

KEV CARMODY

CANNOT BUY MY SOUL - THE CAMPFIRE STORYTELLER (PART ONE)

Late last year Paul Kelly marshalled a group of artists including nephew Dan Kelly, The Herd, John Butler, Clare Bowditch, Bernard Fanning, The Drones and others to cover the songs of his old friend and one of Australia's best and most-respected songwriters, Kev Carmody. The result, 'Cannot Buy My Soul', harks back to that folk tradition of updating great songs for a new generation.

I just love the creativity that's happened on this thing, the total spontaneity of it. It's just-un-bloody-believable. Y'know each person or group had complete freedom with what they wanted to do with it. Pull it to bits, tease it out, change the timing, change the words in that old folk tradition. Before bloody copyright ... corporate copyright and individual copyright - where each generation would update it to fit what's going on in their reality. I just love the way The Herd and The Last Kinection go at it - we've got bloody hip hop going on here!

Paul Kelly mentioned the idea of getting well-known artists to cover Kev's songs some years back but the project didn't become a reality until he rang Kev said: "It's on, we're doing it!" Kelly sent burns of a few songs to each artist but pretty much had a general idea of how we wanted to tackle it. And of course there was a tussle or two over who was doing what.

Paul Kelly recently told ABC television's 'Message Stick' program: "Some, like John Butler, The Herd and The Waifs were quite familiar with Kev's work - others didn't really know him much at all. He's got 17 artists singing his songs. I hope quite a few of them keep them in their sets and play the songs in their own shows. I think that'll happen. The songs will go out from Kev, whether he's singing them or not. That's the idea."

The artists had complete control over how they recorded the song and then Kelly mastered the lot. Carmody reports that Bernard Fanning had his fine version of 'Elly' recorded and mixed within a week. "If I could sing and play like Johnny Butler and Bernard and these fellas - I'd be making money," says Carmody with a big grin. He was never bothered about what these artists did with his songs, to him it was just an honour that these young folk would breathe new life into some of the songs he's carried with him all his life.

And Kev Carmody has had quite a life. Born to an Irish father and an Aboriginal mother, he lived a tough life, constantly on the move in droving camps in the west of southeast Queensland. He saw few other children until he was seven, spending his days with stockmen. His world was all hard work and a fascinating 'nightlife', listening to stories and songs by the campfire. He spoke an Aboriginal / English creole, lived off the land, hunted roos and caught fish.

Carmody is in essence the campfire storyteller at heart - he comes from an unbroken, oral storytelling tradition in which the word image is an essential part of communication. At ten he was taken from his parents and sent to a Catholic boarding school ["pretty much an orphanage"]. "I was taught to think - from an oral tradition - in word images. Because in the oral tradition you gotta have a good memory for one, and it's gotta stick in the memory, so you need a phrase or image that sticks in the head," explains Carmody. "It was a real drawback for me when I was sent to school at ten year old, because they started to take that out of me."

Through his twenties he did various rural



KEV CARMODY (CENTRE) PERFORMS AT THE 2006 MAKE POVERTY HISTORY CONCERT WITH JOHN BUTLER & PAUL KELLY.

labouring work: lumping wheat bags, wool-pressing and the like. Those years of hard physical work are now taking toll on Carmody's body as he suffers back and neck pain and arthritis in his arms that prevents him from playing as much as he'd like.

He toiled hard teaching himself classical guitar, he moved to 'town', Toowoomba, and then life changed. In 1979 at the age of 33 he took up the chance to go to university in Toowoomba, to study history, on probation, even though he could hardly read or write

Fortunately, he had open-minded lecturers who let him bring his guitar to tutorials. In this way he could tell his stories in the oral tradition he was comfortable with. Eventually he completed a PhD.

Probably his best known song, 'Thou Shalt Not Steal' was first released independently in 1987. It was a fiery time. Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke Petersen was hanging on to power, it was the year prior to the 'Bicentennial' that marked 200 years of dispossession for this land's indigenous people. It was the Hawke and Keating years - it was a time of hope. There was this notion of reconciliation in the air.

"The majority of the early songs were done to confront the bloody peanut farmer ... I just used to walk into the studios at Four Triple Zed [at the University of QLD] and start playing and they'd be playing the song on the radio that afternoon."

"Once we bolted ourselves in that studio and they came along with fire axes to get us out, cut the cables and we wound up with a caravan, transmitting from Mt Kuta [recently re-named Mt Cootha]. You certainly lived the bloody reality of the music that's for sure."

'Thou Shalt Not Steal' was written around that time.

"It was a 20-minute-song. I was boarding over at Graceville, and I'd ride my pushbike to Uni over that Indooroopilly bridge. Coming home I'd pull up in the afternoon, sit down, watch the water and look up at the mountains and get myself back to some sort of bloody reality y'know. And that song came over me in about twenty minutes.

