



Sydney's diversity has been immortalised in many a song. **Debbie Kruger** asks four of our most respected musicians to share how the city inspired their music.

Photography Steven Chee

CITY

SONGLINES

*I see buildings,
Clothing the sky in paradise
Sydney,
Where the nights are warm,
Daytime telly,
Blue rinse dawn.*

From *Power and the Passion*
by Peter Garrett (pictured), Rob Hirst
and Jim Moginie.

As diverse and sprawling as Sydney's metropolis is, so too is the spread of songwriters and musicians who live here and the stories told in their songs. But which is a more Sydney kind of song? The kind that dwells on the colourful yet darker side of life in Kings Cross, Darlinghurst or Newtown? A song that refers to a place where trams used to run down to the sea or offers a snapshot of being hung-over early one morning on Palm Beach Road? Or is it a more subtle kind of song, one inspired by a life led quietly and privately in a house in Lindfield or Erskineville that can only come from that particular place and that specific time?

While the seedy inner city has long been a magnet for balladeers and rockers, and the eastern suburbs a convenient and often inspiring area to live and work, the great untold story of Sydney's music scene is the history of the bands and artists that grew up and made music on the leafy, conservative North Shore.

The suburbs from Cremorne to Wahroonga and the coast from Manly to Palm Beach proved fertile breeding grounds for artists and songs that took on the world in the 1980s. The members of Midnight Oil, INXS, Icehouse, Mental As Anything and more attended private schools like Shore, worked part-time cleaning cinemas and squash courts, bought music supplies in Turramurra and played the sweaty pubs of Chatswood, Manly Vale and Narrabeen.

Kings Cross has romantic connotations that will always stir poets and tunesmiths. Every inland suburb from Blacktown to Caringbah has a musical tale to tell. And the deep water that meanders through the middle of the city, caresses its foreshores and splashes on every beachfront has helped create some of Australia's most iconic and popular songs.

Peter Garrett

From rock star to politician, Peter Garrett's Sydney identity has always been manifest. The North Shore private high school student and northern beaches surfer-turned-perspiration-drenched lead singer of Midnight Oil made the world his stage as he sang about military imperialism, nuclear disarmament, ecological degradation and indigenous issues. The image of the Oils attired in black suits emblazoned with the word sorry at the Sydney Olympics closing ceremony is forever etched on Australia's consciousness. But music proved too limiting for Garrett and in 2002 he quit Midnight Oil, ending the band's career, to become a federal politician. He was elected Labor Member for Kingsford Smith in 2004 and lives in Maroubra.

"The business of playing in this vast city with its then mighty proliferation of pubs and clubs and uni halls, driving in and out to venues, going in the afternoon to throw the gear on stage, getting out of there 12 hours later at the end of a show, listening to Double J and then Triple J on the way in and out, absorbing the sounds and the sights of all those suburbs that we went to, fed into both the way we played and the material we wrote – as I think it would for any artist that launched their career in a city that's as big and brassy and bold as Sydney is.

"If you look at the early albums such as 'Blue Meanie', *Head Injuries* and maybe even *Place Without a Postcard*, you'll see that there's a lot of sense of this place, where we were seeing stuff happening and that we were experiencing. *Dust*, *Surfing with a Spoon* and *Koala Sprint* reflect the fact that we were a Sydney band, hammering it every night. But I don't think we were one-dimensional lyrically; that's because we had more than one lyric writer. →



'Cause God drinks down at the Sandringham these days,
Since the Shakespeare changed its name,
He drinks down at the Sandringham these days,
He's what we call alright around here.

From *God Drinks at the Sandringham*
by Tim Freedman (pictured in Newtown).

And we had a number of different things we were chewing on and pushing out in songs.

"Sydney has water and a coastline of surf, and that influenced us. It's got a bold energy that isn't quite as reflective or melancholy as, say, the music that tends to come out of places like Melbourne. I grew up listening to the Beach Boys and heard the word Narrabeen mentioned in *Surfin' USA*, then we found ourselves playing there five years later. We did such a lot of playing in those surf suburbs, particularly in the early stages of our career, I think it's got to seep into your music a little bit. *Underwater* and *Surf's Up Tonight* are about both Sydney and water.

"When I was living in cheap digs in Cremorne – a block of flats that has now been done up but in those days was a place where a lot of people on the pension and young people lived – quite a lot of the *Postcard* songs, bits of stuff that we did from that period on came from there. I remember sitting out on Dobroyd Point and watching that incredible scene.

"You can see North Head and the bush that runs around underneath Dobroyd, and if you cup your hands across your eyes you are able to imagine a little bit of what the landscape was like before the British arrived in the sail ships, and you can see that in a song like *Who Can Stand in the Way*. For me that is a very Sydney song, because my generation, the generation before us and some of the generations after us have all grown up either aware of, or listening to, John Laws.

