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CHARACTER MAP

Characters and relationships in *Don't Start Me Talking*

character types	relationships & themes	song examples
Fathers	The relationship between fathers and their children is frequently described, emphasising the importance of inheritance.	'Before the Old Man Died' 'Adelaide' 'Deeper Water' 'Going About My' 'Father's Business'
Lovers	Platonic and carnal aspects of love are experienced by Kelly's characters; infatuation and loss are common themes.	'Look So Fine, Feel So Low' 'Don't Explain' 'Winter Coat'
	Lyrics often feature a male character who is successful in love due to sheer persistence.	'I'll Be Your Lover Now' 'Before Too Long'
Aborigines	The issues of Aboriginal land rights, mandatory detention and reconciliation are explored.	'Maralinga (Rainy Land)' 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' 'Bicentennial'
Addicts	Characters who are addicted to drugs, drinking and/or love.	The <i>Post</i> album
Criminals & outlaws	Criminals on the run: they are usually victims of injustice who are standing up for their rights.	'I Won't Be Your Dog Anymore' 'Our Sunshine' 'Pigeon/Jundamurra'
Ghosts	Ghostly presences may trigger memories of the past, or console the bereaved.	'Invisible Me' 'Cities of Texas' 'Ghost Town'
Heroes	Notable Australians whom Kelly admires who are celebrated in song:	
	cricketer Don Bradman	'Bradman'
	Aboriginal activist Vincent Lingjarri	'From Little Things Big Things Grow'
	guitarist Charlie Owen	'Charlie Owen's Slide Guitar'
	weightlifter Dean Lukin	'Cool Hand Lukin'
Doubles & doppelgängers	Men who have two aspects to them, but who are largely unaware of their bad side; who may discover their true nature only through other people's stories.	'Stories of Me' 'Sweet Guy' 'I Don't Remember a Thing'

INTRODUCTION

Paul Kelly is a well-known Australian musician and songwriter who has been producing music for three decades. He has written some of the most important and memorable songs in Australian popular music and has collaborated on many theatre productions and films. Although it is best known in Australia, his work has also been praised internationally. David Fricke, the US music editor of *Rolling Stone*, once described Paul Kelly as one of the finest songwriters he had ever heard, Australian or otherwise. Kelly has been described as a ‘navigator of the soul’, a title he has modestly denied, saying that he’s ‘just a song and dance man’.¹

Kelly captures aspects of Australian life in many iconic songs like ‘From St Kilda to Kings Cross’ and ‘Adelaide’, the lyrics of which have also been read as poetry. Especially since the publications of his lyrics in two volumes, *Lyrics* (1993) and *Don’t Start Me Talking* (2004), Kelly’s writing has been increasingly acknowledged as having literary merit. In a review of *Lyrics*, Dr Imre Salusinszky described Kelly as ‘Australia’s premier singer-songwriter for grown-ups, but also one of our two or three essential poets’.²

Kelly is attracted to the great stories, like those from the Bible or Shakespearean plays, yet he is also interested in the minutiae of the everyday. His keen observation of human foibles and his ear for vernacular speech is registered everywhere in his songwriting practice. A cast of believable characters emerges throughout Kelly’s songs. When the lyrics are read as a collection, these character ‘types’ seem more fully defined and Kelly’s recurrent preoccupations become evident. Although love songs outweighs all other kinds in numbers, Kelly is especially interested in representing characters in moments of crisis. They struggle with their identities and regret their thoughtless actions. Often there is a degree of reflection which allows the narrator to consider the implications of past events.

Kelly is famous for his storytelling songs about love, politics and sporting heroes. Since his lyrical oeuvre has had a personal focus, mostly centred on sexual politics, he tends to attract very little adverse media comment, even when he intervenes in controversial current affairs. Kelly’s popularity is perhaps mostly due to his ability to capture the experience of everyman: his songs document the experience of ordinary people trying to determine life’s underlying meaning or pattern. Most Australians

¹ Doug Aiton, ‘Dancing in shadows’, *The Age*, 10 May 1998, <http://www.paulkelly.com.au/articles/theage-980510.html>.

² Imre Salusinszky cited in Robert Adamson, ‘Introduction’, in Paul Kelly, *Lyrics*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1993, p.iii.

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

or legend. British settlers brought the ballad tradition to Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the ballad died out in Britain, it became a strong component in the Australian storytelling and popular music traditions, especially in rural Australia. Subsequently, the ballad was incorporated into the Australian literary tradition.

Ballads and Australian poetry

The ballad tradition in Australia has been closely aligned with the large Irish population that immigrated in the nineteenth century. Irish ballads of this time are typically anti-establishment, usually featuring a working-class hero who is persecuted by authority figures such as landowners. They often celebrate convicts and bushrangers, who were seen by the immigrant Irish to resist the English ruling class.

The bush ballad, through its emphasis on simple emotion, realistic description and anecdote, provided early settler Australians with a way of passing on stories. The ballad emerged as the first literary form in which writers interpreted the Australian experience for their compatriots. It features in the work of Henry Lawson and A.B. ('Banjo') Paterson, whose *Man from Snowy River and Other Verses* (1895) includes the famous poem, 'Waltzing Matilda'. A story about an ordinary man struggling to survive, 'Waltzing Matilda' has become the nation's unofficial national anthem. The themes presented in the early ballads are also explored in the short stories of Lawson and Barbara Baynton and in the songs of many Australian songwriters. In particular, country music – which has always occupied a central position within Australian popular music – has been profoundly influenced by the ballad tradition.

