

WEST WEEKEND

OCTOBER 13-14 2018

CRAZY
GOOD

DUMPLINGS
TO DROOL
OVER

MARKUS
ZUSAK

The Book Thief
almost stole
his next novel

Master class

MONICA GALETTI
HEADS TO MARGS

Paul Kelly

'All I ever wanted
to do was write.'

plus »

BLUE JEAN
BABY AND
HOW TO
BANISH A
BORE

The Weekend West



Featured
Paul Kelly has a thing for poetry. The country's bard shares some stories behind his new album.



WEST WEEKEND

October 13, 2018
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From the editor

The last time I interviewed Paul Kelly we were both a lot younger. It was 20 years ago and I was feeling more than a little nervous about talking to someone whose music meant so much to me. I couldn't drive past the clock at the MCG without Leaps and Bounds looping in my head, listen to Everything's Turning to White without crying, or hear the first few bars of Dumb Things without cranking up the stereo. What if he wasn't very nice? Would that destroy all my musical memories? He was perfectly charming, if a little awkward, but then perhaps I would be if the situation was reversed and I had to talk to a perfect stranger about myself. He'd rather let his songs do the talking. Since then, he's done many more interviews and countless more words have been written about him (including by the man himself in the stellar memoir How to Make Gravy), which in some ways made me more nervous. But with a sharp intellect and a dizzying array of interests, Paul had plenty to say, so much so the anxious PR had to interrupt to say we'd gone well over time. Any interview with Australia's bard can only scratch the surface (the aforementioned memoir isn't far shy of 600 pages) but I'm happy to have had another opportunity.

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COVER PAUL KELLY PICTURE CYBELE MALINOWSKI

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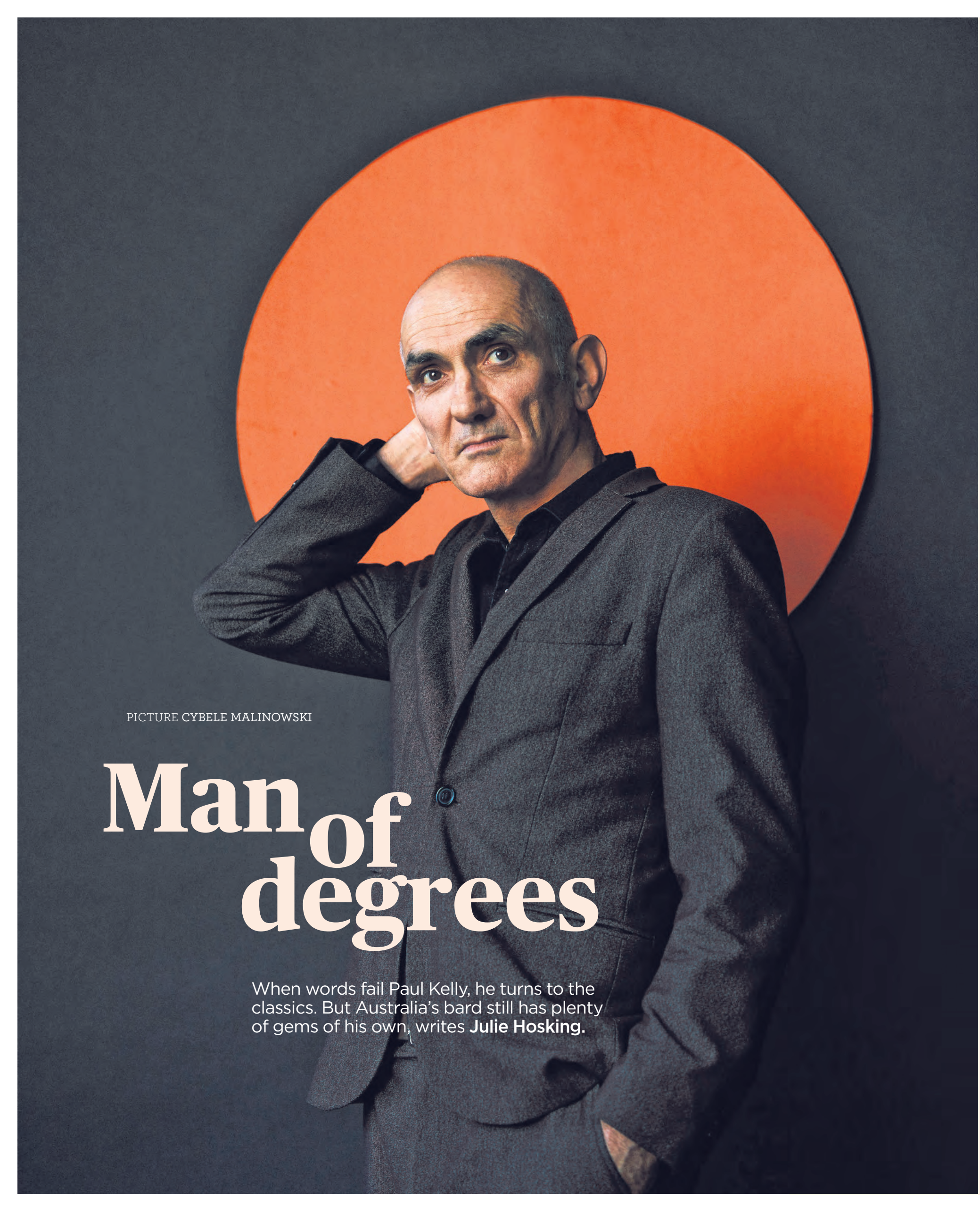


