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Rediscover sex after
CHILDBIRTH

How kids cope with
TRAGEDY

melbourne for a

song

Mark Seymour and other musicians
reveal their inspirations



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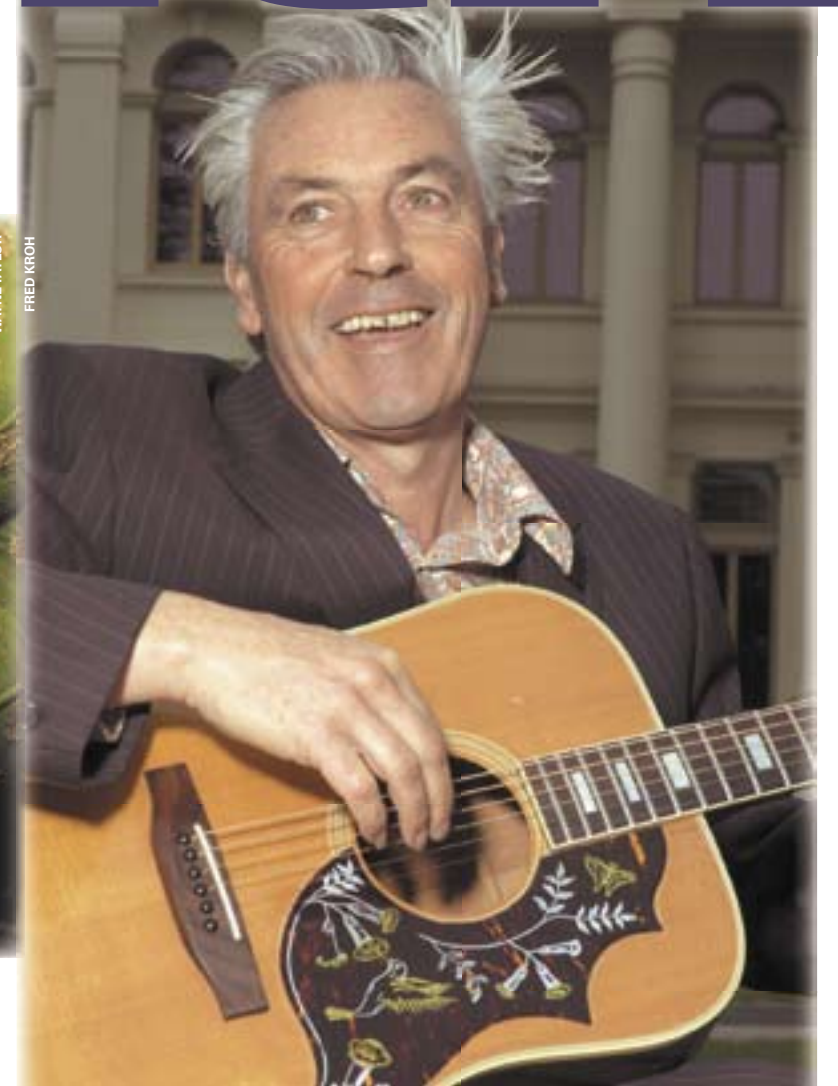
songs from the South

For decades, Melbourne has labelled itself the musical hub of Australia, and its local songwriters admit to an intense spiritual affinity with their hometown, writes Debbie Kruger



WAYNE TAYLOR

FRED KROH



Clockwise from top left: Russell Morris, Mark Seymour, Stephen Cummings and Deborah Conway

In Australian popular music, Melbourne has played a starring role. More than any other city, the sense of Melbourne as a character, not just a place, has been palpable. In my book, *Songwriters Speak*, I interviewed 45 of Australia and New Zealand's greatest tunesmiths, and found that Melbourne songwriters had the closest affinity with their hometown.

The city's moods, its citizens, its suburbs and its climate pervade the lyrics of some of our best-known songs, and have inspired some of the most creative artists to fashion a soundtrack for several generations.

Melbourne's musical enclave has always been tighter than musical communities in other parts of Australia. In the 1960s and 1970s, songwriters and musicians congregated at Armstrong's Studios in South Melbourne. Bruce Woodley, freshly returned from The Seekers' overseas success, wrote songs with Hans Poulsen there.

