

*Insight Text Guide*

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**Don't Start Me Talking**  
**Lyrics 1984-2004**

Paul Kelly



Insight Publications

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remember at least one Kelly song that stirs the emotions. In this way, his songs are like anthems of Australian life which serve to connect people of very different ages, cultures and social groups.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### About Paul Kelly

The sixth of nine children, Paul Kelly was born in Adelaide in 1955. In the early 1920s, his grandparents founded the first Italian grand opera company in Australia. His grandfather, Count Ercole Filippini, was a leading baritone for the La Scala Grand Opera Company. Contessa Filippini was the first woman to conduct a symphony orchestra in Australia. Their daughter, Kelly's mother Josephine, was also a singer, but was too busy bringing up her children to concentrate on artistic pursuits.

Kelly attended a Christian Brothers school in Adelaide, where he played the trumpet and captained the cricket team. He studied arts at Flinders University in 1973, but left after a year, disillusioned with academic life. He began writing prose and started a magazine with some friends. While travelling around Australia for a few years, Kelly worked in odd jobs and learned to play the guitar. He made his public debut singing the Australian folk song, 'Streets of Forbes', to a Hobart audience in 1974, and two years later moved to Melbourne, where he participated in the thriving pub-rock scene. From there he went on to produce over twenty albums with a varied array of musicians.

Kelly has twice been awarded best male performer by the Australian Record Industry Association and has been honoured in the Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA) Hall of Fame. In 1999, the Australasian Performing Rights Association – the songwriters' guild – recognised Kelly's achievements by naming him songwriter of the year. His songs have also been covered on two tribute albums: *Women at the Well* by well-known female singers, and *Stories of Me (a Songwriters' Tribute to Paul Kelly)*.

### The ballad tradition

Although Paul Kelly's writing has emerged from a range of influences, his work needs to be read in terms of Australian literary and musical traditions, especially the ballad form. In fact, ballads are one of the earliest forms of literature. The word 'ballad' comes from an Old French word referring to a song accompanying a dance. Originating in folk songs or orally transmitted poems, ballads tell, in a direct and dramatic manner, a popular story usually derived from a tragic incident in local history

concerns that are typical of the ballad tradition. He gives voice to experiences which are not written down, like the responses of Aboriginal people to nuclear tests at Maralinga and the land rights struggle of the Gurindji. As is typical of the ballad form, Kelly often sings about current events of significance to working-class and marginalised Australians. His recent piece, 'Emotional', about the plight of an asylum seeker in a detention centre, reveals his ongoing commitment to such causes.

Kelly's lyrics range from the political to the personal, sometimes combining the two – for instance, the political is often seen from a personal perspective. They are often suffused with loss and nostalgia, using ballad techniques to evoke a melancholy tone. Though some of Kelly's songs may be judged to be overly sentimental, this quality is typical of the urban ballad and is present in much contemporary popular music.

## GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

### Genre

In the foreword to the first published edition of Paul Kelly's lyrics, acclaimed poet Robert Adamson makes the point that the earliest poets – the authors of Greek and Roman epics such as *The Odyssey* – were performance artists. The word we use for a short poem, 'lyric', originally meant a poem to be performed to the accompaniment of a lyre (a small harp). We might say therefore that Paul Kelly practises a more traditional version of the craft of poetry than most contemporary poets. Several songs may be read quickly in one sitting but, like poems, they take time to be completely deciphered.

### Narrative points of view

Kelly's songs tend to be written in the first person, from one character's point of view. Sometimes they are written in the third person, as a story told by an omniscient narrator. Alternatively, they may seek to document the experience of a number of people, assuming a play-like dialogic structure. 'She Answers the Sun (Lazybones)' and 'He Can't Decide' are examples of this technique. In this way, Kelly is able to replicate the dynamism of a conversation involving multiple characters.

### Song structure

While he occasionally experiments with form, Kelly's lyrics tend to have a standard rhyming structure and chorus, or repeated refrain. The choruses

classic singer-songwriter tradition, the songs tend to be about unrequited love and relationships going wrong.

Kelly's versatility is evident in the two quite different albums that were released in 1999: a bluegrass album with Uncle Bill called *Smoke*, and a technology-influenced album as part of a new group, *Professor Ratbaggy*. *Smoke* has a distinctly hillbilly flavour, featuring a mixture of old and new songs – the old ones redone in the bluegrass style – as well as country instruments (such as the mandolin, fiddle, banjo, stand-up bass and acoustic guitar) and harmonies.

### Collaboration

Collaboration is an important part of Kelly's practice as a songwriter and this allows him to experiment further with style. Kelly began 'mixing things up' when he worked with Archie Roach and the Aboriginal band, Yothu Yindi, in 1991. An early fan of Roach's, he co-produced the singer-songwriter's acclaimed debut album, *Charcoal Lane* with Steve Connolly. The Yothu Yindi connection was established on a trip to the Northern Territory when Kelly collaborated with the group on 'Treaty', a song that became a surprise pop hit when it was remixed as a dance single.

