

July 31, 2005

# Life

Sunday

The Sun-Herald Magazine

**The music makers:  
How our most loved  
songs were born**

Dating's unspoken etiquette

Robert Tickner:  
The rise of a fallen man

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make a statement



# Waxing lyrical

*They've written some of the best loved songs of our time. In this extract from her new book, Songwriters Speak, industry insider **Debbie Kruger** talks to four talented "tunesmiths" about the art of making music.*

Photography: James Braund/Headpress



## Christina Amphlett

Lead singer of the Divinyls from 1981 to 1996, Chrissy Amphlett also co-wrote many of the band's hits, including *Boys In Town* and *I Touch Myself*, and her confronting lyrics and raunchy schoolgirl act defined the band. Now in her 40s, Amphlett, lives in New York and has been working on a solo album.

### **What was happening musically in Australia that inspired you when you were young?**

[Australian blues/jazz singer] Wendy Saddington was wild; I liked her. I thought Renee Geyer was really good. But that's about all. Everything else was too show-bizzy. Women were nice girls in Australia who performed and sang. I always wanted to know what was really going on.

### **Did you have an idea of writing as a part of what you wanted to do in music?**

No, I just used to do covers and it was not even about performance; I used to stand there and freak out. I was very shy; it was hard. It wasn't until I put on the school uniform that I freed myself up.

### **Were you traumatised by your jail experience [Amphlett was jailed in Spain for eight weeks in the '70s for street singing] or creatively inspired?**

Well, the coffee was really bad – until I got used to it. I threw up but I got used to it. And I shared a cell with a gypsy who had her arm shot off. To get her off my back – because all the Arab girls, all the Moroccans, were bisexual – I used to draw them. And that gave me power. I did a lot of portraits in there and that helped me survive.

### **When you started writing, did you consciously draw on those experiences?**

No, I was having a terrible relationship with this drummer and that's what *Boys In Town* came out of. I wrote it in the bath every day, sang it in the bath, "I am through with hanging round all the boys in town." I liked this guy and it was a hopeless relationship. But I'd been quite promiscuous and because I was so wild when I was younger, I had no sexual boundaries. My teens were quite troubled in that regard. So *Boys In Town* was a freeing song for me in that when I wrote it, it cleared me to move on.

### **Did you and your songwriting partner, Mark McEntee, really meet at a choir performance?**

I was singing in a [Sydney radio station] 2CH choir. It was an eight-piece choir and I used to go there in my little punk ripped things. It was a way to develop the top range of my voice, which is all contributing

to the way I sound. And by practising and singing in this choir, I learned to sing with other people because I was a soloist and liked to be out the front. This gave me a discipline. It was so far away from what I wanted to be but it was a sort of training for me. And Mark came to a performance because one of the people in the choir said, "You should meet Chrissy."

### **Your performance style has always been provocative. Did you write songs to fit that image?**

No, never. By the time I put on the school uniform, we had all those songs – *Boys In Town*, *Science Fiction*, *Only Lonely*, all that *Monkey Grip* period. I used to wear anything and just stand there. And then I started to wear the school uniform 'cause it was an AC/DC thing. Girl schoolgirl. I was singing lyrics like *Boys In Town* and all that and it was very exposing and embarrassing for me. I'm standing up there telling everybody I'm a slut, basically, but I'm sick of it. And so when I put the school uniform on, it once-removed me because I had a character and also the school uniform was very submissive. So then I had to juxtapose myself against that and I became assertive because I couldn't be submissive.

### **Were you conscious of the dearth of successful female songwriters when you started?**

No, it was marvellous because I was it. But even I wasn't considered. I don't think I've ever been considered a songwriter until recently. I was a performer, I was a singer, I was a sex symbol. I was thought of as a monster – everything else but a songwriter. Until the Americans said, "You're a poet," I was never thought of like that here because my lyrics were very simple. And I remember guys used to say to me, "It's embarrassing what you do, your songs and things." I was always a bit on the outer in the scene. I used to turn up to benefits in my school uniform and they'd all go, "How could she?" In this country, how you look comes first. And your youth.

