

Society Concert – Dunkirk Hotel 13/07/26

2nd Floor 205 Harris St, Pyrmont

The July **Songwriters Society of Australia** (SSA) monthly concert was at The Dunkirk Hotel (205 Harris St, Pyrmont. On the corner of Harris Street and Pyrmont Bridge Rd) on the 2nd floor. It is held every 2nd Monday of the month – Russell has his SongsOnStage concerts every other Monday night.

On the SSA night on the 13th of July there were seven players booked with all mostly original songs in their set. It was definitely a quieter concert but with the Winter winds a blowing few want to venture far from the fire.

For attending songwriters, the Society Concert is a great time to hear to how others approach songwriting, become inspired, all the while socialising and networking to find out what's happening in the world of songwriting. A number of songwriters come along just for that and don't actually play. Could you be one of them?



There were many talented songwriters playing on the night and Russell thanked the following supporters of songwriting that he knew: "And thanks to Marc Maeji (sorry you couldn't stay to play), Linda Chesher, Sue, Acacia, and everyone else for coming along to listen! If you ever want to book at the monthly SSA Nights then contact Russell at songsonstage@gmail.com, which is good for any of the weekly open mics or any of the SongsOnStage gigs as well.

There were lots of families and kids tonight which added a different dimension to the proceedings!

As well, I video every Songwriter, with permission, on the Society Concert nights and the full video of their performance is available to Society members – there is a 20 second video attached to each review, but you have to become a member to gain the full video. Go to the new SSA (Songwriting Society of Australia) site at <https://songwritersociety.com.au/> to read the reviews and join the membership.

Russell was superb with his P.A, sound engineering and MCing of the night. So, when the P.A was sparkling then the first act of the night, Russell himself, came up to the stage.

Russell Neal: Russell started off, appropriately with "*Family Secrets*", as there were a number of families present. All about those ol' skeletons hanging about outside the closets again. Every family has them, but these days they "don't matter very much, but back then they were deep dark, deep dark, family secrets." Maybe its because these days everything is captured on social media, so few secrets are hidden? A folk driven exposé as it's the intimate little details that brings the audience in closer – everyone likes a good gossip, or so I've heard. No more housewives chatting over back fences, now it's the guitar, microphone and confessional songwriting that captures the ear well. I will always feel a twinge of sadness whenever I hear Russell sing "*Bright Moon*" as it's such a catchy, upbeat and memorable that my ex-partner, Jocelin, and I used to sing whenever there was a full moon. Now that's just a memory I have attached to the song. Russell said it was a hypothetical song about a girl he met while travelling in the Outback (Visiting Mr Hardway maybe?). It has a 1920's jazz stomp which is very danceable in a flapper fashion. This song will definitely



stay in your subconscious until you once again see a full moon glistening in the night sky, but I'll be the one with the small tear in my eye. Then the song ends with a repeated chorus that morphs into the "da ta da ta da" scat before finalising on "Bright moon". Russell then thought it was time to delve into his rich songwriting history of comedy songs. Starting off with his cowrite, "*Christmas Cheer*" with its "Christmas in July" intentions. A tale of too much Christmas "inkahol" and the consequences of that action at his girlfriend's family home. "What's the matter, baby, don't shake my Christmas tree," to "Floating in a vat of Christmas cheer." I like the ending of "Drowning in a vat of Christmas cheer" as his girlfriend storms off in anger. A very funny, award-winning song. As there were fewer performers tonight all were playing four songs. So, Russell's last song was one of his infamous ones, this time "*The Lady Loves Women*". This is another award-winning song when you reconnect with someone from your past, but that person has disconnected from that lifestyle. As usual the chorus had the audience singing lustily along with lots of laughter from the uninitiated. A super way to start off the July Society Concert, Russell. [Russell Neal on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section