"I used to spend quite a bit of time at North Curl Curl. You'd come in from the Comb & Cutter [in Blacktown] or up from the Caringbah Inn or from the Local Inn at North Ryde, and you'd go to bed just as it was starting to get light and

pull yourself out hopefully before midday. If it wasn't the middle of summer, you'd go down for a surf or maybe just have some breakfast near the beach and put all the bits and pieces back together and go out and do it again the next night. Martin [Rotsey] and I used to drive out to the gigs together and I used to take him back to Coogee and drop him off at his flat and we'd have a cup of tea or a beer and talk until the early hours of the morning. One day he walks in strumming *Wedding Cake Island*. There it was. There were a lot more places for us to play then, luckily. And there were small venues and wine bars as well as the pubs. So you could take a few small steps for mankind as you tried to land on the moon, just belting around north of the city. I never really fully understood why we were lucky enough to be able to end up in a little sweaty hole in the back of Chatswood making a racket. But I was very glad we did."

Tim Freedman

Like Peter Garrett before him, Tim Freedman's youth revolved around private North Shore schooling and frolicking in the northern beaches surf, but as an adult he gravitated to Newtown, where he formed the Whitlams. Freedman, the band's lead singer and songwriter, made music intimately connected with his city, as the 1999 album *Love This City* attested. He is not averse to stepping outside his comfort zone; he collaborated with classical composer Peter Sculthorpe on the band's 2002 album *Torch the Moon*, and went to New York to write for the upcoming Whitlams album, *Little Cloud and the Black Ice of Manhattan*, due for release early next year. He has lived in the same Newtown house for nearly 20 years and has no plans to move.

"Sydney has hosted most of my adventures so it's usually the backdrop to the songs. Usually it was the carnality of the inner-city streets, with bands on every corner, student chicks in sandals, 20-somethings with crazy drug problems, hearts breaking, getting thrown aside. I try to do the inner west some justice, give credit to the great things said; well, those you can hear over the planes anyway. [I've] always mixed it up with a playful distrust of the eastern suburbs because I always get lost over there and the girls act so fancy. Often there's a sense of respite when the song gets near the ocean, probably because I miss the sights and smells of my youth on the northern beaches. In *No Aphrodisiac* I'm trying to get a girl to move up from Melbourne because I've got a place near the beach for the summer. And in *Out the Back* I'm taking a breath, having an early surf, *waking up in a dream out here, sun is so low, it's throwing shimmers at me, skimming its stones*'. Over the years, my Sydney has become less scrappy. A Sydney song on the next album starts: *'It's easy being famous in Sydney 'cause everyone's a star, But it's got to be the deepest darkest night for you to see them all.'*

"Newtown is where the Whitlams formed, and what we're known for, but it has never been named in a song, until the next album. All around the country people have come up to me to share their Newtown reminiscences. Usually it's how it was a great place, but how it beat them. Now they live in a country town nursing the bruises. It's changed, of course.

"On *Love This City*, God moves down King Street to drink at the Sandringham Hotel because the new owner of the Shakespeare decides to change its name. He likes the grainy light at four o'clock and his middy is always half-full. That album was written in '98 when there was a vacuum of →

Rockon



Photography Stephen Baccon

The concrete jungle leaves its mark.

How the same city inspired a cross-section of songwriters to come up with such different lyrics gives a fascinating perspective on the creative psyche.

Singer **Sharon O'Neill** (pictured above), recently transplanted from New Zealand and staying in a Kings Cross hotel, was affected by streetwalkers. She wrote *Maxine* about a woman she observed night after night. "This particular girl was always in the same place. I felt sorry for her," O'Neill says.

The story in the song could be set anywhere, of course. So, too, could most of the Mental As Anything songs – people all over Australia love to drink, party and surf – but **Martin Plaza's** *The Nips Are Getting Bigger* had a distinctly Sydney flavour.

"The melody popped into my head when I was driving across the Harbour Bridge one day in my '63 V-Dub," Plaza recalls. "I kept singing it. I was living at Chippendale and I got on my guitar, put the chords around it and threw the words together really quickly."

When **Rolf Harris** wrote *Come to the Sydney Opera House* to commemorate the landmark's opening in 1973, the song went unnoticed. "I don't think anybody in Australia is interested in songs like *New York, New York* or *Chicago*," Harris says.

"It's like, how embarrassing to sing about Sydney or the Opera House."

