

Q&A

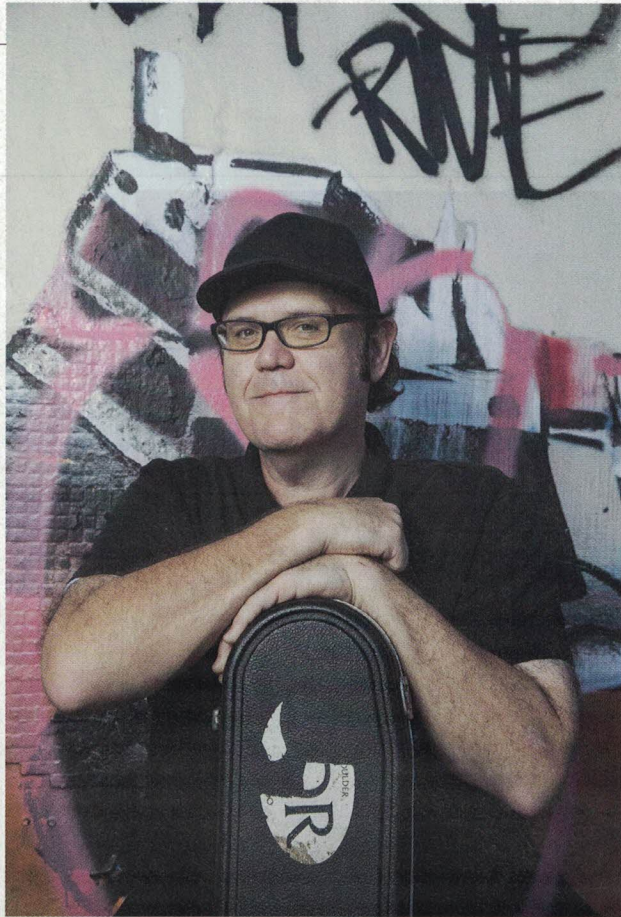
Perry Keyes, singer songwriter, 52

You've been described as Sydney's Bruce Springsteen. He says his job is to describe the difference between the American dream and the American reality; how do you see your music? I try not to sound pretentious. I hope the stories and the songs are something people want to think about and be moved by. It's always been important for me that the songs come from somewhere real.

Your songs explore the lives of the urban poor. What was your upbringing like? I grew up in Redfern, Sydney, in a two-bedroom terrace with my grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins – there were eight people. My grandfather worked at the Botany tannery and Dad was a merchant seaman. Mum was only 17 or 18 when she had me, and I had an older brother. I got polio when I was 18 months old and spent a lot of time in hospital. My parents lived nearby; there was no abandonment. It was just a matter of everyone helping out with the cripple kid. I was given everything I needed.

How did being "the cripple kid" affect you? I had plenty of friends, but when they played football or ran around I would be there watching, taking it all in. I was an observer. I wrote *New Year's Eve* when I was 17. I didn't know any musicians when I was 17 and to think that all those years later Missy Higgins would cover it. To me that was a very special thing.

In 2014, the year South Sydney won the NRL grand final after 43 years, you were asked to perform your song *The Day John Sattler Broke His Jaw* before one of the finals matches. Why did you decline? It is actually an anti-nostalgia song. It says: "Look, the good old days weren't as good as you think they were". There was no lucky country in Lewis Street, Redfern... there were whole families living in houses that had one tap. This is the '70s! You've got to be very careful about what you romanticise. It was great that Souths won the comp but I didn't want my song to become some sort of anthem.



What themes do you explore in your fifth album, *Jim Salmon's Lament*? There's a lot about fatherhood. I began writing it not long after my dad died in 2013.

Is it about your father? It started off that way but moved into an exploration of fathers in those poor neighbourhoods. They ranged from being great guys to really bad men, but all under the Houso umbrella of getting by and doing what they had to do to keep things going.

You still live in a Housing Commission house, in Waterloo, inner Sydney. Are you concerned you'll be moved on? Sydney's never cared about its poor. It's inevitable. Most of my extended family were moved from city terraces to cul-de-sacs in the west at Airds, Blacktown and Mount Druitt. From frying pan to fire, mate. My previous album *Sunnyholt* [2015] was about my family out west. With this new album I sort of wanted to turn back to the inner city. With Waterloo disappearing under the weight of redevelopment, I thought I would make one last record before it's all gone.

Your song *In Ancient Rome* featured on the hit US TV series *Californication*. Did that change things? It was great but, hey, I'm still living in a Houso joint.

THERE WAS NO LUCKY COUNTRY IN LEWIS STREET, REDFERN

◀ Jim Salmon's Lament is out next month. perrykeyes.com ▶