Jen Tessmer: Those of you who remember the Old Fitzroy Society Concert days will remember Jen, Johnny G's daughter, always playing a superb array of original songs. Since those days she's gotten married, moved North and produced a few kids. Jen was visiting grandad Johnny G and I suggested they ought to come along for our July Concert. Jen brought her young ones as well. Originally the first song was going to be a cover with Jen and her daughter Matilda singing, but both siblings got up to join Mum. You can tell both of them have inherited their mother's musical genes! Johnny G looked on as a proud granddad. Then Jen started playing some of her own material as a solo act with the first one being, "*Birds*", with a metronome like drumbeat. Very Carly Simonin style and in a light folk delivery. There was an enthusiastic applause from the audience. Jen's second song, "*The Lucky Ones*" comes from the time she taught (Yes, she's a fellow schoolteacher) at St. Alban's. Johnny G got up on the piano and the pace was slowed down. The kids she experienced and the lives they led, like one had a Mum who was a prostitute at thirteen, another was an abused seventeen-year-old while a Russian mob mum had given her kids away to save them.



All of these sad, distressing stories are used to tell the listener they are the lucky ones. I'm not sure if Jen's used to the automatic drum pattern her dad programmed in, but you can hear the passion in her voice. A good hook based on the juxtaposition of the grim tales in the verses up again the chorus. Such an impassioned rhythm, a good song that tell us "We are the lucky ones." Jen's last song of the set was one I remember from the Old Fitzroy days called "*Burning Bridges*". With a Tori Amos feel in a Soul Blues of hurt and incredible dynamics in a minor passionate drive. The super hook of "Burn your bridges" leaps out at you from the intense passion of the verse – "The damage is done". Jen's vocals add such depth to the delivery and impact. The only song I can think to compare it to is Paul McCartney's "*Live And Let Die*". The energy, the verve and the raw emotion are in this amazing song. Great to see three generations of your family supporting and to her your brilliant talents again, Jen. [Jen Tessmer on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section



Johnny G: Jen returned the favour for her father by doing backing vocals on his first song "*If I Ain't Got You*". Definitely done in Johnny's distinctive white soul delivery. The bridge has a talking style, while the harmonies were especially nice and soared well. Then we hit a jazz edge with "*Penny For Your Thoughts*". The white soul essence reminded me of Val Doonican's material, even Frank Sinatra would have had a smile on his dial with this one. Jen's vocals work well over Johnny's, especially in the "ah, ah, ah" combination. Johnny then did a cover for his grand kids and the other children in the audience. It was time for Johnny G to get upbeat, and he did with relish and the song "*Surfer Joe*". Real rock'n'roll heaviness and a stomping rhythm a la Jerry Lee Lewis. With "*Boppin' The Blues*" vocals we are now officially cooking with bacon grease. There are shades of The Flaming Barstools as well. Johnny got up and run around the audience during the "Chu chu chu chu" section. He's definitely a real showman and entertainer. [Johnny G on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section.



Gav Fitzgerald: I'd like to thank Ken D'Aran for the reviews and John Cheshier for the photography of my performance. Gav pulled out of his musical history and ol' Velvet Road special, "*Saturday Morning*", which was the title of their only album release. Written as it's Gav's favourite time of the weekend, where Friday night is full of tiredness Saturday morning is full of promise. Ken understood this in his writing: "Breathe.... It's Saturday morning and life is sweet – I see the Sun; I feel the love. Not a stormy Monday song, this is a nice, fluid moving pop song. This is also a sigh of relief song." Next Gav song on the list is another classic, "*Kate's Friend*" from his Velvet Road days. Ken opened his mind to the song's possibilities: "This is Linda's favourite song done in a reggae style, with a nice lick. Not quite forbidden love, but it could be awkward – bugger!" Gav's third song was written after Velvet Road's last hurrah and was probably last played at the Old Fitzroy Hotel in 2015. Called "*Love Hangover*" it's about past relationships still can haunt you even years after they have ended. It came from a vivid dream about a girl he'd been in a long-term relationship back in the early 90's. Ken mustered up his empathy to pen: "Is this the next morning after a big night out? No, it's about vivid dreams of the past. It's a love hangover – a haunted dream combined with active thoughts and memories upon waking. Too much! The past and being haunted by it." The last song of Gav's set was "*Dream Song*" which had been written in 1999 and was part of the Velvet Road song stable. Ken wrote: "Another haunted dream trying to get me! This shadow is always there trying to undermine 'me'. What is this past that's unresolved? Fuck these thoughts, their tormenting ideas and dreams." Sorry, Ken, I think you missed the song's central idea! By a long shot! "*Dream Song*" is about believing in the future even though you are battling the mundane life. "It's the thing that gets you going, it's the thing that gets you high, it's the thing that gets you moving, when you'd rather give up and die." It's actually a very positive song about believing in yourself. Thanks Ken and John for your help. Gav Fitzgerald on Stage – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section. Gav's website is at [Gavsta60.com](#)