John Farrar, future songwriter/producer for Olivia Newton-John, was resident guitarist and arranger for songs as diverse as the Johnny Young-penned *The Real Thing* and Smiley and Axiom's *A Little Ray of Sunshine*, written by Brian Cadd and Don Mudie. Daddy Cool recorded Ross Wilson's *Eagle Rock* at Armstrong's.

In the mid-1970s a new breed of Melbourne songwriter came to the fore, led by The Skyhooks' Greg Macainsh, who wrote songs like *Balwyn Calling* and *Carlton*. It wasn't a long stretch to the work of Paul Kelly, whose 1985 song *From St Kilda To Kings Cross* spearheaded a long career of quintessentially Melbourne songwriting.

Melbourne has been the breeding ground for songwriters as significant at home as overseas – Little River Band, Nick Cave and Archie Roach, to name a few. It has also been home to some of the most outstanding female songwriters and artists Australia has produced, including Deborah Conway, Renee Geyer and Missy Higgins.

Russell Morris Born and raised in the east, Russell Morris is an essential part of Melbourne's music history. Morris recorded Johnny Young's *The Real Thing* in 1969. It brought together the leading lights of Melbourne's music scene, with Ian Meldrum producing, Brian Cadd and his band The Groop playing on it, and John Farrar arranging and playing guitar.

Morris was a fledgling songwriter, unsure of himself and musically untrained. He wrote a follow-up, *Paper Walls*, about teenage angst. Even when he had major hits with *Sweet Sweet Love* and *Wings of An Eagle* in the early 1970s, he was low on self-confidence. His unconventional song structures and illogical timings frustrated other musicians but, along with sweeping poetic imagery, they were his trademarks.

Wings of an Eagle was written in the front garden of his parents' house in Doncaster, the lyrics coming to him without conscious intent. "I'd been reading about Red Indian traditions and life, and I found parallels between them and Aborigines. The words were ambiguous when I wrote them: 'Well I'm looking out on overcast sky in the morning/And I can hear the warning as it calls to you/As the birds migrate and the wind is raised I see the eagle soaring/Although I'm just a pawn in nature's game'."

Sweet Sweet Love was written in London, when Morris was longing for his girlfriend at home. Back in Melbourne, he offered it to Johnny (as he was then known) Farnham, who turned it down, saying, 'Listen, I love the song, but it just takes so long to get to the chorus'. Undeterred, Morris recorded it himself and had great success with it.

After a stint in the US in the 1970s, Morris returned to

Melbourne. Living with his family in Mont Albert, he writes spasmodically.

"I'll go on a binge", he says. A mainstay on the touring circuit for decades, he is writing more confidently now but understands that his audiences largely come for the nostalgia factor – particularly when he performs with fellow Melburnians Jim Keays and Darryl Cotton. New songs rarely get an airing.

Asked which song he'd most like to be remembered for, he replies: "The next one I'm going to write."

Stephen Cummings

Stephen Cummings grew up in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, a shy boy who read books to try to get out of his own head. The resultant intensity in his adulthood took time to find its way into his songwriting; in the 1970s, when writing for The Sports, it was more about finding enough material to entertain audiences in pubs five or six nights a week.

Their first hit, *Boys (What Did The Detective Say)*, was inspired by detective novels, but brings to mind the heyday of Melbourne-based Crawford Productions' early cop shows such as *Homicide*.

Probe Cummings about those early Sports hits and there are recollections of sitting at the kitchen table in a Malvern flat, nutting out songs with fellow band members Andrew Pendlebury and Ed Bates, such as *Reckless*, the infectiously catchy *Who Listens To The Radio?* and *Don't Throw Stones*.

"I lived above a shop in Malvern by the railway line," says Cummings. "Most of the songs I just filled with little bits of things that were around me."

It was during his solo career when Cummings' dark side was let loose. In successive albums he created a mythical metropolis, Lovetown, and populated it with fictitious broken and lovelorn people such as Jane, who features in three songs, including *You Jane*.