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PICTURE CYBELE MALINOWSKI

Man of degrees

When words fail Paul Kelly, he turns to the classics. But Australia's bard still has plenty of gems of his own, writes **Julie Hosking**.

The tears came out of nowhere. Driving down the tree-lined back roads of Yallingup last month, singing along to Paul Kelly and Neil Finn at the Sydney Opera House, no doubt murdering some of the most-loved tracks from two of the best songwriters in the business. As the first bars of To Her Door rang out, I cranked up the volume. It's a song I've heard countless times before but suddenly, almost inexplicably, I was crying.

At the risk of sounding like a fawning fan girl, I reveal as much to its author a week later. "It's not something I'm thinking of when I write but I know exactly what you're talking about," Paul says generously. "That's what music does. I had that reaction to some songs, too. Sometimes you can listen to a song, which you know really well, and suddenly it hits you sideways ... that's the thing about tears as well, they take you by surprise, you don't know when they're going to come."

Paul is not afraid to admit he is often moved to tears, crying in movies and at performances. Just the night before, he was at a concert at the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School, where one of his sisters teaches music. "I sort of got that feeling just watching these young kids playing so well or singing so well," he says. "They finished with Vivaldi's Gloria and that's where the whole school played and sang ... that gave me the shivers up the back of the neck."

Australia's bard has been doing that to others for nigh on four decades now. Lifting us up with joyful, quintessentially Australian songs (Leaps and Bounds, Bradman). Making us cry at Christmas (How to Make Gravy) and just about any other time (Sweet Guy, Deeper Water). And pricking our collective conscience in the way only artists can. For many, songs such as Jandamarra, From Little Things Big Things Grow and Maralinga were an introduction to pieces of Aboriginal history that Paul believes we should have been learning in school.

His own awakening he puts down to a combination of curiosity and timing, as well as the fact he travelled into remote corners of Australia with his band from the early days, befriending indigenous musicians. "There's a book by Henry Reynolds called *The Other Side of the Frontier*, which I read in 1985, which was probably a big influence. It opened my eyes to a lot of Australian history I hadn't been aware of, more the idea that there was a war and there was a lot of Aboriginal resistance to dispossessing of the country," he says. "It's still not widely acknowledged. I think that's still the heart of some of our problems; that we haven't really owned up to the history and the smashing of culture, the massacres, the taking of land. Until we can properly acknowledge that, I don't think we'll get very far."