### **Do you find it irritating that you are best known for songs written as long as 20 years ago or are you comfortable with that?**

It is hard because people lock you into a certain thing and you've got to constantly try to do something different. I've got this reputation and, being older, it's difficult to shake it off, for people to see you in a new light. That's what I'm attempting to do but it's not easy. To spur my career into a new decade. To do it into a third decade and to think differently. I'm doing it but it's hard to get other people to think differently about you. →

**“I don't think I've ever been considered a songwriter. I was a performer, a singer, a sex symbol. I was thought of as a monster.”**

Christina Amphlett

## Neil Finn

Forging his career alongside elder brother Tim, Neil Finn, now 47, joined Tim's band, Split Enz, in 1977 and wrote *I Got You*, which went to No. 1. After Split Enz disbanded, Neil fronted Crowded House from 1985 to 1996 and wrote a string of hits such as *World Where You Live* and *Better Be Home Soon*. In 1995, Neil and Tim collaborated on the *Finn* album and in 2004, they released *Everyone Is Here*.

### Was there sibling rivalry in the Split Enz years in terms of songwriting prowess?

I don't remember in Split Enz there ever being any – apart from a natural inclination if Tim had written a good one, for me to go, "Oh shit, I really want to go and write something that's as good."

### And that's not necessarily sibling related.

Well, I suppose it's sibling in one sense. But we have a six-year difference; he was clearly my older brother and I was never a serious threat. Maybe towards the end of Split Enz we were more on an equal basis as songwriters but it was later, where there might have been things that were difficult to deal with. I probably felt guilty when I was successful with Crowded House, in a sense, that he wasn't there, after having been there for years and years.

### Why did you and Tim write songs separately for Split Enz's 1979 album, *True Colours*?

Writing a song with somebody is a difficult thing to do. Some people seem to be able to do it fine but it involves allowing someone to hear you at your most embarrassing, in many ways, because sometimes before a song is an idea, it sounds like nothing – or sounds like a very exposed bleat or a grunt. So you've got to let your defences down and it's the same with a brother as with anybody.

### Was *Message To My Girl* a simple love song to your wife, Sharon?

Yeah. In as much as I could. I've always been a bit guarded about writing very direct love songs, which is possibly a hang-up of mine because there's nothing greater than a simply expressed love song. But my love songs always seem to have some twist or a bittersweet quality to them. So it's not for me to say, "I want to say I love you." I'd say, "I don't want to say I love you."

### Was it hard to write?

No but to some degree, I listen to it and go, "Well, what a cop-out." You know, like, why couldn't you just say it? I spend the whole

song trying to say how I want to say it – and I really do – but I just can't bring myself to.

### Was Crowded House's *Into Temptation* more a case scenario than something personal you were confessing?

The beginning of that song is, "You opened up your door, I couldn't believe my luck." It was to do with staying in a motel in Timaru [in New Zealand] and there was a rugby team and a netball team at the bar, getting tanked, and they started pairing off as the night went on. I heard a knock on my door and went to the door and looked and there was no one there. And then I looked up and there was a netball player knocking on the door of one of these rugby players. She disappeared into the room and they spent the night shagging till dawn. And I wrote those lines down that night.

### How about *World Where You Live*?

I wrote the chorus in my manager's condominium in Santa Monica. It was inspired by his neighbour – every morning I'd be woken at about six in the morning and this woman who lived next door to him was making loud moaning and groaning noises. I never heard any other guy but she sounded like she was having wild sex with somebody.

