

NEIL MURRAY

"ABOUT TIME" TOUR DIARY

Pix by Marty Williams

Neil Murray is widely regarded as one of Australia's most respected singer/songwriters. In April Neil released *About Time... A Song Collection*, a definitive studio collection of his finest works, complimented by a bonus disc of live & rare recordings. A month later, he set out on a ten date tour promoting his album, taking in Melbourne, Brisbane and many points in between. Australian Musician asked Neil if he wouldn't mind documenting his journey ... and here it is.

10AM. WEDNESDAY MAY 4TH.

My touring trailer had been sitting out front of the local garage for over a month awaiting "modifications". What appeared to be an old holden air cleaner was now oddly attached to the outside of the 8X5 tandem fully enclosed box trailer. Before I could hook it up to the vehicle (80 series Diesel Landcruiser) and get out of there, Tony- the mechanic- saw me. He began a cheery discourse on the merits of his handy work with a long winded explanation of the principle behind his home-made air dam. Reluctantly I prepared myself to receive the grease monkey's discursive wisdom, which was wide ranging and included aspects of meteorology, physics, and bush know-how. The short of it was that the trailer would now be sealed and not suck in water and dust onto the gear.

"I'm sure you'll be happy with it" said Tony.

"We'll see" I said, letting my scepticism show "It's bound to piss down rain on the north coast"

I had a ten date run from Melbourne to Brisbane to promote my new release- "About Time"- a 2Cd anthology. No matter how I tried to deny it - it was a "best of" or "greatest hits" package - as they are colloquially known in the biz. The kind of thing you put out when you're over the hill and have a back catalogue that doesn't sell to prove it. It'd been more than a year since I'd done a decent run with a band. I was keen to get the cruiser on the road and see if my voice and fingers could still cut the parts.

12PM THURSDAY MAY 5TH.

I was parked on the side of a busy road 2ks from Melbourne airport waiting for the bass player to call my mobile to let me know if he was out of the terminal and waiting in the bus bay. I wondered then why it was always bass players I was looking or waiting for.

Thierry Fossemalle had played on "the Wondering Kind" album but we hadn't done a tour together. Since then I'd occasionally run into him in Byron and he always expressed interest in playing with me if I was ever doing anything. Most of the time I wasn't doing anything. I could barely get around myself, let alone carry a band. Now he had his chance.

Thierry had called twice that morning. Once to ask if I had my credit card as he was up for over 250 bucks in excess baggage?. I had to inform him I'd lost my card.

"No shit" he said.

Then he called again to say he was on the plane but he would need an advance when he landed.

The third time he called, I started the cruiser and pulled into the traffic heading towards the terminal. There he was, juggling his mobile, smoking those hideous indo cigarettes with amp, speakers and the biggest guitar road case I'd ever seen strewn about the sidewalk.



We threw the gear in and headed for a rehearsal studio in Richmond where drummer, Matt Earl was waiting. Matt had played on the "Going The Distance" album and had done a few east coast runs with me as well as an NT and Kimberly tour. He'd proved himself a cheerful operator, willing to roll up his sleeves and muck in without complaint. He didn't mind driving, packing the trailer, sleeping outdoors or on floors and drinking beer. He had a high tolerance of humbug and got on with pretty well anyone. He had an astute appreciation of Australian rules footy - and being a Cats supporter he knew how to live with defeat. Being a Swans supporter myself I knew what that was.

The streets around Richmond are one way, narrow and often come to dead ends. This can be a problem for a four wheel drive and trailer if you're looking to park.

It was already an hour into our rehearsal time, and I was getting more practice for the reversing championships on Bloke's World than playing music.

We ran over 30 songs in rehearsal, many of which I could barely remember myself. However Thierry was hungry and lived up to his reputation as a quick master of anything and Matt had been playing with me long enough to have it in his bones.

CENTRAL CLUB, RICHMOND, FRIDAY MAY 6TH

They were still painting the toilets when we loaded in so I guessed they weren't expecting a rush. After initial teething problems with the in-house system, ably kicked into shape by sound man Phil Shrek, Rachel Taylor opened followed by Monique Brumby. When we went on it was to the usual sparse gathering of faithful souls that have borne witness to my odd career. New manager Paul Minshull put a brave front on it- delighted that the merch sales were outgrossing the door take. There were some fans there I recognized from the Warumpi days of the early eighties. I was pleased they'd followed me to my solo stuff.

We were helped out on stage by a couple of guests artists- the very urbane David Bridie, tinkering on keyboards and the very bush Tonchi McIntosh with backing vocals and a swing on my Gibson Firebird through "Far Away". All up we played non-stop for at least two hours.