"I liked the idea of a story song, and that one led to another few songs – *Melancholy Hour* and *Walk Softly But Carry a Big Stick*. I like romantic clichés; I am interested in love."

Cummings lives in Caulfield with his wife and two sons, writing songs and novels (his new book is called *Kitchen Man*) in a garage at the back of his house. And while not peppering his songs with overt references to the city where he has lived his entire life, he is very much of his environment. "I think of myself more as a Melbourne person than an Australian."



Melbourne on song

BILLY THORPE – Most People I Know Think That I'm Crazy

"I'd gone to Melbourne for two weeks and stayed eight years. I would play to 1000 people and 200 of them would be fighting on stage. People would come along to hear

Somewhere Over the Rainbow and

they were getting *Mamma* at

1000 decibels. And this

guy said to me, 'You

know, mate, most

people I know

think you're

f**ing crazy'. I

went home – I

was living with

Warren Morgan in

Toorak – and there

was a piano in the back.

He was writing, and he

remembers hearing me sitting on the

bed in the front singing, 'Most people I

know think that I'm crazy ...'. I wrote that

song in two minutes."

NEIL FINN – Weather With You (co-written with Tim Finn)

"Obviously it's about emotional weather and the changeability of everyday life.

The spark was the crazy weather in

Melbourne. One of my fondest memories

of Melbourne is when the cool change

would come in and the big black clouds

would roll in over the Domain and the

sun would hit them. You'd have had a

beautiful sunny day and then all of a

sudden these big, menacing, thick

looking clouds would roll in, but they'd

be lit intensely by the sun."

COLIN HAY – Who Can It Be Now?

"I was living in St Kilda, I was on the dole,

and everyone that came knocking on the

door seemed to want something, whether

it was the police, people looking for drugs,

the rent man or the doorman. So we'd

sneak up and see who it was before we

opened the door, just to make sure it wasn't

somebody we didn't want to see."

Mark Seymour After a childhood in country Victoria, Mark Seymour studied at Melbourne University and took up teaching before dedicating himself to a full-time music career. Hunters and Collectors, the quintessential pub rock band, provided music for the urban populace. It was difficult for Seymour's staunch intellectual parents to accept the path he chose, but he shrugs off any suggestion that the intensity he was so well-known for as the Hunters' leading man was because of an intellectual background.

"I think there is a tyranny in intellectualism," he says. "It can block you. Melbourne Uni people stand out like

dogsbods to me. They're incredibly self-critical, really rigorous, and very sceptical.

"If something strikes me as interesting, my next step is that it will manifest itself in a song. But unless I believe that I can write it using language that actually has some form of beauty in itself, I won't go there – even if I have reacted to it honestly."

Seymour has clear memories of where some of his most famous songs were written and how. *Talking To A Stranger* was written in a house in Carlton with the band's keyboard player. *Throw Your Arms Around Me* was inspired equally by a relationship and his city.

"I was in love with this girl. She lived in Carlton and I used to travel across town to see her, and I was acutely aware of the geography of that transition, crossing Melbourne."

Say Goodbye, which has the memorable line, "You don't make me feel like I'm a woman anymore", was inspired by an argument Seymour heard through a wall in a St Kilda apartment.

"This conversation transpired between the tenants that were there, which I thought was really funny. I'd been through something similar with my girlfriend, where I came home and she ground her finger in my breastbone – a girl literally nailed me to the floor and said, 'What the f**k are you doing?'."

But the line, 'You don't make me feel like I'm a woman anymore' came through a wall. I heard that, and I thought, 'That's just fantastic'. It suddenly gave it a humorous edge."

As a solo artist since the late 1990s, Seymour has been even more acutely aware of the influence of Melbourne in his writing. *Home Again* and *Strange Little Town* are odes to the city.

He has been inspired to write songs about incidents elsewhere – London, Auckland, Sydney – but knows there is something fundamental about Melbourne as a creative force.

"I think Melbourne's more intimate and discreet; there's something really bracing about it. I come home here to work. It's a serious place." **mwm**