To this day **James Reyne** cannot explain what he meant by all the evocative imagery in his classic Australian Crawl song *Reckless*, saying most of it "just fell out". *Meet me down by the jetty landing, Where the pontoons bump and sway, I see the others reading, standing, As the Manly Ferry cuts its way to Circular Quay.*

Paul Kelly is a Melbourne tunesmith who has immortalised Sydney in his work, such as *Sydney from a 727* and *From St Kilda to Kings Cross*. In the latter he sings: *Have you ever seen Kings Cross when the rain is falling soft? I came in on the evening bus, from Oxford Street I cut across, And if the rain don't fall too hard everything shines just like a postcard.*

Drinking in Sydney was at the heart of some of **Richard Clapton's** greatest songs, especially *Deep Water*, inspired by intoxicating escapades from Bondi to Palm Beach. The song begins with late-night parties and ends up with a hangover. *Quotes and anecdotes from Songwriters Speak: conversations about creating music by Debbie Kruger, Limelight Press.*

live venues. So in *Blow Up the Pokies* I bemoaned the fact that a musician was playing the dip dips on the spot where he used to play the bass. Just where the stage used to be at the Sando.

"Often a song's geographical reference dates it nicely. You remember where the homeless guys used to drink in Taylor Square? I knew one of the drinkers, who demanded I call it 'Taylor Square proper' rather than Gilligan's Island, out of respect for professional drinkers. The song went: '*Holding court on Taylor Square proper was the man he could become, Lear's Fool is a bum now, With seven holy parcels by his side.*' [From *You Gotta Love This City*.]

"I thought the Olympics were a silly risk for the glory of bureaucrats so I wrote *You Gotta Love This City* in 1994, trying to be the first anti-Olympics song. Needn't have rushed, in retrospect. How was I to know they would be the greatest Games ever?"

"The songs I wrote in New York for the next album have a longer perspective, I hope. There's a song about a little cloud drifting over Sydney, which was a way of me using the distance I felt in a lyric. And that's the title of the next album, *Little Cloud*. In that lifeless winter I could dream of the other side of the night where '*cicadas are the sound of the earth creaking as it's slowing down to spin her into sleep in our hometown.*'

"I finished a lot of the songs from the next album with [producer] J Walker in a little house in Broken Head, just south of Byron. But I predict that I'll always live in Sydney. I only ever leave so I can come home." →

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*But she knows no one will care,
so easy to forget,
Just another sad affair with
the girl on Angel Street.*

From *Angel Street*
by Iva Davies (pictured above in Angel Street, Erskineville).

Iva Davies

He is no conventional songwriter. Unlike his guitar-strumming contemporaries, the classically trained Iva Davies has always built music in layers, reliant on electronic devices. From *Great Southern Land*, a sweeping statement on his homeland, to the heartbreak of *Don't Believe Anymore*, his songs were inspired by private emotions and the minutiae of daily life viewed from homes in Lindfield, Leichhardt and Erskineville. In recent years Davies has worked on large-scale pieces for events such as the Millennium New Year's Eve, the Sydney Olympics and the score of *Master and Commander*. He lives at Whale Beach with his family.

"The proximity of Sydney to the sea has very direct links with *Great Southern Land*. The first verse talks about the ocean, the harbour, and then in the second verse it looks up towards the Blue Mountains, 'listen to the motion of the wind in the mountains'. All of these things I can view much better with hindsight, because they were instinctive at the time, but that very first opening long note, which is the defining picture of the enormous nature of the continent, was defined by the horizon line of the sea as much as anything as well.

"The great irony of *Great Southern Land* was that it was written in a house directly under the flight path next to a bus stop that was incredibly noisy in Leichhardt.

"[The song] *Icehouse* was written at 18 Tryon Road, Lindfield. There was this beautiful, old two-storey mansion on the corner, which had a tennis court behind it, and the woman who owned it had it turned into flats rented out to members of the ABC orchestra. Lindfield is a beautiful, leafy conservative area. I went through a whole period there when *Flowers* were starting when I had a very, very insulated life and these weird hours. We'd do a gig and I'd go down and clean this theatre in Chatswood at three o'clock in the morning, and then come back and start to write lead lines. I was up most of the night for years.

"Across the road was another beautiful old house, but this one was really dishevelled. I noticed that the lights were always on all night, and this was very weird in Lindfield. You'd see people coming out of there during the day and they'd wander up the street and then come back with some shopping, and you'd see them for a couple of months and then you wouldn't see them any more, you'd see somebody new. It had a very strange vibe about it. I couldn't work out what was going on. It wasn't until after the song had been recorded that I found out it was a psychiatric halfway house.

"Right from the beginning I was so nervous about writing songs that I wanted them to have nothing to do with me. And when I look back at that first *Flowers* album now, it's a picture of me alone in this flat in Lindfield. That's exactly what my life was like. I was in this room, up all night, it was a very isolated existence. That period produced a whole lot of songs like *Walls* and *Not My Kind*, which are songs about the distance between you and everything else that's happening.

