarist Steve Connolly, in the production of the acclaimed Archie Roach album, 'Charcoal Lane'.

"It's been a really great experience for me, meeting Archie and getting to know him because I just think he's an extraordinary man and talent as well. I think his singing is untouchable — I wish I could sing like that. His songs are very political but at the same time they're love songs."

In spite of the weighty concerns that surface on Kelly's albums he main-

in a deliberate ploy to draw attention to this fact. While the press release written by Kelly, is humorous, deprecating and the album co-ode to David Gower sung tune of 'Guantanamera', there to be a strong sense of irony title.

"I mean Nick Cave, Morrissey Leonard Cohen are three songwriters that people would say are dark gloomy," states Kelly, in defence of a trio who hardly conjure up images of The Three Stooges and whose humor will certainly never be found in the history of 20th Century humor. "I think they are very funny as we muses. "I guess what I'm saying humor can run through song appear dark and sad. I think songs often have a bit of both — stories do."

With the release of 'Come Home' might have appeared that Kelly band were poised to capitalise on the success of the previous few releases which have gained considerable attention overseas. However, in a move typical of Kelly's artistic obsessions (a quality that has been essential to his success) a decision to part way with The Messengers has been made paving the way for a Kelly solo career. "What we've decided to do is to have an indefinite break from each other. I want I'll do some stuff on my own work with other people. They'll have plans of their own too. We're not doing the future but it wouldn't be for a while."

If the past few years are any indicator, Kelly is sure to pursue his projects in the same unassuming way that has characterised his previous work; he is also bound to produce the same degree of admiration and respect for his work. "There is no songwriter at present than Kelly," proclaimed Michelle Shocked in a statement that finds a still growing number of supporters. Paul Kelly and the Messengers