Kelly has said that he collaborates with other musicians to keep his own writing fresh. A range of musicians have asked him to write songs for them, including Renee Geyer, Vika and Linda Bull, Joe Camilleri and Jenny Morris. Kelly believes that this process allows him to take on different perspectives:

As a songwriter, I'm always trying to write different types of songs anyway. I'm not a great stylist in any way ... I don't have a particular style and if I have any strength it's being able to write in different styles. It's a bit of a tightrope act: you have your own sound, you develop it, and there's a time where you have to start breaking away from it.<sup>7</sup>

## SONG-BY-SONG ANALYSIS

### *Post* (1985)

#### 'From St Kilda to Kings Cross' (p.3)

One of Kelly's best-known songs, which celebrates his adopted city of Melbourne. The narrator retreats into his mind while travelling on a bus; he prefers the run-down St Kilda beachscape to the flashiness of Sydney Harbour.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Kelly cited in Shaun Carney, 'Kelly Country', *Rolling Stone* (Aus), no. 498, July 1994, <http://www.paulkelly.com.au/articles/rs-9407.html>.

## CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

### Relationships between men and women

#### KEY QUOTES

'But when I lie next to my girl/I'm the most wanted man in the world' (p.74, 'Most Wanted Man in the World')

'Never has a man been born/Who can take a woman's scorn/Nor tasted a more bitter wine/Than the brewing of his mind' (p.60, 'Desdemona')

'You put the weapon in my hand/You made me what I am' (p.228, 'Taught by Experts')

'Cause you know and I know that love never runs on time' (p.144, 'Love Never Runs on Time')

Paul Kelly has always aspired to write modern love songs but they always seem to become more complicated, with other people creeping into the traditional 'boy meets girl' narrative. Vexed relationships between men and women figure in many of the lyrics. Kelly's songs about love are invariably bittersweet, revealing the joy of love as well as its pain. The protagonists are usually men, although there are a few songs written from a female perspective such as 'Taught by Experts' (p.228) and 'Don't Explain' (p.119).

Kelly is more interested in depicting the ways in which people behave than in providing a moral message. In fact, many of his characters find themselves in morally complex situations for which there is no easy solution. Recognising that people are fallible and prone to give in to temptation, Kelly's lyrics frequently address the issue of infidelity – or the threat of it. In 'Satisfy Your Woman' (p.11), infidelity is even condoned by the narrator, who claims that a man may 'stray' as long as his girlfriend knows that she's the one who matters most.

A number of songs deal with the consequences of betrayal. In 'The Oldest Story in the Book' (p.271) and 'I'll Forgive but I Won't Forget' (p.167), men are betrayed by trysts between their girlfriends and best friends. 'Keep It to Yourself' (p.110) is narrated by a woman who mocks her partner for thinking his infidelities matter in the overall scheme of things, yet there is a hurt quality to her narrative which lends the song a realistic complexity.

## THEMES & ISSUES

### Mortality

#### Key Quotes

'Dad's hands used to shake but I never knew he was dying/I was thirteen, I never dreamed he could fall/And all the great aunts were red in the eyes from crying/I rang the bells, I never felt nothing at all' (p.10, 'Adelaide')

'Soon it's closing time/Won't you stay with me?' (p.251, 'I Wasted Time')

'If I could only count my days/But I just don't know what's in store' (p.244, 'I Close My Eyes and Think of You')

'In my mind I see the light/I've never been so ready/Now I'm going to the pretty place' (p.250, 'The Pretty Place')

The characters in these songs have a variety of responses to the threat of impending death. Faced with death, a number of Kelly's characters become fearful, while others accept it peacefully. The lyrics suggest that premature death is the most difficult to accept, due to its unexpected nature. The semi-autobiographical piece, 'Adelaide' (p.10) is about a boy who feels nothing at his father's funeral, unable to register the enormity of the event. Only with hindsight can the adult look back at the child and see the loss of his father more clearly.

'Oh Death', based on a traditional song, contains the repeated line, 'Oh death, oh death, won't you hold me over for another year?' (p.217). The implication is that death is always lurking, ready to prey upon the unwary. The narrator's mother tells him never to take death's remoteness for granted, hence his plea to be spared once more. 'Passed Over' (p.294), which also has a folksy, ballad-like quality, is narrated by a man who is thankful that his ill child has been left alone, after a very close call with death.

'Deeper Water' is an exploration of familial inheritance that features the untimely death of the narrator's partner: 'Death doesn't care just who it destroys/Now the woman gets sick, thins down to the bone/She says "Where I'm going next, I'm going alone"' (pp.168–9). Death is depicted here as an indiscriminate force that can take people away at any time.

The prevalence of Kelly's songs about death has increased along with his age. One of the pieces revealing Kelly's recent preoccupation with mortality is 'The Pretty Place' (p.250), which centres on a man's fond memories of a favourite spot. Knowing he will never see this place again, because it now exists only in his memory, he dreams of going there when he dies. In this way, his memory becomes his own private heaven and