

MUSIC

Kelly's Blues

DESPITE BRILLIANT SONGS, AUSSIE SINGER/SONGWRITER PAUL KELLY IS A LONG WAY FROM FAMOUS

BY GEOFFREY HIMES

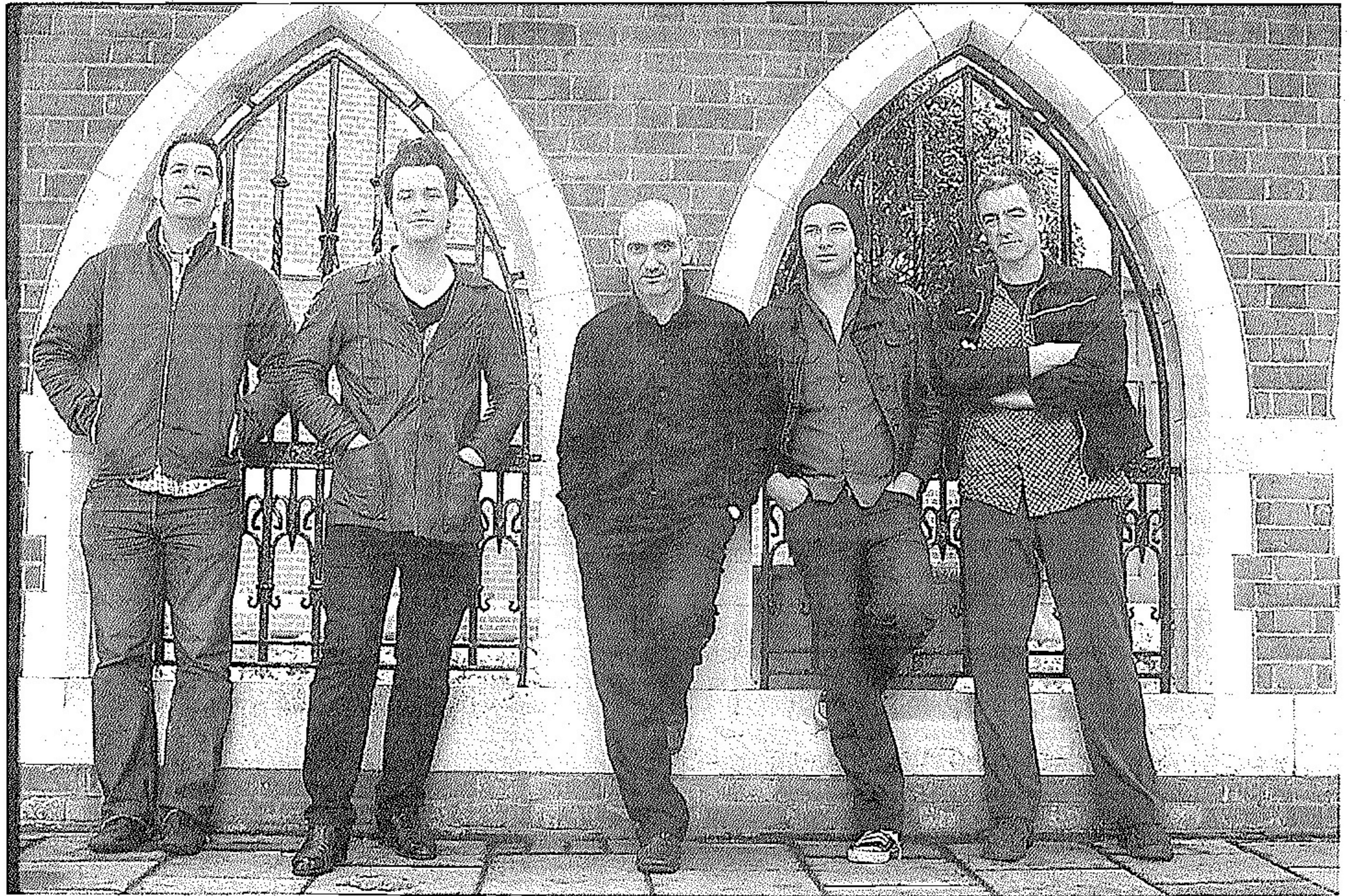
IT TAKES 24 HOURS TO FLY FROM BALTIMORE to Melbourne, and it's not a fun trip. That more than anything explains why a lot of Australian artists are not better known here, and why rock 'n' roll singer/songwriter Paul Kelly isn't as well known as his peers Elvis Costello, Richard Thompson, and Steve Earle. And yes, Kelly is that good.

When he came to Washington's 9:30 Club this past March, backed by his terrific Melbourne band—guitarist Dan Luscombe, drummer Pete Luscombe, and bassist Bill McDonald—he concentrated on songs from his 2004 *Ways and Means* (SpinArt). This two-CD set featured 21 songs about all aspects of love, from first meeting to last regret, songs that neither celebrate love nor mock it; instead, they explore why love is so difficult to sustain and so impossible to resist. "Young Lovers," for example, begins with a lazy country-rock verse, set to one of Kelly's seductive melodies, fondly describing entwined couples in a park at evening.

But this romantic mood sours in the second verse as the narrator admits that these young lovers, who think their affairs will last forever, "drive me right out of my mind." Kelly points out that everyone was a young lover once; even the old man who "now has to sit down to take a piss" once "pressed a girl against a fence and drank her kiss." But the more the narrator complains, the more the mood shifts again; the narrator is speaking as much from jealousy as from wisdom. Meanwhile, the sweet melody never falters.