### You have a lot of these experiences of people having sex near you.

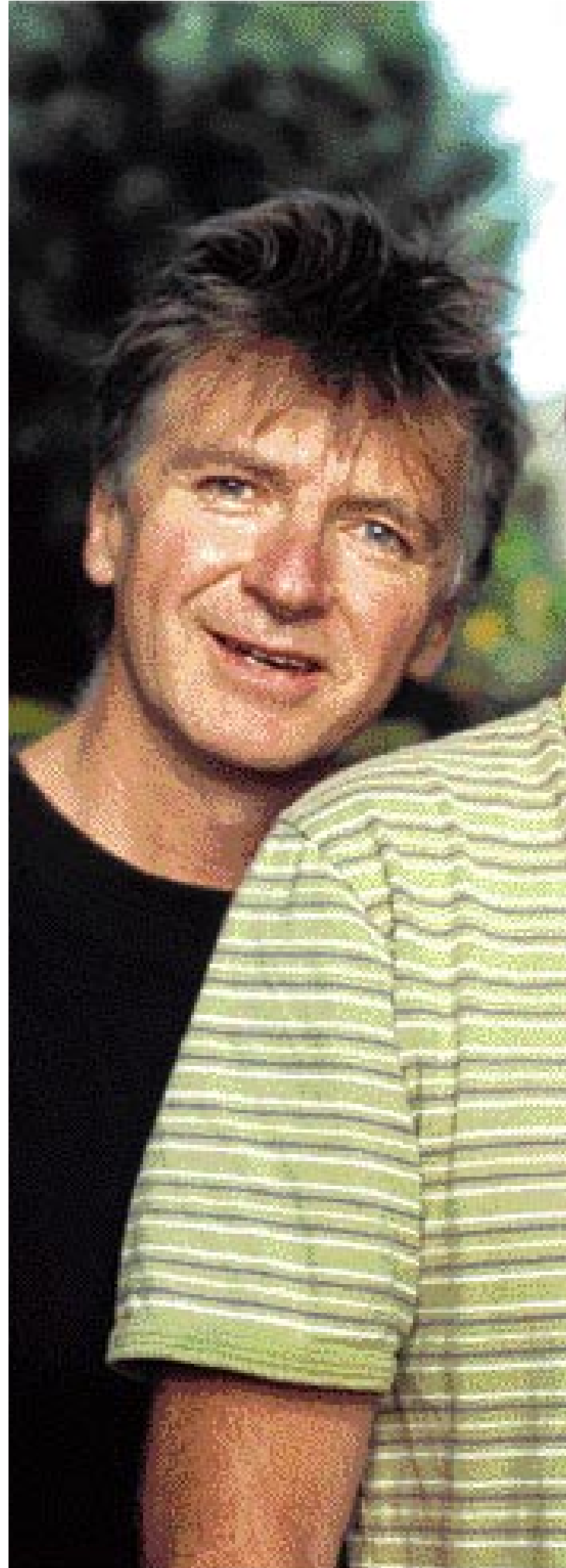
Well, it's a fascinating thing. It's the detachment of listening. Being an observer is probably quite good for songwriting because you can take it in but you don't have to take part in it.

### How about *Better Be Home Soon*?

It was me attempting to put myself in my wife's mind. Not that she ever did it to me but the staunchness of being able to say to somebody, "Look, there's a limit. And don't assume I'm going to be here when you get home."

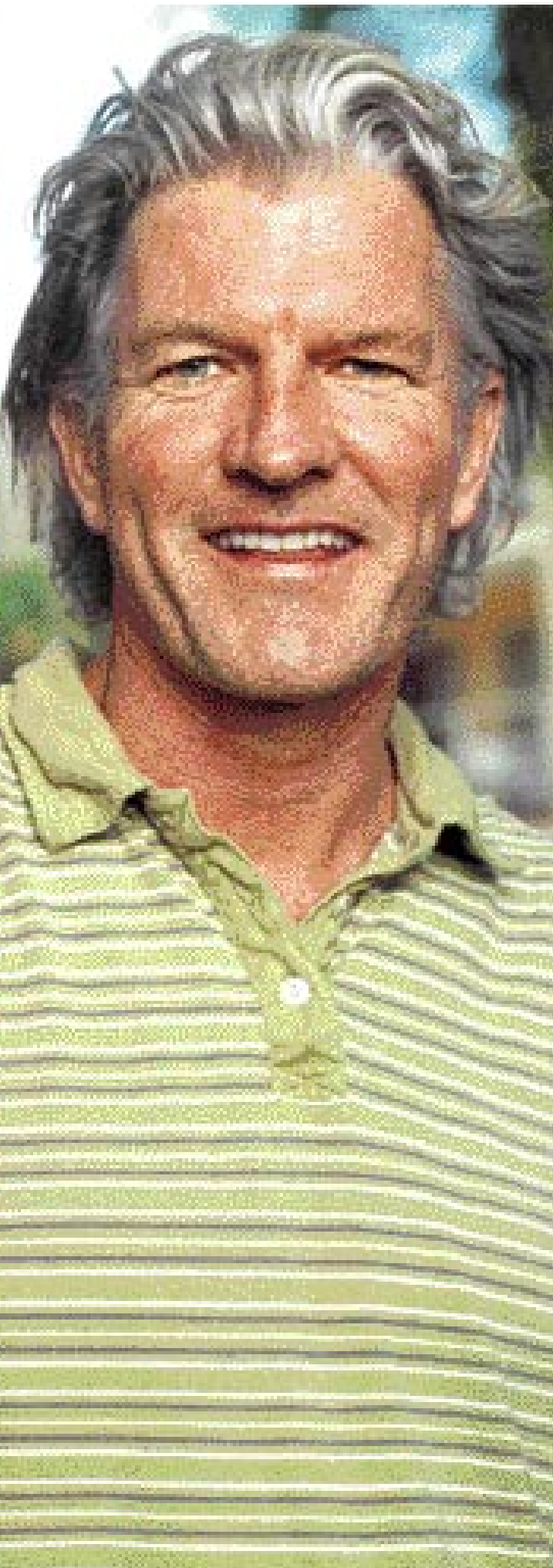
### Are you attached to songs, like children?