Paul Kelly's place within the ballad tradition

The ballad continues to be an important component within contemporary Australian music, including the work of Paul Kelly. The narrative drive in his songs connects him with early Australian balladeers, though his emphases may be different. While Kelly is concerned primarily with the lives of Australian urban dwellers, his work is not confined to any one place – a quality which makes his songs iconic to Australians, in the same way as Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' is. In fact, collaborator Renee Geyer has said of Kelly: 'He is the voice of urban Australia, the modern-day Banjo Paterson',³ placing him firmly in the Australian ballad tradition.

Though they do not have the traditional ballad structure and are often sung in an Anglo-American rock style, many of Kelly's songs express

³ Renee Geyer cited in Claudia Sammut, 'The gentle dreams of an urban troubadour', *Herald Sun*, 15 August 1999, <http://www.paukelly.com.au/articles/herald-sun-990815.html>.

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

differentiate these lyrics from most contemporary poetry, which is less dependent on a conventional rhyming pattern. The chorus serves to link together all the elements of a song, distilling its meaning to a few words. Kelly's lyrics are usually written with the music in mind and vice versa, further highlighting the difference between the writing of songs and the composition of poetry.

Kelly's songwriting process

In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Don't Start Me Talking*, Kelly discusses the process of songwriting in some detail. A song begins with what he calls 'dream words' which come to his mind when he starts conceiving a song, and which then undergo a metamorphosis:

[They] fall from grace, from possibility to actuality, from dream words to real words, the real words always a little disappointing at first, bald and skinny until they are sung over and over again and the dream words disappear and the real words approach sound again.⁴

Kelly's political songs have a slightly different genesis. He calls these the 'newspaper songs' because they are often prompted by something he has read in the media. With these political songs he usually has a clearer idea of what he's writing before he starts. Kelly distinguishes his overall approach from that of a more politically orientated songwriter such as Mandawuy Yunupingu of Yothu Yindi, with whom Kelly collaborated on 'Treaty'. Kelly describes Yunupingu as: 'a big picture writer, that's how he sees his songwriting. He's a teacher; he's spreading a message, explaining a philosophy'. In contrast, Kelly sees his own songwriting as 'much fuzzier'.⁵

The song, 'Nothing but a Dream', which features a muse who provides inspiration, could be read as a meditation on Kelly's own songwriting process. Other pieces, like 'Love Never Runs on Time' and 'Before the Old Man Died', feature protagonists who make up songs as a way of understanding their experiences.

Unlike many contemporary singer-songwriters, Kelly avoids writing lyrics that are directly autobiographical. He claims not to be interested in revealing himself through his music – although he admits there is a subterranean story running beneath the lyrics. He does write about

⁴ Paul Kelly cited in Claudia Sammut, 'The gentle dreams of an urban troubadour'.

⁵ "Paul Kelly cited in Andrew Stevenson, 'Blue Notes', *The Age*, 5 October 2001, <http://www.paulkelly.com.au/articles/smh-011005.html>."

himself occasionally, but only in an indirect way., He has repeatedly claimed that he merely inhabits characters, like a writer of fiction:

A lot of the songs will start from something in real life, some true detail, a real detail, not necessarily from my life. Once they start becoming songs they become fiction ... Like any writer, I'll grab anything that's at hand in order to write a song....⁶

Literary references

The epigraph to *Don't Start Me Talking* is a quotation from the Russian writer Anton Chekhov, and it provides a clue to Kelly's writing practice: 'I don't have what you would call a philosophy or coherent world view so I shall have to limit myself to describing how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die and speak'. Through these characters and their experiences, Kelly develops a kind of commonsense philosophy which is delivered in an accessible way.

Kelly also borrows from and alludes to the work of a wide range of literary authors, including William Shakespeare, Brendan Behan, Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allan Poe. Kelly is obviously well-read, yet he keeps the lyrics simple and intelligible, if occasionally puzzling. Indeed, Kelly likes the songs to have a certain amount of ambiguity so that the more you listen to them, the more they will reveal .

Style

Transformation and versatility

During his extensive career, Kelly's music-making has undergone a number of transformations. He began as an independent pub-rock act and now claims a range of styles as his own. Kelly calls himself a pop artist because this is a broad enough description to include styles such as rock-and-roll, dance, folk, soul, gospel and bluegrass. It may be argued that his longevity as a musician is due to this ability to adapt as musical tastes and fashions change.

The tone of Kelly's lyrics tends to vary according to which musical style he is adopting and vice versa. For instance, when he writes about sex he often draws on the Motown tradition because musicians who recorded for the Motown Record Company wrote and sang about joy and sex without being banal. On the other hand, when he draws on the

⁶ Paul Kelly cited in 'From St Kilda to Kings Cross', TNT, 10 August 1999, <http://www.paukelly.com.au/articles/tnt-990810.html>.

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.⁷

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.

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