

Background notes - *A Few Notes Short of Accord*

This was one of the first "Art in Working Life" projects in Queensland – a then new category of artistic work funded by the Australia Council (Music Board) in the 1980's to encourage artists working in areas associated with Trade Unions and "working life" in general, which encompassed a range of political and social expression. What you might call "social practice" art. (It was, of course, controversial and ultimately politicised out of existence for a time until becoming subsumed in popular culture).

When I began this project, which took about a year (between 1985-86), I had been working in political theatre for several years, writing songs for various social and political causes, "issue-based" plays, cabaret skits, protests and other performances. An extension of this work was performing original political songs at demonstrations, and when the opportunity arose to do some concerted work as a "resident" songwriter with several Queensland Unions (QRU, QNU, QTU, ATEA, among them).

I took it up with a combination of initial excitement and utter dread. How could I move us all on from the tired kind of "folksy" Australiana that had mired political song writing for a century or more in occasionally artful, but mostly parochial, narrow-focused, bush balladry and heroic myth-making, laden with the imagery of a largely mono cultural, protectionist, isolationist Australia? This subtle cultural religiosity was even undercurrent in the popular bands of the time (the Oils, the Hunters...). It was a conflicted area, and I was suitably conflicted also: wanting to do something meaningful and artfully relevant in a contemporary and popular music sense, while realising that overburdening songs with the content of polemic and stereotyped cultural characterisation would not achieve that shift I had wanted. The last thing I wanted to write was anthems with power chords. Yet, with the SEQEB dispute fresh in our memories, there were plenty of reasons to defend the principles of trade unionism – even if the narrative was being corrupted by proponents from both the so-called right and left sides of politics.

Instead of looking backwards at mythologies of struggle, I chose to look forwards at the threats of encroaching technological advancement, economic rationalism, privatisation, robotics, institutionalised values and the deterioration of conditions - the *relationships* that could be predicted

would eventually signal the demise of unionism's dwindling membership, and most worthy narrative: defending *humanitas*. That meant, I knew, that I would have to both highlight some basic, general principles of "working life", as simply as possible, and not pull any punches in condemning how trade unionism and Labor party-political interests had together corrupted their own story. To look at the human cost squarely, meant also looking at the cost of pragmatic and consequentialist unionism and politics.

These songs were performed and recorded live (on 4-track, with the most minimal production facility) at the 109 Edward Street Theatre in Brisbane on three nights in September 1986. Audiences were small, mostly friends. All performers donated their services; rehearsals were very few, and financial or other material support from the participating unions was sadly completely absent. (It was "all about them" after all, wasn't it? Wasn't art just supposed to be "useful"? Can we use any of this stuff for an ad campaign?). When, as it eventuated, some songs seemed a little "too critical", the whole project was completely ignored, and I subsequently forked for the distribution of about 50 home-made cassettes among friends. Even so "Privatise" (which I still think is the poorest in this selection) went on to win the inaugural *Labour Day Song Award (1987)* in Melbourne – a reward for which I was later shunted around the workplaces of Tasmania for several weeks on a "solo tour" (another euphemism for frugality) that was to completely extract from me, like salt, any desire whatsoever to write "songs for unions" or even remotely political songs ever again.

The song lyrics speak for themselves. The performances were not perfect but were spirited and full of youthful energy and commitment. The poor recording production values attest to an era when we scrambled to put together projects on a shoe-string budget, with more heart, humour, sheer determination and defiance than money and connections. The overriding metaphor in most of these songs is about human relationships and how any "accord" we reach can be either meaningful and robust, or artificial and bound to corrupt... like power itself. Like any musical chord, harmony is only found in the meaningful relationship between the notes.

(Nat Trimarchi, 12 July 2018)