I couldn't possibly imagine that they are in any way as precious as children but there are a lot of similarities in the sense that once they're written and they leave home, you can't control who they sleep with. I always thought that was quite a good way to look at cover versions. But I love the fact that they do have their own life and they have a journey that you can't predict. Sometimes you think that being a songwriter is a selfish occupation and who needs another song in the world? There's enough already and it's a vanity. But you only need to get a couple of people come up and say that something helped them through a difficult part of their life and you go, "Praise be!" Couldn't ask for more.



Neil Finn

**“There’s nothing greater than a simply expressed love song. But my love songs always have a twist.”**



## Tim Finn

After the demise of Split Enz, Tim Finn embarked on a solo career, briefly joining Crowded House during the *Woodface* period and co-writing songs *Weather With You* and *It's Only Natural* with brother Neil. Finn, 53, has since written soundtracks and formed ALT with Hothouse Flowers frontman Liam O'Maonlai and Andy White. His most recent solo album was 2001's *Feeding The Gods*.

### **Can you tell me about your early musical influences?**

In the earliest stuff there would have been church music, like hymns. I used to play the organ in church and I'd be up with Mum in the choir in this funny, rickety old wooden church, the Catholic Church in Te Awamutu [in New Zealand]. It's a lovely image of mother and church and young boy.

### **Did your religious upbringing play a part in shaping your musical character?**

Oh, definitely. I was very spiritually aware at a very young age. It meant a lot to me. I didn't go under sufferance; I didn't hate it. Going to Mass, going to Holy Communion, receiving the Host, having that 10 or 15 minutes of communion with God, were amazing things for me. It was an access to another world. An internal world where it was very quiet and very still. And when you think about it, that's where true inspiration always comes from.

### **You've said that *I See Red* was written in anger. It was quite a personal one for you?**

It wasn't written in anger but it tapped into a long-running frustration that I was having with a particular relationship. With songwriting, it's a mistake to think that you write it in the heat of the moment. Often you're feeling really good one day for no particular reason; you just wake up and you feel happy. And that's often the day when you'll get some good writing done. I never write when I'm in the midst of something.

### **Do you need to have a melancholic disposition to write songs of melancholy?**

I think so, otherwise you wouldn't really know what you were writing about. Is anybody up-beat all the time? Songwriters allow themselves perhaps to feel it more.

### **But weren't you also truly depressed?**

### **You spoke in a documentary about clinical depression.**

I've been cursed by this. I've never suffered from what I would call true depression at all. But I agreed to do an interview with a woman

who was making a documentary for SBS about the link between creativity and depression. I should never have agreed to do it. It's an insult to anybody who's ever suffered from depression to call me a depressive – because I know the difference. But there's an Irish dark mood thing that can happen. Life is sad sometimes and there is suffering.

### **How much was *Fraction Too Much Friction* about the relationships in Split Enz?**

It must have been. I don't remember being conscious of that but I think it definitely had some of that in it. I tried to weave it more into the male-female area. But there was a lot of friction in the band towards the end.

### **You have explored Buddhist philosophy. Did you look back on some of your past intensity with a new calmness?**

I learned about letting things go and the idea of detachment. It doesn't mean that you can't have passion or emotion or feeling; a songwriter will always be afraid of being too calm or passive in a sense. I don't meditate but I find that swimming is meditative for me and having a good steam bath afterwards. I get into a really good zone. Swimming pools are like temples to me.

