Love is Paul Kelly’s major subject matter and he writes about it in numerous ways. In the tradition of the bard or balladeer, Kelly tells musical stories about love – first love, love of partner, love of family, love of country, love of God, love gone bad, love filled with regret, love that starts all over again.

‘I think it is the love songs that define him,’ says writer David Leser, interviewed in the documentary. ‘He is the romantic poet in song.’

The pop charts are always filled with love songs, but Paul Kelly’s love songs, while attracting chart success in the 1980s, have never been disposable pop songs. Kelly’s love songs have had, like Keats – who Kelly quotes in the film – a depth and complexity that belie their apparent simplicity.

An anthem like ‘To Her Door’ talks about break-up and reconciliation in stark and unsentimental terms; ‘Before Too Long’ addresses how a potential ‘suitor’ views the relationship of the woman he wants to be with; ‘When I First Met Your Ma’ speaks both poetically and directly about Kelly meeting his first wife Hilary; ‘I Can’t Believe We Were Married’ looks at that former marriage from the distance that time offers; and ‘Love is the Law’ is a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13, the famous biblical verse often used at weddings: ‘If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.’

Both his former wives are interviewed in the film, and they suggest that Kelly’s desire to dig into what he sees as the fullness of love was difficult at times for them to handle. As Kelly’s first wife, Hilary, told the filmmakers, Kelly seems to have a song for every girl. But as filmmaker Rachel Perkins says, it is only through Kelly’s experiences of loss, love and suffering that he has been able to get inside the heads of the characters he sings about, including himself.
Paul Kelly is portrayed in the documentary as a songwriter who has been able to show Australians who they are. Along with bands such as Skyhooks, the Dingoes, Midnight Oil, Goanna and Australian Crawl, Paul Kelly (first with the Dots and then the Coloured Girls/Messengers) was one of the first popular musicians to reference Australian places and culture (even to the point of local landmarks such as the clock on the silo near Melbourne's MCG) so clearly. This depiction of Australia in straightforward, non-jingoistic ways has been a consistent theme in Kelly's work since his third album Post, which opens with the line ‘From St Kilda to Kings Cross, is thirteen hours on a bus.’

As well as portraying the nation's landscape and cultural ‘iconography’ (e.g. the MCG, Sydney Harbour, the lights of Sydney from a plane, Queensland's cane fields and Adelaide) he has at times delved into its political heart. ‘From Little Things, Big Things Grow,’ which appeared on Kelly's 1991 album, Comedy, tells the story of Aboriginal stockman Vincent Lingiari's battle for land rights in the 1960s. Kelly recounts in Stories of Me how he went camping with Aboriginal singer/songwriter Kev Carmody who told the story of the Northern Territory Wave Hill Station Strike, during which Lingiari and other stockmen walked off the Station in protest at their working conditions.

‘It quickly turned into a land rights claim,’ Kelly says in the documentary, ‘one of the first.’ Kev Carmody explains how the song’s lyrics go beyond simple retelling of history, saying that it taps into the ancient practice of the oral tradition, keeping history alive in people’s consciousness via song, story and poetry. The Aboriginal community has adopted the song as an anthem, perhaps one of Kelly's highest ever songwriting honours.

Kelly has written a number of songs over the years about Aboriginal identities and events. They include co-writes such as ‘Treaty’ (with Mandawuy Yunupingu), ‘The Land Is Mine’ (with Kev Carmody) and ‘Rally Round the Drum’ (with Archie Roach), and on his own, ‘Maralinga,’ ‘Pigeon/ Jundamurra,’ ‘Smoke Under the Bridge,’ ‘The Ballad of Queenie and Rover,’ ‘Nukkanya,’ ‘Bicentennial’ and ‘Special Treatment’.

The documentary also shines a spotlight on a lesser known political song, ‘Little Kings,’ from Kelly’s 1998 album, Words and Music. Written during the height of the nation’s concerns about Mabo, the Wik Ten-Point Plan and unfettered capitalism, the song highlights Kelly’s love for Australia with one of his most poignant barbs:

‘I’m so afraid for my country … In the land of the little kings, justice don’t mean a thing. And everywhere the little kings are getting away with murder.’
Kelly is adamant that his political songs emerge unconsciously, unbidden, like any other of his songs. They come out of his attention to the world around him. Kutch Edwards explains in the film, ‘Aboriginal people don’t like white people speaking for them’. He believes that Kelly is one of the few white Australians who can deal sensitively with Indigenous issues and that the Indigenous community in Australia holds Kelly in particularly high regard.

Less controversially, Kelly has also written about Australia’s surrogate religion, sport. His most famous track is his ode to Australian batsman Sir Donald Bradman, the man who still holds the record for the highest ever Test cricket average:

‘More than just a batsman, he was something like a tide. More than just one man, he could take on any side.’

Kelly was a high ranking junior sportsman, and his competitive nature was obvious to all who watched him or played against him. He took that same intensity and ambition into his chosen art of songwriting.

STORIES OF SUFFERING AND INSPIRATION

‘WELL I LOOK SO FINE, BUT I FEEL SO LOW’
— PAUL KELLY (‘LOOK SO FINE, FEEL SO LOW’)

The composer Stephen Sondheim once said that art is an attempt to make order out of chaos. And while Paul Kelly’s outer world remained ordered after his father’s death when he was thirteen, it is clear from interviews with him in the documentary that the event had a significant impact on his life, and it is revealed in several of his songs.

Kelly’s first wife, Hilary Kelly, says she once found him at his piano weeping over his father’s death. Here was an adult man finally dealing with the loss of his father, a loss that second wife Kaarin Fairfax suggests Paul was never given time to properly grieve. Fairfax says that Kelly has a very strong, single-mined focus and a stoicism that probably came from the trauma of his father’s death.
If great art comes from suffering, then Kelly’s suffering has produced its own unique contribution. The death of his father, the drug-related deaths of several close friends and his marriage break-ups, have all contributed to Kelly’s prolific outpouring.

Fairfax says Kelly is ‘not an open book’ and that the way to him is through his songs. Kelly affirms this, but, as fellow songwriter Deborah Conway says, that’s difficult when he has taken only small kernels of truth from his life and grown them into fiction. But Kelly’s friend John Kingsmill has a different perspective, saying that Kelly’s songs have tracked his life so closely that it’s hard for him – or, he says, anyone – to believe that they’re just made up stories.

Kelly himself says little about this issue in the documentary, remaining mostly the closed book that Fairfax says he is. But he speaks openly and at length about his songwriting influences and inspirations. Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Shakespeare (‘Anything you come up with in a song seems to have been in Shakespeare first’, Kelly says), numerous authors, especially the ‘bad boys’ of American literature, the poet Keats, and many of his Australian songwriting contemporaries (including Grant McLennan from The Go-Betweens and David McComb from The Triffids, both songwriters steeped in ‘place’) are said to fire his imagination.

Kelly, apparently a lapsed Catholic, also admits how much the Bible has influenced his songwriting, with passages and phrases regularly appearing in songs like, ‘Love is the Law’ and ‘Meet Me in the Middle of the Air’, both of which borrow heavily from 1 Corinthians 13 and Psalm 23 respectively.

Early in the documentary, his first wife Hilary quotes a young Kelly as saying that he didn’t care if he wasn’t well known for his work when he was alive, as long as he was recognised after his death. Paul Kelly – Stories of Me celebrates an Australian music legend who is much loved and respected now, and will be an influence on Australian songwriters for generations to come.