Sadly, the incoming Howard Liberal Government would starve any idea of a national focus on reconciliation of its very oxygen, and it has stayed that way throughout their tenure.

"That's why every one of these songs is still bloody relevant today," Carmody says with a wry chuckle.

"Johnny Butler rings me up ... Paul burnt off four or five songs for each person, so they could make a choice ... we thought he'd take the slide ones like 'Black Bess' or 'Twisted Rail' with the finger-style stuff. And he rings me up and says 'I'm doing 'Thou Shalt Not Steal', and I said 'John, that's the best way to stop your career in its bloody tracks mate!' and he said 'I'm doing it because it's gotta be done.'"

"And you hear that guitar lick at the beginning - it's a John Butler song. And it's all of our song."

When his debut album was released in 1989, 'Pillars Of Society', Kev Carmody was heralded as 'the black-Bob Dylan', but he has proven to be much more than that. He is the black Woody Guthrie, The Australian Bob Dylan, the indigenous Australian Bob Marley, he's all those and more. He, like Paul Kelly, has done so much toward us being less self-conscious about ourselves. These blokes write about Australia: not Alabama, Georgia, the Mississippi. But St Kilda, Kings Cross, Marrickville, the 'Rooster & Rib' at Woodridge in Logan City, the Indooroopilly Bridge, Vincent Lingari, Jundamurra ...

On November 7, 1993 an 18 year-old member of a traditional dance group, Daniel Yock, collided with a plain-clothed policeman and fell to the ground in a South Brisbane street, knocked unconscious. His hands were cuffed behind his back and he was thrown into the back of a paddy-wagon, where he lay while police patrolled for some time. He died en-route to the city watch house. A week later thousands marched silently down Roma St to the



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police watch-house. No police officer was charged or disciplined with regard to his death.

"'Young Dancer Is Dead', I wrote that the night I heard that it happened. Steve Kilbey [The Church, who produced Carmody's 'Images & Illusions' in '95] played bass on it when I recorded it. It's a driving bass on the original ... and here again in these times these young fellas, The Last Kinection, update it and we've got Palm Island going on. Y'know, there's a continuity there and it means something to that younger generation ... it's not Kev Carmody it's a whole collective on here. It's reconciliation ... and I'm just blown out by the talent."

Pat Whyte

The two-disc 'Cannot Buy My Soul: The Songs Of Kev Carmody' - which features 17 covers and 17 originals spread over two CDs - is in stores now through EMI. Next week: The collaborations of Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody.

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KEV CARMODY

CANNOT BUY MY SOUL - THE CAMPFIRE STORYTELLER [PART TWO]

It's such a very apt choice to use the refrain from his typically forthright song 'Cannot Buy My Soul' as the title for a collection of well-known Australian musicians re-interpreting the songs of Kev Carmody. For a man whose career has been totally uncompromising at every level, honest and strong, this is the mantra he has lived by. His songs are our stories. For Kev Carmody: "... It is a life record of the journey travelled."

There's a system here that nails us ain't we left out in the cold. You've taken our lives and liberty, but you cannot buy our souls'. In this new collection, that particular line of song is given new voice by Archie Roach, and that's not just any voice. Writer Richard Flanagan ["that one-hand-clapping-fella"] describes Roach, in the eloquent liner notes he wrote for this collection as: "Arguably the greatest soul singer Australia has produced."

"You can here his spirit coming out in that 'Cannot Buy My Soul'. In fact Paul was so excited with that recording - Paul helped record it round the back of his place in St Kilda - he rings me up on the bloody telephone and says 'Listen to this man, this wild'," Kev recalls.

It is through the extraordinary creative talents of artists like these, that you realise how bloody amazing these songs are. The covers really do work. And in the course of writing this story I've seen and heard of it really capturing people's imaginations - moving through like an invisible force. Kev, the warm, friendly man that he is, says with his usual modesty, that these artists have taken: "...raw uncut carbon and turned it into diamond brilliance."

With out that great bedrock there'd be no diamonds, but he has a point. For instance, the song that Dan Kelly covers, 'I've Been Moved', is a sublime re-working of a song that was written way back in 1968, when Kev was 22.

"I was a young man on a droving camp," says Kev, "I was just looking up at the night-sky, thinking what moves my spirit? What moves me emotionally?" The astonishing cover version is an unrecognisable take on the original.

According to Dan Kelly, the original: "Is done just right. His signature chugging, driving acoustic guitar, his tough and tender vocal ... Rather than try and recreate something done so simply and powerfully I messed with it, re-wrote the chords and the melody and the rhythm until it became almost a song about how his song makes me feel ... In my mind it's the new folk opus. In yours it might sound like Bryan Adams singing with Pentangle."