He's opened the archives again with *A Bastard Like Me*, the defiant second single off his 24th studio album, *Nature*. Like many of Paul's songs, it's told in the "voice" of another, this time late Aboriginal activist Charlie Perkins. The first Aboriginal to graduate from university, Charlie was one of the key players in the 1965 Freedom Ride, organised to draw attention to the shameful state of Aboriginal health, education and housing, particularly in country towns where they were banned from local swimming pools and RSL halls. The shocking discrimination garnered huge media attention and helped bring about the 1967 referendum that meant Aborigines would finally be recorded as citizens in their own country.

I've taken my licks/I've taken my kicks/I am a man of degrees. I wear the scars/ I earned them so hard/ Every day in the lucky country.

The accompanying video is just as moving, and a reminder that many of us probably know more about the American civil rights movement than our own. Having worked with Charlie's filmmaker daughter Rachel (Bran Nue Dae, Jasper Jones), Paul was given access to treasured family footage. "We did (short feature) *One Night the Moon* together in 2000; that was the year Charlie died. I never met him but I was fairly familiar with his story. Rachel sent me links to (her documentary) *Freedom Ride*, which I'd already seen, and another documentary by Ivan Sen, called *Fire Talker*. And Rachel had also digitised some of the old family photos and I think, what's really the icing on the cake is having those home videos ... it's really strong."

He credits his long-time band with giving the song its edge. "Sometimes when you write something, you don't quite see it. I thought I'd written this folk song. And the band said this is a really angry song, so they jumped into it and smashed it."

While Paul says writing something that is "starting to cook" is a thrill of its own, the process of collaboration, "of making something that none of you could have made on your own is probably a bigger joy because it's a wider, deeper joy". And he's really open and engaged with that process. "Often the writer is the last person who can look at the song objectively, so it's really good to have all those ears and eyes on the song and have ideas for it. It's not like I come up with guitar riffs, or piano lines, or drumbeats – I sort of throw that to the band and I like to be surprised."

The band, many of whom are racking up a couple of decades of their own with Paul, have grown accustomed to being brought surprises, too. In a career that has encompassed everything from pub rock to film scores, PK hasn't exactly been resting on his impressive back catalogue.

Nature, a companion piece to last year's *Life is Fine* – somewhat incredibly, his first No.1 album – puts music to poems from such literary greats as Dylan Thomas (*And Death Shall Have No Dominion*) and Walt Whitman (*With the One I Love*), as well as four PK originals. Naturally, it features the vocals of the irrepressible Bull sisters, Vika and Linda. His daughters, Madeleine and Memphis, also lend their harmonies to a couple of songs.

Paul has always enjoyed the company of women, too much for the liking of his ex wives, Hilary (mother of son Declan, a producer and DJ) and Kaarin (mother of his daughters), though both had nice things to say about him in 2012 documentary *Stories of Me* (his long-term girlfriend Sian Prior was removed at her request when they broke up not long before the film's release).

He said once that Hal David's opening to *Say a Little Prayer* sounded so tender it was hard to believe a man wrote it but I've long been intrigued by his ability to write songs with such a strong female voice. He puts it down to listening.

"A lot of songs come from things people say and women talk to me just as much as men do; I think my women friends talk to me a lot more," he says. "I think it's also that I've had really good women singers approach me for songs, like Renee Geyer, Vika and Linda, Christine Anu »

'We haven't really owned up to the history and the smashing of culture.'

«... You've got to come up with the goods!» He wasn't always so confident on that score. In 2010's "mongrel memoir" *How to Make Gravy*, in which he also writes frankly about his long affair with the dark mistress of heroin, he reveals that he was hesitant to sing the first song he wrote from a female point of view.

