

Borrowed words, new music

Paul Kelly's new album *Words And Music* reveals there's a lot on his mind

AFTER a period of creative lull and relatively disappointing albums, Paul Kelly's purple patch – sown in 1997 with the triple platinum-and-counting success of his compilation album *Songs From The South* – is set to continue flourishing with the release of his new album *Words And Music*.

His finest collection of songs since *So Much Water So Close To Home*, *Words And Music* sees Kelly – aided by Spencer P Jones (The Johnnys/Beasts of Bourbon), Shane O'Mara (Rebecca's Empire), Peter Luscombe (The Black Sorrows), Bruce Haymes (The Feelin' Groovies) and Steven Hadley (Stephen Cummings) – shifting the focus from his folk-rock roots to a more groove-inspired sound hinted at in songs such as 1986's *Last Train To Heaven*.

"A lot of the songs are more based on jamming with the band rather than coming in with a completed song – verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge – and so on," says Kelly from America, where he is holidaying with his wife, actress Kaarin Fairfax, and children. "There are a lot less chords on this album."

Kelly puts the looser feel down to the relaxed, collaborative nature of rehearsals that preceded recording sessions last May.

"A lot of the songs were definitely band things," he says. "Over the last two years, whenever we had a chance we would get together and rehearse on, say, every Wednesday of a month. We weren't rehearsing for a tour or a record, we were just playing around."

"I'd come in with a lot of half-finished ideas, Peter would come in with a drum groove. The song *Nothing On My Mind* (a funky dirge about getting rip-roaring drunk in a pub) came together like that, we jumped on his groove, I played a C and an F chord and we were away."

Day one of recording continued the tone. "It was a good omen for the record," says Kelly. "One of my favourite memories of doing the album was that very first song, the very first take on the very first day that we recorded. It was *Nothing On My Mind* and what you hear is our first take. The whole thing just fell into place. The noise you hear at the end is the sound of Spencer's guitar pedals running out of batteries."

While Kelly's work tools – an acoustic guitar, a pen, a piece of paper and a nasally, passionate voice – have kept him clothed and fed for almost 20 years, he rejects the cliché of the musician creating as a form of inexpensive self-therapy. "I don't know if 'soothing', 'healing' are the right sort of feelings," he says. "It's a form of play for me. I don't set out to write songs with things in my head, I don't write them as therapy or confession or to work out issues."

"I really don't know what is going to happen when I sit down and write a song. It's always a



Mark my words: Paul Kelly has no qualms about using other people's phrases to get his point across.

Ever since I started writing, if I've heard a line I like from someone else, I'll put it in

musical thing first and then in the end I'm just trying to fit words to a melody or to a kind of phrasing. If I really want to take myself away I'll usually put on someone else's album."

Words And Music is littered with phrases Kelly has borrowed, from John Lee Hooker ("I'll have one scotch, one bourbon, one beer"), to Friedrich Nietzsche ("Intimacy involves shame and is therefore precious") and Alfred Hitchcock (who described Grace Kelly as "a volcano under snow").

As a writer, Kelly sees himself as simply being

"part of a river and music is about picking it up and passing it on". "Songwriting comes from everywhere and that always comes from something before. We use a Prince drum pattern on

a song and that probably came from James Brown.

"When sampling became popular it seemed to make sense to me because I always thought that as a writer I was sampling anyway, ever since I started – if I've heard a line I like, I'll put it in.

"I think that's how everyone starts as a writer and I've always done it. You don't take great slabs, but you can always use a little quote."

★ Paul Kelly plays The Metro on May 12. *Words And Music* is out through Mushroom.