Kev Carmody has known Dan's uncle, Paul Kelly - the driving force of this project - for 20 years. "We met at those Land Rights concerts they put on at Bondi Pavilion in the eighties with Midnight Oil and Yothu Yindi. Then our paths crossed at different times. In 1990 he came up here [to Queensland] and we went camping together with our families by this waterhole - in fact that waterhole was Wivenhoe Dam, when it had water in it. Sitting around the campfire there and Paul had this concept of 'From Little Things Big Things Grow'," says Kev.

That particular song tells the story of the Gurinji people and Vincent Lingiari, a seemingly unlikely leader of the Wave Hill strike [one of the longest in our history], a major turning point for the Aboriginal Land Rights movement in Australia. Most people would agree the song is an absolute classic.



VINCENT LINGARI & GOUGH WHITLAM

"I came up with this boring sort of chord progression on a mandolin, swapped it to a banjo and then he fixed up the guitar," say Kev. "I said 'It's a pretty mundane chord progression but it'd be good to tell a story on'. We threw a few ideas around, came up with the Gurindji thing and bang! two o'clock in the morning and it's almost finished."

"I've worked with both his brothers, Martin and Tony, with the street kids down at Logan City. Paul's old mum was living down at Norwell at that time, she used to make the sandwiches for the kids. I'm a real admirer of Paul Kelly's music and what he's done. With the concept of him putting in the Australian place names like 'from St Kilda to Kings Cross'."

They've collaborated on few other projects over the years, Paul and Kev, including the soundtrack for 'One Night The Moon'. Based on a true story of a racist, white station owner who refuses the tracking skills, local knowledge and help of local blacks to help find his young daughter missing in the scrub. Paul Kelly played the station-owner.

"Most of that was one take hey. We had a blue with the bloody producers and I refused to go into the bloody recording studio, so most of that soundtrack is actually done in the one take, at the back of Paul's place y'know - with one microphone. We just moved the cello back, brought the violin in a bit, pull the dijeridu back ... and we mixed all around the one mic."

It was a unique film project. "That was done completely the opposite way to the way you usually do a film. We did the music first, we knew what the story was about, and in six to eight weeks we had the basis of the music done. Then they brought the scriptwriter in, Johnny Romero, he fitted the script to the music. And then they brought in the Director, Rachel Perkins. The dead opposite to the usual way."

"The original concept as far as I was concerned was that it was a film with no spoken dialogue, it was gonna be just visual images and the music. And then they changed it and other things evolved."

Sara Storer beautifully covers a song from that film project on this record, 'Moonstruck'.

"I wrote it for that [missing] child's spirit at the end of the film. Saying from the grave; 'We're not lost in the spirit world. It's you homosapiens that are stuffing it up bigtime' y'know."

He's happy that his lifetime of stories, of spirits and people have been given new life.

"That's what this whole thing is about. When Missy Higgins contacted me about 'Droving Woman' [which is performed by Missy, Paul Kelly and Glenn Richards from Augie March] we talked about that there's four or five stories in that one song. It's a combination of stuff as well as the woman telling the story - how the kids got their education by correspondence, things that



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happened on the droving camps when it rained and that. And then the story of the bloke getting killed. It's unbelievable work that they've done on that track."

Melbourne band, The Drones, who do a searing cover of 'River Of Tears' observed that: "most songwriters just phaff around and say nothing ... they're worried about the effects of speaking their minds. So it's a good day when a black songwriter from Australia calls the cops terrorists. Hats off to that."

Kev recalls the incident in which police shot a man in his home in Marrickville: "I was staying in Sydney for about a month and that incident happened two blocks down the road and they wouldn't let me out on the balcony for two days because anyone with dark coloured skin was on the ground with a gun at your bloody head. So I recorded that on the lounge-room floor on a four-track [recorder] that some bugger had and again we had that on Radio Redfern that night."

"It's part of my cultural background - inclusion - in our culture you say things up front if it's getting up your nose you say it, you get it out in the open, there's no hidden agenda and backroom carry-on. You say it out front and then you try and get a positive bloody outcome in the flaming thing."

"I think that's the thing about this album, it's a total reconciliation thing, y'know, with all those performers on there and also we've gotta include you fellas - in the media - you fellas are writing about this and you fellas are part of this whole collective of people's concern. We've got so much to address ... now we've got a corporate democracy we haven't got a people's democracy."

Pat Whyte

'Cannot Buy My Soul: The Songs Of Kev Carmody' is in stores now through EMI. The 2 CD set features 17 cover versions and the originals.

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