"I tried to pass it off to women singers I knew but no one bit. Then I took it into rehearsal and the boys, themselves called the Coloured Girls, jumped on it right away ... 'If you wrote it, you can sing it,' pressed the gang. 'You have more right than anybody!'"

Singing *Sweet Guy*, a sadly still relevant song about a woman in the grip of domestic violence, changed his perception of what he could do. "I could be anything I wanted in a song. Soon I was a ghost, a dog, an Aboriginal stockman, a nineteenth-century outback policeman."

What he was above all else was a storyteller.

This was a man in love with words. He once walked 3km to spend one of his first pay cheques (as an extra for Crawford Productions) on an annotated box set of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*. He would spend hours immersed in the pages, along with Marcel Proust's equally voluminous *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Words haven't come easy to him, though. Almost everything starts with the melody or a visual prompt, such as the powerful image of Gough Whitlam pouring dirt into the hands of Vincent Lingiari, to mark the handing of land back to the Gurindji people in 1975, that inspired *From Little Things Big Things Grow*. Sometimes the words don't come until much later, or he uncovers snippets or scraps from times past, like digging in his pocket and finding a missing piece of a songwriting puzzle. He only half-heartedly jokes that's why he's turned to other people's poetry in more recent times.

"I've always read a lot of poetry. I'm reading an anthology by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes called *The Rattle Bag*, which came out in 1982," he says. "It's a book I've had on my shelf for quite a while ... the great thing about that book is that all the poetry is in alphabetical order by the title, so the poets are mixed up. You just sort of read them quite randomly, which is obviously why it's called *The Rattle Bag*. That's the book I'm travelling with at the moment."

Music is in his blood. The grandson of an Italian opera singer and his Irish student at the Sydney Conservatorium who travelled around Australia in the 1920s bringing opera to the bush, Paul is one of nine children to lawyer John Kelly and his bride Josephine Filippini (there are some cracking stories about his mum in *How to Make Gravy*, not the least of which is the 61-strong "short" list she came up with for his greatest hits).

They all had piano lessons, some also took violin, and Paul remembers listening to his parents' classical records, as well as comedy albums from the likes of Victor Borges and Barry Humphries. The radio was a constant – he sings me a few lines from Johnny Horton's *The Battle of New Orleans*, a mutual family favourite – but with four older brothers and sisters,

'The best advice I ever got was from Don Walker.'



he was also exposed to their eclectic tastes. "The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Normie Rowe, and my sisters loved Peter Paul and Mary ... a lot of it came from older siblings."

And they like to claim credit for all his success, I suppose? "Oh, of course," he says with a laugh. "My second eldest sister claims credit for teaching me my first guitar chords – to *I'm in Love With a Big Blue Frog*, by Peter Paul and Mary. Everyone's a little bit musical, some more than others. My elder sister, who's a nun, is the first songwriter in the family because she wrote hymns."

Young Paul was also a voracious reader, though he couldn't seem to write long enough essays to please his English teachers. The all-rounder did well enough to be dux of his Christian Brothers school in Adelaide, however, as well as earning accolades on the cricket and footy fields. He tried university but decided it wasn't for him, much to the disappointment of his mother. His dad died when Paul was just 13, having been diagnosed with Parkinson's three years earlier (his mum would speak to him every day for 32 years after his death, saying "if I get to heaven, it's John first, God second").

"All I ever wanted to do was write. They were pretty open minded, my parents, I said 'I just want to

Stories of us
Paul Kelly in the early days; with the Bull sisters; and with then wife Kaarin Fairfax and daughter Memphis in *One Night the Moon*.



be a writer, I don't want to study," Paul says. "She was disappointed that I wasn't going to study and get a real job but she also supported me to do what I wanted to do."