### **I've read about your so-called "rocky" musical relationship with Neil over the years, with words like "jealousy" and "guilt" bandied about. It seems to me, as an outsider, that the relationship has always been fruitful and quite wondrous.**

People put their expectations onto us because we're visible siblings. You can get on each other's nerves more than anybody else on the earth, 'cause you've shared all this common history and yet you don't necessarily have any real natural chemistry. It's a weird thing; you're thrown together in this world. With Neil and I, because we're creative together, that takes care of everything. Yes, we can fight and have arguments and get a bit shirty and rub each other up the wrong way and then we just step back for a while. But there's an underlying love of songs between us and it never goes away.

### **Your 2000 album *Say It Is So* shimmers. Marriage, fatherhood, happy experiences – is that what brought you to those songs?**

There was a sequence of wonderful things and a feeling of freedom when I finally met [wife] Marie. A lot of the ego and narcissism had dropped away and I was ready to love and be loved. I was ready to write whatever the hell I wanted to write. It was a great feeling. →

***"I See Red" wasn't written in anger but it tapped into a frustration I was having with a relationship."***

Tim Finn



# “I’m imagining the next part of my life could be about going in completely the opposite direction.”

Andrew Farriss

## Andrew Farriss

On August 16, 1977, the day Elvis Presley died, Sydney band the Farriss Brothers (later renamed INXS) played their first gig. Keyboard player Andrew Farriss and lead singer Michael Hutchence formed a songwriting partnership that included the hits *Original Sin*, *What You Need* and *Never Tear Us Apart* and lasted until Hutchence’s death in 1997. Farriss, 46, began writing songs for INXS again in 2001 and the band is now looking for a new lead singer.

### At what point did you realise that the chemistry you and Michael Hutchence had in your writing was so potent?

There was one point where we’d written *Original Sin* in 1983. That turned out to be a No. 1 hit for us in Australia, New Zealand, France and other places and we were getting death threats from people in the United States because they didn’t like the racial overtones of the song. So we realised, “Hang on, it’s different from the Australian pub mentality. We’re operating on a different level here.” And the next album, *Listen Like Thieves*, we had a No. 5 hit in the US with *What You Need*. And I remember sitting at home and feeling a bit overwhelmed. Everyone was calling me going, “Isn’t this incredible? Isn’t this amazing? It’s fantastic!” And I remember hanging up, going, “What am I getting into here? What is this?” Then I realised on the next album, which was *Kick*, that I had to sit down seriously and do nothing but focus on songwriting for a while. I remember ripping the phone out of the wall at home, literally, and just living in my pyjamas for two weeks and writing for that record.

### So you did a Brian Wilson.

Yeah. And many years later, on the last record that we made with Michael, I was in Dublin and the U2 guys invited us to go around to the studio. Michael said, “I really want you to come and meet Bono because he’s a good friend of mine.” I said, “I don’t know. I’m a little bit overwhelmed; they’re such a big group.” He said, “Don’t be stupid. They want to talk to you.” So I said, “OK, fine.” So I went around to this house and Bono was treating me like royalty and at the same time making fun of me because he said, “Ah, you’re just like Brian Wilson in your bloody sandpit, aren’t you?”

### How did you view your partnership with Michael Hutchence?

I probably looked at myself as being a support structure for Michael. I didn’t really think of us

as being in competition. I didn’t want to be on the front page with all those supermodels.

### How would you describe your collaborative process?

Michael never played a musical instrument. When I met him, he was reading books by Hermann Hesse, like *Siddhartha*, Kahlil Gibran and philosophers, and I was playing footy and was interested in how to fix my dad’s car. I realised that he had an ability with words, to understand how to reach in to grab philosophies and concepts and mess around with them. In fact, he was far more interested in words than he was in singing.

### After Michael’s death, how long was it before you were able to start writing?

I found it very difficult to start writing pop songs again. I started working fairly shortly afterwards on some instrumental pieces, which were part of my solo thing. As far as writing popular music again, thinking about commercial music, I just had no particular desire to do that for quite a long time.