"I wrote all of *Primitive Man* and *Sidewalk* [albums] in Leichhardt, and all of [the ballet] *Boxes* and [albums] *Measure for Measure*, *Man of Colours* and *Code Blue* in Erskineville. One of the things I do constantly is make up a possible life for someone. And one of those lives was the girl on *Angel Street*. *Angel Street*'s up the road from where I lived. My room upstairs overlooked Erskineville Station, so I caught myself one day just staring at the people waiting at the station, thinking, these people, where are they going? And what's going on in their lives? And one of them was this girl. Every morning she got up to go to work and did herself up, and every day she was hoping she'd meet somebody and every night came home and it never happened.

"I still own that house. I was there yesterday. And it was very peculiar because I could stand in that front room and look down onto the street and I knew exactly where *Man of Colours* came from. And look out at the back bedroom and look at the station and see where the song *Angel Street* came from.

"I have written an album's worth of songs up here [at Whale Beach], which have yet to be released. To write those songs up here was very difficult because there weren't stories happening all around me. They're extremely personal and a lot of them are very challenging. I think it will be a challenging album to listen to." →



*Any time you want to find me,
I ain't got a telephone,
I'm another world away,
But I always feel at home with my
cheap wine and a three-day growth.*

From *Cheap Wine*
by Don Walker (pictured at
the Piccolo Bar, Kings Cross).

Don Walker

Born in north Queensland and raised in Grafton, Don Walker has always had a strong affinity with rural life. Since his success as songwriter for Cold Chisel, he has written country songs for, and with, the likes of Slim Dusty and Troy Cassar-Daley. He has also recorded on his own and with Tex Perkins and Charlie Owen in the trio Tex, Don and Charlie (their latest album *All is Forgiven* was released last month). But Walker will always be best known for the songs he wrote and performed with Cold Chisel, from the ode to Vietnam vets, *Khe Sanh*, to pub rock anthems such as *Choirgirl* and *Cheap Wine*. Walker has lived in Kings Cross for nearly 30 years.

“In 1976 Cold Chisel came running up the Hume Highway from a dire winter in Melbourne. We lived for three weeks in a motel in Tamarama, then I went looking for the cheapest accommodation in Sydney, which was the Plaza Hotel in Darlinghurst Road – \$12.50 for a double room for a week. I moved the band to Kings Cross purely for economics. They all moved out to other places fairly quickly and partly through inertia I stayed at the Plaza for five years or so.

“Apart from those three weeks in Tamarama, I've never lived anywhere else in Sydney, and I've never bothered to try other places. When I was much younger I spent a couple of weeks here, staying with my aunt in Caringbah and

spending most of my time with my girlfriend in Dee Why. Going between Caringbah and Dee Why each day probably put me off suburban living.

“Everything I needed to sustain life in 1976 – apart from more money – was in Kings Cross. And Kings Cross was the only place in Sydney in those days that provided 24-hour meals, reading matter, etc. I never had much use for the strip clubs or that end of things. I had a look at that when I first arrived here and, not through any puritanism, I never really got motivated to go back.

“These days, of course, you could do just as well in Newtown, Bondi, any number of other places. But in those days it was Kings Cross. Kings Cross was the yolk of the egg.

“The second Cold Chisel album, *Breakfast at Sweethearts*, was written, like all second albums, in a short space of time and it smells a lot of the place where it was written. It was also the last Cold Chisel album I wrote pretty much all of. So that album, probably more than anything, reflects my life in this place. Even though I've lived here ever since, by and large I think I'm writing about other places.

“The original Sweethearts Cafe is where McDonald's is now. That got demolished and Sweethearts moved over the road to where Krave Espresso Bar is now. That lasted for quite a few years, until the late 1980s, early '90s.

“*Khe Sanh* was written on some scraps of paper at the

old Sweethearts. I used to do a fair bit of eating there and at the Crest. I spent as little time as possible in the Plaza because there was nothing there. You could sit in the Plaza for an afternoon and read, which I used to do often, but you couldn't spend a whole day. It was just a room and a bed.

“I think the songs were influenced not by wherever I was going and the kind of life I was leading. I used to spend a lot of time in Oxford Street, around Taylor Square, because a couple of the other guys moved there. There was a strong connection to Bondi Junction, because Jim [Barnes] moved out there with some people that his older brother, Swanee [John Swan], knew, and we used to spend a lot of time at the Bondi Lifesaver. In Kings Cross, past the fountain, there was the Rex Hotel. And in the Rex was the Bottoms Up Bar. That was a big gay and transvestite scene. Paul Hewson from Dragon used to spend a lot of time in there, so I knew that place through my friendship with him. In the middle of Kings Cross was the Manzil Room, which was just across the road from the Plaza. I could walk out of there after the sun had come up and know I didn't have too far to go.

“The connection between what's around me and what finishes up in lyrics is unconscious. It's probably different for most other people, but I don't look around and say, ‘Well, now I'm going to write a song about this street, where I'm sitting right now.’ I don't really write that way.” (s)