What he wanted to do wouldn't pay the bills until years after he left Adelaide for Melbourne, doing odd jobs to support his passion before 1985's *Post* – his third album – gained some attention, though it was another two years before *Gossip* (and its catchy singles *Before Too Long* and *Darling It Hurts*) troubled the charts. "It took a long time for me to make a living off writing, or songwriting, I didn't really make a living until I was 32," he says. He hopes 25-year-old Memphis, whose electro-pop debut *Overflow* (as duo *Saatsuma*) was released last year, won't have to wait as long.

At 63, however, the elder statesman of Australian music – and grandfather of two youngsters being raised on an appropriately eclectic diet of music – says he probably wouldn't do anything differently.

"I wanted to be a writer since I was about 15 or 16. The best advice I ever got was from Don Walker when I played some of my songs around 1980/81. He said 'Keep writing', those two words. He's a man of few words, Don Walker, he didn't say 'Oh, they're good',



writer Anna Goldsworthy, who first approached Paul about the project a few years ago, and Melbourne singer Alice Keath, who also features on *Nature*.

“I just follow hunches these days. And if you get an invitation to work with someone the calibre of Anna, why wouldn’t you,” he says simply.

“The original idea was to do poems about animals but we quickly realised that was way too big a frame, so we chose birds. We’ve actually got three owl poems; I think it’s going to be 13 poems in all. Probably my favourite poem is *Ode to a Nightingale*, a long one by (John) Keats, and that’s on there. The *Darkling Thrush* by Thomas Hardy ... *Gwen Harwood’s Barn Owl* ... some of them are more like art pieces and others are more like songs.”

If this is all sounding a little esoteric, remember this is the artist who also did an album of funeral songs with Charlie Owen (*Death’s Dateless Nights*) and set Shakespeare’s sonnets to music (*Seven Sonnets and a Song*). These days, Paul does what he pleases. That doesn’t mean he’s forgotten how to please the faithful, as anyone who caught last year’s sellout show at Kings Park can attest.

“Every song I record is something I can perform because that’s how I write the song. I walk around the house singing it; it’s a song whether I’ve used someone else’s words or not,” he says. “Even if I made a song that was densely recorded, with lots of different elements, it can still be broken down to one or two instruments because that was the way it was written.”

And while there are songs he likes to play that aren’t necessarily the hits, you won’t find him refusing to play the songs everyone knows, either. “The popular songs, you always get something back from the audience, so they’re fun to play.”

He remembers being enthralled by Leonard Cohen’s performance when he supported the Canadian on his 2009 Australian tour, an occasion he describes as a real career highlight.

“He’s been a big influence but also to see the way he puts the shows together, the attention to detail ... it was like prayer mixed with vaudeville. It was extraordinary, I’ve never seen anything like it, the love from the audience coming at him. And it wasn’t like he wallowed in that adoration – he sort of turned it back on them, he served the audience like a rabbi or a priest at a ceremony.”

Having collaborated with so many great artists, and supported more than a few, Paul doesn’t have a bucket list of others he’d like to perform with. “If I like them, I just go and see them, that’s good enough for me,” he says. The last big concert he went to was hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar, “someone at the top of his game, really fluent and musical and really good storytelling”. Sounds like someone else we know. [www](#)



Nature is out now. See paul kelly.com.au.

or “That one’s good”, he just said ‘Keep writing’. So I did!”

And that’s what he’s been doing ever since. When we catch up for coffee (or orange juice in Paul’s case) in between a whistlestop tour of radio stations earlier this week, the writer reveals he’s been in town working with composer James Ledger on his next project. The pair collaborated on *Conversations With Ghosts*, a series of poems exploring death and mortality set to music.

This time around, they’re putting poems about birds – I’m sensing a pattern here – to music. Entitled *13 Ways of Looking at Birds*, it’s a show he suggests will be on the 2020 Perth Festival roster (incoming director Iain Grandage is also a friend of his son Declan.) “We’ve been going back and forth for over a year; next week we meet in Adelaide with everyone to do a workshop.”

Everyone includes Adelaide-based pianist and





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