Most singer/songwriters are lucky to put one strong emotion across in a song, but here Kelly has delivered three: romance, irony, and envy. It's a typical Kelly strategy; he'll get his listeners leaning one way, then pull the rug out from under them. When he performed "How to Make Gravy," perhaps his most popular song at home, at the 9:30 Club he did it again.

Joe, the song's narrator, calls his brother



MAN IN BLACK: PAUL KELLY (CENTER) FAVORS FUNK AND R&B AS MUCH AS COUNTRY OR ROCK SETTINGS FOR HIS SONGS.

from prison about the upcoming Christmas holiday. Kelly's deceptively purring tenor casts Joe as jocular on the verses, joking about the family recipe for gravy, but the mood shifts sharply on the chorus. The guitars grow agitated, as does the vocal. Joe loses his cool and accuses his brother of trying to seduce his wife, then apologizes for his paranoia, and finally breaks down, confessing his despair at spending the holiday in a cell. It's not your usual Christmas song.

"I was invited to contribute a song to a charity Christmas album in 1996," Kelly recalls. "So I asked myself, 'How do you write something new about Christmas?' I decided the best way is to have someone who's not there. ... Once you have the scene in your head and the character's voice, the song usually writes itself. The recipe comes from my first father-in-law, but all that stuff about being in prison is made up."

It's an entire movie in four minutes, and it's typical of a career that has sustained a high level of quality for 20 years. Kelly, now 49, grew up in Adelaide on the South Coast along the Indian Ocean, moved to Melbourne, made two so-so new-wave albums as Paul Kelly and the Dots, and finally emerged as a major talent on his third album, 1985's *Post*. His fourth album, *Gossip*, was the first released in the United States, but three discs on A&M failed to break him here, despite glowing reviews and impressive tours.

With international success dreams dashed, Kelly settled into a comfortable career at home, where like a Steve Earle or Richard Thompson, he played large nightclubs and small theaters, won effusive press, and sold respectable numbers of records. But just as Bonnie Raitt suddenly transformed a career's worth of goodwill into stardom with 1989's *Nick of Time* and her subsequent

Grammy sweep, so did Kelly break through with 1997's *Songs From the South: Paul Kelly's Greatest Hits*. The 20-song anthology shoved Hanson and the Spice Girls aside and rose to the top of the Australian charts.

"What happened is that everyone who had heard of me but had never bought one of my records said, 'Well, I'll get this one,'" he surmises. "It sold 250,000 copies, which is triple platinum in Australia and more than double any of my previous albums. But it didn't carry over."

Some of Kelly's albums have been issued on American indie labels—Dr. Dream, Vanguard, and SpinArt. But many of Kelly's Australian records—his first three, his greatest-hits collection, his three soundtrack projects, his bluegrass and funk projects, and a 1992 live album—are still unreleased here.

As are the superb albums he has produced and co-written for such Down Under acts as

MUSIC AT ARTSCAPE

YOU KNOW THE SCORE. Four stages—the *Sun/LIVE Stage* located at the Maryland Institute College of Art's Station Building, the *Value City Department Stores Stage* on Mount Royal Avenue between MICA's main and Fox buildings, the *University of Baltimore Stage* at Mount Royal and Maryland avenues, and the *DJ Culture Stage* at Mount Royal and Charles Street—three days. Free. Put your dancing shoes and drinking hats on, kids.

Here are the choice 'Scape cuts.

FRIDAY: The rocking Celtic rush of local *Donegal X-Press* (7 P.M.) gets the whisky and blood flowing at the *UB Stage*. Local neo-soul/cosmic jazz troupe *Fertile Ground* (5:30 P.M.) raises spirits to the proverbial roof of the *Value City Stage*, followed by the spunky folk of singer/songwriter up and comer *Mindy Smith* (6:45 P.M.) and the acid-jazz-funk ruckus of *New Orleans' Galactic* (8:30 P.M.). *Q-Burns Abstract Message* (8 P.M.) drops in some house breaks at the *DJ Culture Stage*, with *Kartzma* (9 P.M.) closing out. And then get your ass ready for the hot buttered soul of the hyperbolicsyllabic-

sesquedalymistic man himself at the *Sun Stage* as *Isaac Hayes* (7 P.M.) gives you some of his good love, followed by the *Commodores* (8:30 P.M.).

SATURDAY: Locals the *Low Life* (2:15 P.M.), *June Star* (3:45 P.M.), and *Can't Hang* (5:15 P.M.) lead off the *UB Stage*, with hometown fave the *Kelly Bell Band* (8:30 P.M.) bringing the party rock. Everybody's favorite Irish-folk pub-rock band fronted by an elected official, *O'Malley's March* (6:30 P.M.), opens up for the *Violent Femmes* (8:30 P.M.) over at the *Value City Stage*. *DJ Lil Mic* and *Olu Butterfly* (noon) do the DJ 'n' spoken word thang at the *DJ Stage*, with "Underground Experience" hon-

chos *Pope* and *Oji* (6 P.M.) bringing down the house and *Feelgood* (8 P.M.) winding it out. Rocker *Paul Kelly* (noon) fires up the *Sun Stage*, but after that hunker down for some serious fun: new R&B ladies' man on the block *Van Hunt* (4:30 P.M.) does anything to get your attention, daisy survivors *De La Soul* (6:30 P.M.) serves up oodles and oodles of O's, you know, and former Fugee *Wyclef Jean* (8:30 P.M.) gets the party really started.

SUNDAY: Locals lead the way at the *UB Stage*, with pop-rock outfit *Karmella's Game* (1 P.M.), gangly postpunk throber *Two If by Sea* (2:15 P.M.), and folky fun of the *Jar Flies* (3:30 P.M.). *Arrested*