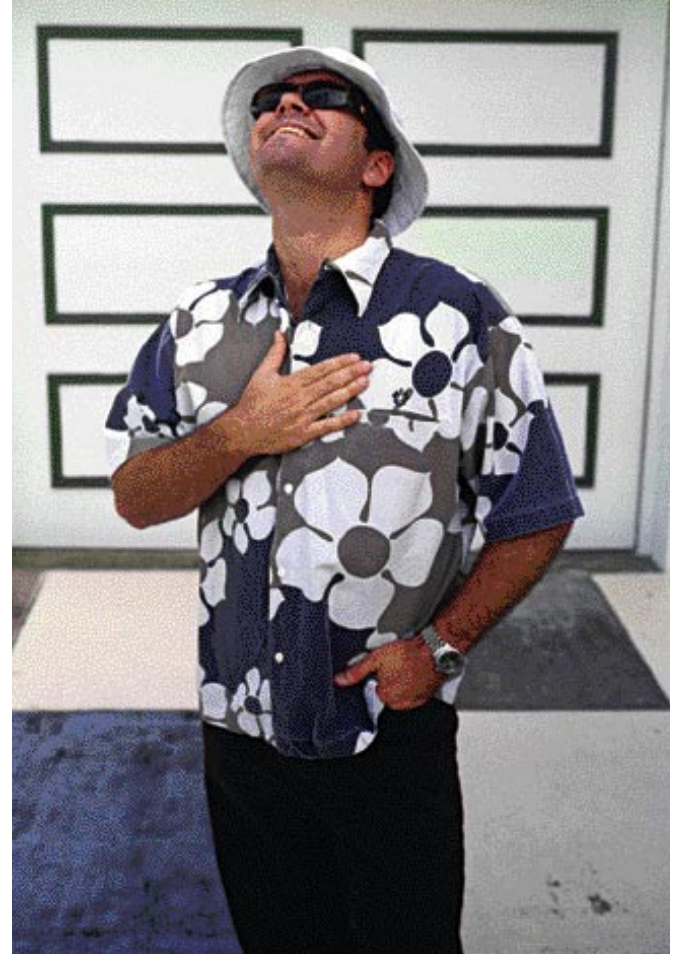
### Did you write something about Michael or about how you were feeling in that time immediately after his death?

I sort of did and I sort of didn’t. I think when you lose someone who’s very close to you, you go through all these different emotional periods. You go through things from disbelief to shock to anger to sadness to being overly sensitive to then being insensitive. I didn’t trust myself at that point to believe that I was stable enough to think about it objectively.

### Have you had to redefine yourself as a writer or performer after Michael’s death?

Yes, I have. One thing he and I used to say to each other every so often was that we didn’t compete for the same things. I didn’t want to be the lead singer of a band and be “Mr Fabulous”. But he did. He wanted that. I just wanted to be a writer and I was lucky to have that. And he was lucky to have someone like me helping to create who he wanted to be. So when Michael died, I had to re-evaluate who I was, in a sense, and what my next thing was going to be all about. I suppose I spent the first part of my career trying to write for one very narrow conduit. I’m almost imagining the next part of my life could be about going in completely the opposite direction. Trying many different things with many different cultures and many different types of people. ●

This is an edited extract from *Songwriters Speak: Conversations About Creating Music* by Debbie Kruger, published by Limelight Press (out tomorrow), \$49.95.



## 10 GREAT AUSTRALIAN SONG LYRICS

“There’s nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear, than to stand in the bar of a pub with no beer...”

Slim Dusty, *A Pub With No Beer* (1957)

“Monday morning feels so bad, everybody seems to nag me, comin’ Tuesday I feel better, even my old man looks good...”

The Easybeats, *Friday On My Mind* (1966)

“Gettin’ robbed, gettin’ stoned, gettin’ beat up, broken boned, gettin’ had, gettin’ took, I tell you folks, it’s harder than it looks...”

AC/DC, *It’s A Long Way To The Top* (1976)

“And it’s really got me worried, I’m going nowhere and I’m in a hurry, you know the last plane out of Sydney’s almost gone...”

Cold Chisel, *Khe Sanh* (1978)

and everywhere a rain of falling cinders...”

The Go-Betweens, *Cattle And Cane* (1983)

“I will come for you at night time and I will raise you from your sleep, I will kiss you in four places, as I go running along your street...”

Hunters & Collectors, *Throw Your Arms Around Me* (1984)

“There is freedom within, there is freedom without, try to catch the deluge in a paper cup...”

Crowded House, *Don’t Dream It’s Over* (1986)

“I’m high on the hill looking over the bridge to the MCG, and way up on high the clock on the silo says eleven degrees, I remember...”

Paul Kelly, *Leaps And Bounds* (1987)

“Had a scratch only you could itch, underneath the Glebe Point Bridge, and now every boy in a knitted vest has got some precedent...”

You Am I, *Purple Sneakers* (1994)

Barry Divola