After the first gig of the tour I felt like I'd been hit by a truck. It'd been a while since I'd played at volume with a band. I was used to the solo acoustic mode. I might have got to bed at 3 or 4am but I was up and restlessly walking the streets of Northcote by 8.30am trying to get my body right and looking for a coffee and a feed.

SATURDAY MAY 7TH

In the band room of the Palais Theatre at Hepburn I was agonizing over a song list. The problem was I was trying to reduce a 25 year career into an hour and half. At some point Thierry remarked "I've found generally around Australia that songs about beer go down well" It wasn't on the "best of", but I slipped "Beer in our hands" into the set.

The Palais is a grand old country theatre and I felt we should have been wearing three piece suits. Support act, Rachel Taylor's divine voice soared beautifully in that room. We played at a lower volume on stage and the sound was crisp. With an open fireplace, sumptuous surroundings and good food I wished vaguely for a residency. Why couldn't we just do ten nights in the Palais and have the audience come to us?

MONDAY MAY 9TH

I defy any act to look cool on morning television but it is a necessary evil if you want any chance of getting some punters to your gig and buying your record. We went on to GMA doing an obscure song they'd requested off the bonus "Live and Rare" CD from the ABOUT TIME release. The tune "Johnny Grey" I'd recorded 12 years ago as a bit of lark- a kind of "retro 70's rockin blues thing". To give it a bit more bite I'd got Shannon Bourne in to play slide guitar with us and he didn't disappoint, extracting a wicked bark out of his rig. Then like any tradesman he packed up his tools and left for the next job.

TUESDAY MAY 10TH

The drive up the deadly Hume was uneventful. The usual stops at the usual roadhouses while we monitored on channel 40 UHF CB the reports of police activity and the occasional amusing banter between the truckies. Arriving into Newton after dark, we checked into backpacker type accom and made way to the nearest bar to quench a few miles.

**THURSDAY MAY 12TH**

Sydney, and stress levels immediately rise when you are trying to get to the Basement for soundcheck and its peak hour. There's no hope of a park, you just have to fork out the best part of \$50 bucks for a paystation.

Finally we get inside and it is all worth it. The Basement is a fine room.

For the gig we are joined by Jim Moginie on guitar, ukelele, ominochord and various gadgets. Jim is a masterful musician and producer and has had a hand in most of my recordings. He'd been a great support to me over the years, especially when record companies weren't listening. Invariably I'd turn his ear with a song I



had and his interest and enthusiasm would often see him participate in the recording and mixing of my albums. Jim had earned an open invitation to play with me anytime, anywhere.

With Jim on board, the palette is huge for the gig. We go from three piece black n white to technicolour cinemascope. During the show I invite former Rainmakers members- drummer, Bill Heckenberg and guitarist, Bob Jones up for a few numbers. It'd been more than ten years since I played with them and it's a blast from the past appropriate to the launch of a best of. Post-gig calls of reviving the old Rainmaker's line-up are met with mirthful scorn.

FRIDAY MAY 13TH

The next day we head to Bulli, driving through some showers on the way. An inspection of the trailer reveals some water still pooling on the trailer floor though not as bad as it used to. I can already imagine my mechanic scratching his head.

The Heritage Hotel is a superb room. The crowd is modestly reasonable and is strongly supportive so I'm tricked into thinking the tour is on reliable ground.

SATURDAY MAY 14TH

In the comfort of the lounge room that is the Clarendon Hotel at Katoomba we play an intimate and eclectic set to my best attendance there yet before settling into the red wine by the fire. After the Clarendon I'm convinced my career is in good shape and that I'll be able to continue indefinitely.

SUNDAY MAY 15TH

Sunday night in Cronulla was always a big call. Despite all the media publicity Paul Mishnull had been able to string together for me, the turn out at the Brass Monkey was disappointing. From the glimmer of break even possibilities of a few days ago, the grim reality of sustaining financial loss on the tour had returned with a vengeance. What could I do? What can anyone do? You perform with the same intensity whether your audience be a few or a few thousand, whether you're making a quid or losing it.

Early next morning, we left in darkness from a caravan park bound for the far north coast and the final four shows of the tour. As I drove and put distance on Sydney and my history with the place, I brooded on what I was sure were diminishing prospects of sustaining a viable career. Then, at some point north of Newcastle, suddenly my spirits lifted just to see the country open up before me. What lay ahead was another gig. At that moment whether it brought redemption or disappointment didn't seem to matter.

About Time .. A Song Collection 2 disc set is out now through Shock distribution. www.neilmurray.com.au