

KEV CARMODY

S I N G E R - S O N G W R I T E R

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What sort of music does Kev Carmody make?

Aboriginal Australia now has many contemporary voices, one of which is Kev Carmody.

Kev released his first album *Pillars of Society* in 1988. At the time, Sydney Morning Herald reviewer Bruce Elder wrote that Kev was "Australia's Black Bob Dylan".

His second album, *Eulogy (for a Black Person)*, released in 1991, did much to confirm this initial impression. As one review at the time noted, "Using a combination of folk and country music his hard-hitting lyrics deal with such potent material as the David Gundy slaying, black deaths in custody, land rights and Aboriginal pride and dignity. Carmody is deeply committed, powerfully intelligent and persuasively provocative. He uses images of revolutionaries... and challenges White Australia to stare unrelentingly at the despair which under pins Aboriginal society".

Then, 1993, along came the album *Bloodlines* from which the EP *Street Beat* and the song *Freedom* were drawn and the folk/protest tag fell away. In one stroke Kev Carmody had decided that all music could be used to express his ideas. As he said at the time, "To me, sound and feel come first and the lyrics after. So you could say my influences range from the howls of the dingo to the sound of a symphony orchestra.

"Freedom", written with Mixed Relations' Bart Willoughby, was a wonderful hybrid with a reggae rhythm, West African guitar licks, and just for good measure, some particularly funky didge playing. It was catchy, powerful, and it deserved to be an international hit.

From there it was only a short step to the full -on hard rock of "Living South of the Freeway" on the "Street Beat" EP which was included on Kev's third album *Bloodlines*. The process was complete and Rolling Stone wrote of the recording, "Carmody has made a concerted attempt to break the mould. *Bloodlines* is an adventurous album that is quite clearly trying to reach out and touch more people....Both "Asbestosis" and "BDP" have a groovy, hard reggae-funk, complete with additional mandolin and didgeridoo instrumentation..

The process continues on *Images and Illusions* where the music ranges from the rockabilly of "Needles in the Nursery" to the hauntingly beautiful evocation of Aboriginal culture on "Travellin' North" and the funky pop of "Some Strange People". There's a syncopated reggae beat behind "The Anti-Christ" and deeply felt anger rises at the story of "The Young Dancer Is Dead".

On *Images and Illusions (1995)* and *2003's Mirrors*, Kev continues to stretch his musical vocabulary. No one can now draw comparisons with Bob Dylan and the folk/protest tradition. Certainly the anger is still evident but it is set against a wide variety of musical backgrounds. These are songs which well up from deep inside Carmody. This is no imitation of other musicians. This is the powerful, original voice of Kev Carmody.

The subject matter - the unfairness and hypocrisy of a world - which shone through on his debut album *Pillars of Society* remains unchanged. What has changed has been Carmody's musical approach. Some years ago Kev told Rolling Stone, "Black musicians should be able to play whatever they bloody like". And that's exactly what he's doing.

Kev was a tireless traveller and performer, who has played in some of the world's foremost venues and has worked with some of the world's most acclaimed musicians. Brisbane and Sydney have been privileged to see the bringing together of the artists from the *Cannot Buy My Soul* tribute album, with a video of the Sydney performance available for purchase.

About Kev Carmody

Kev Carmody grew up on the Western Darling Downs area of Southern Queensland. His early childhood was simple but happy, mixing mostly with stockmen, drovers, fencers, ring-barkers and timber-getters. His family, although poor lived largely off the land growing vegetables near the small three roomed ant-bed floored hut and hunting and catching everything from kangaroos to fish.

In 1956, when he was ten, Carmody was sent to a "Christian school" which he has described as "little more than an orphanage". After school Kev returned to his rural roots working for seventeen years as a back country labourer doing everything from bag lumping, cane cutting to wool pressing. He told one newspaper that his musical career was "a far cry from the 15 year old who thought he'd spent the rest of his life pressing wool. Mind you, I had a job then, I was actually making bloody money. Not with this music caper...."

When he was 33 he got the opportunity to go to University where he studied history, geography and music eventually progressing to work on a PhD. His thesis topic, not surprisingly, was the history of the Darling Downs between 1830 - 1860. His career in music started while he was at University. He explains: "They accepted me in there on probation, and it was a bit of a funny one really because I could hardly read or write. I had no mastery of the written language... But I was lucky. I had good lecturers and they let me bring the guitar in for the first six months as a means of implementing oral history and my background and what I wanted to say into the tutorial. And it worked really bloody well."

Music had always been around him. As a child he listened to old records on the family's wind-up 78 gramophone and, absorbed everything from country music to classical from an old valve wireless, and spent many nights singing folk and popular songs around the campfire. He did not, and still does not see himself as "a musician" in the way that most musicians see themselves. Still the influences upon him were powerful and profound.

Carmody's initial inspiration came from a truly rural, oral tradition. Both his second generation Irish father and Murri mother came from powerful oral traditions. Carmody still talks about the stories and songs he was told and taught by his first generation Irish Grandmother, Murri grandparents and his extended Murri family.

Kev Carmody has lived out the life of a modern troubadour. He was a travelling singer/songwriter with a base in southern Queensland and an itinerary which found him touring the world. He has

played concerts in Australian gaols for all inmates. He has worked with marginalised children as part of a community education program at Logan City "to encourage the kids to come up with artistic ideas, find their spirit, and, most importantly, their self-esteem." You could often find him at a Greenpeace rally or fund-raiser, a world music celebration, an Aboriginal musical festival, on a university campus, or playing at regular concert venues.

What does the world think of Kev Carmody?

Wherever he has gone, and he has now travelled all over the world, Carmody has been met by respect and admiration from both critics and the fans.

Since the release of his first album, **Pillars Of Society**, described in Australian Rolling Stone, as "the best album ever released by an Aboriginal musician and arguably the best protest album ever made in Australia". Carmody has established himself as one of the most respected singer/songwriters in the country.

Kev was the subject of the outstanding SBS documentary titled '**Bloodbrothers**'

Also in 2008 SBS filmed the two sold-out nights at the State Theatre in Sydney the **Cannot Buy My Soul** concert incorporating some of Australia's finest singer-songwriters doing their unique musical interpretations of Kev's music,

When he performed with the other Aboriginal musicians in "Corroboree" at the Queen Elizabeth Hall (part of London's South Bank complex) the prestigious British music magazine Folk Roots described his performance as: "Carmody isn't just a protest singer but it's certainly his forte. His style may be American influenced (whose isn't?), but I'd prefer comparisons with the living, incisive style of a Jim Page than dried-up Dylan, if you must. Down-to-earth and very much on the offensive, Carmody delivered two excellent sets with virtually no duplication".

One of his great admirers, the British singer/songwriter Billy Bragg, describes Carmody's work as "For us in England the voice of Aboriginal Australia has come to us either through the white editorial system, the media, or in the traditional Dreamtime form. But there hasn't been anything about contemporary Aboriginal issues. So Kevin, writing about the subjects he writes about from the angle he writes them, is quite a refreshing thing to come into contact with."

Although Australia is his first love Kev has undertaken a tour of Europe and Canada where he played at festival and concert venues in Canada, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland. He is now one of Aboriginal Australia's most visible ambassadors and the message that he brings, although rooted in the experience of Australia's Aboriginal community, has universal resonances which reach and touch audiences around the world.

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