John Cheshier: John started with a new song he'd written with Al Crew called "*Particles*". The song is that we are an aggregation of molecules and atoms, or a "being of particles", a bit like a "murder of crows"? I think John has a better handle on his Fender Reflecting Pool guitar pedal this month. It gives the song an "*Albatross*" feel at the beginning. With the theme of the song being about our makeup it then brings in the question about which accumulation of particles you'd like to be with. Nicely picked with Biblical references to needles and camels being just "particles in time." There is a slight Country tone to this song. John's inner granddad couldn't help himself and had to play a couple of covers for the kids in the audience. However, he came back into the songwriter's fold with his classic, "*Old Henry*", with its story of a man who can't settle down. Oh, yes, he fell in love and settled for a bit, but the wanderlust kept calling him and one day he left – "The West wind pulls on the Redwoods, the full moon pulls on the Sea, the highway pulls on old Henry, the freedom to never be free." I like how John combines the imagery of Nature with old Henry's predicament. It in his actual human nature, the same force that drove our ancestors from Africa, to Europe, to Asia, to Australia, to the Americas and hopefully sometime in the future into the stars. Some control it and stay home all the time, sinking into the soft arms of comfort each night. Some venue out occasionally like crabs on the beach, to explore adventures but love returning to the safety of their home eventually. While others are driven constantly to ask, "What's over the next hill?" and are on a lifelong adventure like "*Old Henry*". Some great songs with a philosophical bent tonight, John. John Cheshier on Stage – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section.



Jack Nolan: Jack is a newbie to the Society Concert stage, I think? However, he showed he has the right stuff of a great songwriter and a super performing songwriter at that. Jack started off with *"Save It Up For A Sunnier Day"* which featured his superb vocal over tastefully picked guitar. The bluesy lyrics and gravelly voice turn lines like "Take me down I'm not dead yet"



into classic wonders. Jack has a brilliant lyrical trick of juxtaposing clichés against modern ideas to great effect. The song itself has a *"Summertime"* (Gershwin & Heyward) feel that's airy, melodic and memorable. Jack's second song of the set was *"Tell It To The Birds"* which was based on the fact that its common now for people to have different opinions. A great list song with the same general theme – "Tell it to the moon," etc. There is an excellent use of repetition that reminds me of its use in Blues. The sound aura makes me think of a cross between The Byrds and Cat Stevens.

There is a great use of dynamics in the song's structure and delivery while that super hook bookends the song. Its capo time with Jack's third song, *"The Less You Want To Know."* Once again it features masterful picking skills, although Jack softened his vocals to suit the song. I like the modulation into the middle eight which is really persuasive. "We are calling out for heroes." Jack casually mentioned that years ago he played in The Kelly Gang (WTF! I looked him up and he was a founding member along with Rick Grossman, bassist for The Divinyls and Hoodoo Gurus. "Nolan and Grossman were joined live and in the studio by fellow Hoodoo Gurus guitarist, Brad Shepherd; Midnight Oil drummer Rob Hirst and guitarist Martin Rotsey; and Ian Miller (now sadly deceased), a versatile guitarist in his own right, and a one-time accomplice of Vanda and Young, as well as a former Australian Producer of the Year." (From The Kelly Gang website <https://thekellygangofficial.com/>) The band released one album, *"Looking for the Sun"*, but the other band commitments meant they didn't go further. That's the thing about the Society Concert, you'll never know who will turn up! I didn't know all this when I reviewed Jack's next song, *"That's The Sea"*, but it was a song The Kelly Gang performed. A minor key rocker which showed off Jack's powerful vocals. I like the chordal riff, with the lyrics having both Soul and Dylan influences. Jack demonstrates his mastery of song form with a great use of dynamics. I'm hoping Jack will come back and play at our Society Concert again one day. I'll also have to hunt up the *"Looking for the Sun"* CD! [Jack Nolan on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section.



