

## EXTRA MUSIC



Photo: James Brickwood

# Songs from the city

**H**e has been lauded by critics from Los Angeles to London. His music has featured on the hit American television series *Californication* and his most recent CD was named album of the year by ABC Radio National.

It is a mystery, then, why Sydney singer-songwriter Perry Keyes, a man who has been described as Redfern's answer to Bruce Springsteen, remains largely anonymous in his own town.

Keyes, who has spent his whole life in and around Redfern – and still lives in Waterloo – isn't sure but he's realistic about the vagaries of the music industry.

He sometimes works for his builder brother as a labourer and drives a taxi a couple of nights a week when he needs the money. This is despite a talent that has been hailed by the likes of Tim Freedman, frontman for the Whitlams, for whom Keyes has played as a support act.

Stuart Coupe, who has managed acts such as Paul Kelly and the Hoodoo Gurus, says the first time he heard Keyes he was "obsessed" – and immediately signed him to his Laughing Outlaw label. Freedman described Keyes's 2005 debut double album *Meter* as "the greatest Australian album of the past five years".

Yet Keyes remains all but invisible as he walks Sydney streets. The 42-year-old son of a part-time SP bookie, who later became a merchant seaman, and a mother who worked at a cigarette factory, he contracted polio when just 14 months old and still walks with a limp.

His was reportedly the last

Perry Keyes is largely unknown in Sydney despite being lauded as Redfern's answer to Bruce Springsteen, writes **WINSOR DOBBIN**.

laboratory-confirmed case of polio in Australia but he says he never felt excluded.

"Redfern 40 years ago was a very inclusive community," he says.

"The fact I had calipers on my leg didn't prevent the local kids from dragging me to play footy.

"People were robust and weren't precious about things. They took you for what you were."

After spending five years in hospital, he lived with his grandparents in Hugo Street, in what is now known as The Block. Keyes says his family – "boxers, smokers and gamblers who lived hard" – moved to Eveleigh Street and then Waterloo: "It was like living in a Ruth Park novel."

He was educated at Redfern Primary School – "not the sort of place where you can sit in the corner" – and Cleveland Street High School. Growing up in an area where he knew people like Arthur "Neddy" Smith and stolen cars were an everyday occurrence, it wasn't always easy to stay out of trouble.

"You have to be able to run away from the cops – and if you can't run you are going to get caught every time," he says with a wry laugh.

After a stint with a band known as Leb Zetland, with mates of Middle Eastern origin, Keyes formed cult Sydney band the Stolen Holdens in 1989. The band never released an album but

attained iconic status with pub rock fans.

Keyes turned his back on playing professionally for 10 years until 2003 when he picked up his guitar again.

"I just didn't feel a part of the music scene at that time, although music has always been my passion," he says.

Keyes sings about the fast-disappearing working-class culture of the inner city, referencing local pubs, Luna Park, the speedway at the Sydney Showground and professional wrestling. Often his songs – such as those about South Sydney rugby league legend John Sattler and teenage motorcycle daredevil Dale Buggins – have a deeper message lurking behind the simple choruses.

"I try to write about iconic things to draw people into what a song is really about," he says. "The thing about a song isn't the detail – it's about how it makes you feel."

The songs on *The Last Ghost Train Home*, his 2007 album lauded by Radio National, feature stories about heroin addicts, the homeless and disenfranchised. Several echo Springsteen, except Keyes writes of the Captain Cook Hotel and Matthew Talbot Hostel rather than the Jersey Shore.

On *The Day John Sattler Broke His Jaw*, ostensibly a song about the 1970 rugby league grand final, Keyes rails against the exit of long-standing residents from Redfern to the outer western suburbs and what he describes as "the death of the sense of community that once held these neighbourhoods together".

"It worries me what happened to people who needed a sense of community to keep them together and ended up in a ... cul-de-sac in Mount Druitt in 1971, with nothing but unemployment and intergenerational welfare dependency staring them in the face. People move into [inner city] areas that have long-standing, vibrant cultures and they make no attempt to adopt them. They put bars on their windows and stay inside.

"The value of something like rugby league, when teams still played in suburbs they represent, used to be its ability to get people out of their homes, having a shared sense of community. When they took the football team away from Redfern Oval there was real damage done. It was a

great focal point of community – something you don't get at the Olympic Stadium.

"Some of the changes are good. It's great I can now get a good coffee in Waterloo but what is happening in the high-rises of Waterloo, in the car parks, is disgraceful."

Keyes – whose new album, to be released in May or June, is "about rites of passage and how you do or do not get through them" – first came to attention when his 2005 two-album set *Meter* was compared to Springsteen's *The River*.

"What I've tried to do is use a lot of real people and a lot of real places ... I try and make my songs as cinematic as possible," he says. "Describing pictures in my head in a song."

Remaining relatively unknown appears not to faze a musician with no apparent ego.

"I'm with a small independent label that doesn't have the resources of the big labels, so it is sometimes hard to get my music out there," Keyes says. "There is only so much you can do."

"I've never really thought about commercial success and it doesn't worry me but I would certainly like as many people as possible to hear my songs. That's a big part of why I do what I do."

Keyes, who once ferried former prime minister Paul Keating – "we didn't have a conversation" – has resisted attempts to portray him as a singing cab driver.

"Heaps of musos in Sydney drive cabs, so it's not so strange," he says. "It's just a job where your focus is getting through the shift. I don't see it as a hook or even particularly interesting."

"People try to label you. For me, the songs are what matter, not getting famous."

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