Kenneth D'Aran: When Ken gets on stage you always have to smile as he has that Dean Martin atmosphere, laid back and jazzy. However, Ken prefers a good whiskey, and I agree with him on that! Ken started out with a newie, a work in progress called *"Critical Thinking"*. The song starts with some gentle picking and quite a trebly tone. Ken's introspective lyrics are a thinking man's favourite – "If the joke's on me." Then the song's dynamics are served by a mix of picking and strumming. Only Ken could write a catchy, memorable song about being bored! *"I'm Bored"* is such a brilliant song with an Arabic feel to its melody. It conjures up an image of Lawrence of Arabia sitting outside his tent waiting for the next battle. The verse builds, then softens in the jazzy prechorus. Then it roars back forth for the dynamic kick of "I'm bored" in an emotional roller coaster of music. Each time the chorus comes out it kicks arse like a Spanish matador in a bullring facing the bullshit of raging boredom. Then it drops back to a jazz stutter in the middle eight of, "Just give me some space" before soaring into the aural



stratosphere with the crowd singing along, "I'm bored." There's a songwriting lesson in there for all of us! Ken followed this with his classic masterpiece of political comment on power, *"Tangled Tango"*. This song was written in 2017 and as Ken said, "It's 2026 and unfortunately it's still relevant. This is a great song as it discussed the wages of power and their abuse all done to a tango format. There are stunning dynamics and quirky, spot-on, lyrics – "Mine is bigger than yours, I have the biggest gun of them all." Think of all the crazy dictators, Hitler, Stalin, Trump, etc and this applies to all of them. Ken's last song, *"Listen"* is actually about the process of songwriting itself! "Write it down, the words are profound." This song also had a trebly tone with lyrics about songwriting: "Running around, spinning around with my feet just off the ground," "While the words slip on by," "So much to say..." A very catchy song about a very catchy subject if done right and Ken does that job well. A great performance to finish the official Society Concert night. However, there was some spare time left over and those present were offered another song to fill out the time. As Ken was on stage he continued for one more song, this time *"A Little Water, A Little Sun"*. I like the chord changes in this song with its jazz tinges and its CoVid time themes. Once again Ken demonstrated his fingerpicking dexterity and that jazz chordal stutter he favours. There's a real minor key fell that captures the emotion well. His outro works really well. A good addition to your main set, Ken. [Kenneth D'Aran on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section.



Gav Fitzgerald Part 2: Gav got an extra song as well. *"The River"* was written at a Liz Scott Gecko Music Workshop back in the early 2020's. Gav had been in a writing group with two absolutely gorgeous women who played in a funk band. The songs they wrote in that funk group are still being played and Gav gets his APRA share all the time. The other person in the group was Russell Perrot, who stayed when the girls went for lunch. Gav was inspired by a riff and started writing *"The River"* with Russell's encouragement. It was played for many years by Velvet Road, a group that Gav was involved with. Since then, it became one of Gav's classic solo numbers and he nailed it again tonight. [Gav Fitzgerald Part 2 on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section.



John Chesher Part 2: John played his third original song, *"Mountain Lady"*, as the last song of the night. It is very atmospheric, and the song makes you feel the fresh air, the green grasses, the snow-capped mountains, the lively bubbling streams all in the eyes of this woman – "Seems I spent my whole life falling in love with you." It makes you wonder if the song is an allegory for Nature especially with lines like "When your seasons change, I fall in love with you again." However, John said it was written for a beautiful lady he once knew who passed away. One way, or another, it is a very beautiful song. [John Chesher Part 2 on Stage](#) – The full video is available for members in the Member's Section

