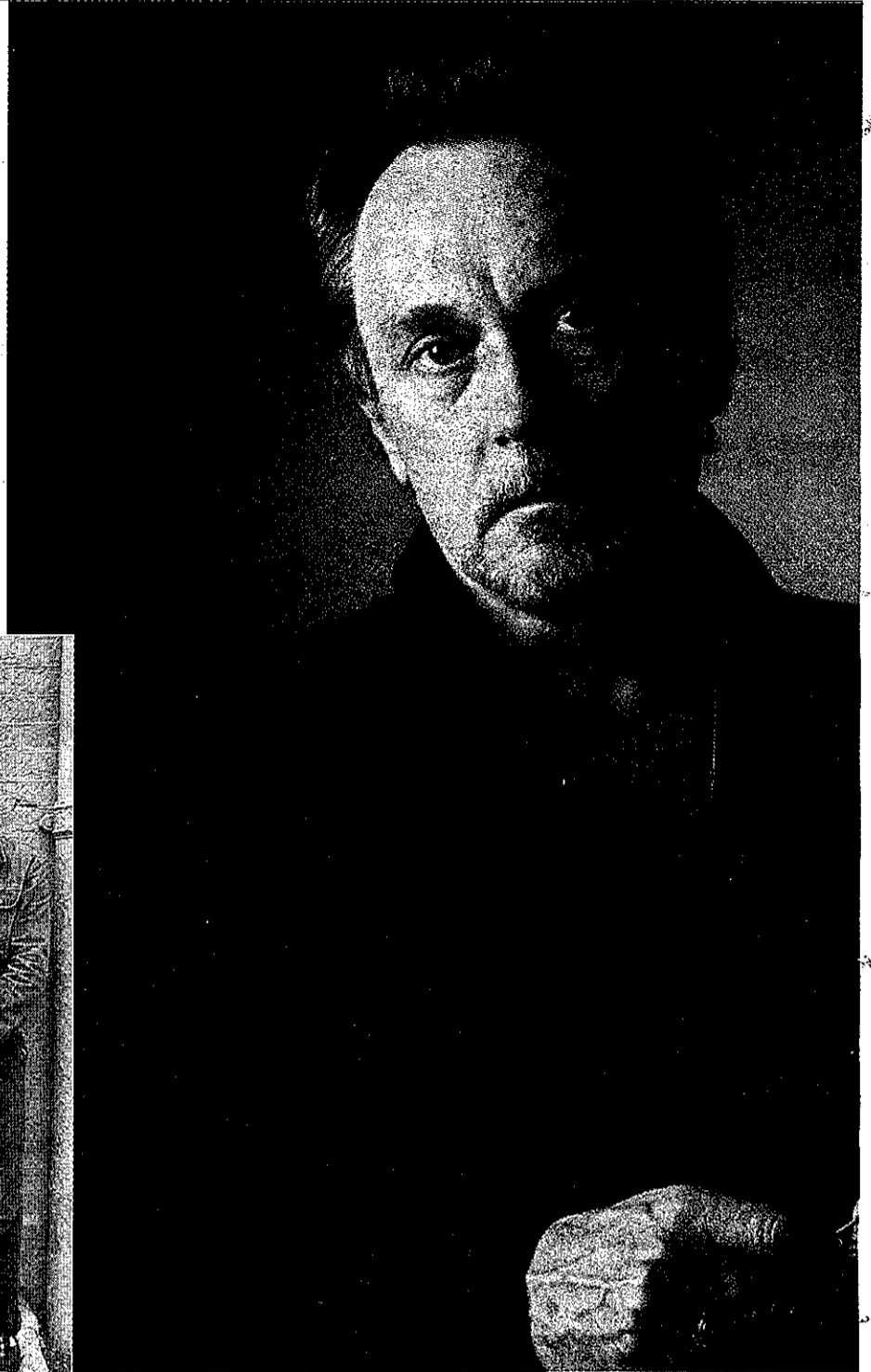


MUSIC

I'm not history

Ed Kuepper's music resonates far beyond his punk beginnings, despite snubs in rock retrospectives, writes JOHN ENCARNACAO.



Prolific ... the albums "tumbled out" of Ed Kuepper, pictured left rear with fellow Laughing Clowns Louise Elliott, Jeff Wegener and Peter Walsh.

He is one of the most influential musicians this country has produced, and yet is hardly a household name. Ed Kuepper's '70s band the Saints are acknowledged the world over as one of the groups that kick-started punk; his Laughing Clowns of 1979-85 produced some of the most original recordings in the rock canon; and his 20 years-and-counting solo career has ranged from sublime acoustic collections (*Today Wonder*, 1990) to epic rock ragas (the Aints' *Ascension*, 1992) and synthesiser instrumentals (*The Blue House*, 1998).

Triple J's music director, Richard Kingsmill, says Kuepper is "hard to measure against other artists. He is unique and we're very lucky to have had him." Andrew Khedoori, from the Preservation label and music director at 2SER-FM, sees Kuepper as "quite the minimalist in all his ventures — from his punk beginnings to the flow of solo work that appeared in the '90s and beyond — and that's such a trademark. And his lyrics match in their personal and emotive drive."

In the past 18 months, Kuepper's career has been given the boxed-set treatment: the original Saints' output plus live material over four CDs, *All Times Through Paradise*, was released in 2004. All the Laughing Clowns recordings are collected on three CDs, *Cruel, But Fair*, released last October. And hot off the presses, *This Is The Magic Mile*, a triple set that represents Kuepper's pick of the 20-plus albums released during his prolific 1990s.

But how does one measure success? Thirty years into his career, Kuepper commands substantial followings in Europe as well as Australia, and has released records all over the world. The Saints are the stuff of legend. Sales of his albums post-Saints are estimated at about 150,000. He makes music on his own terms. Does he feel successful?

"Yeah," he says in a tone that sounds not completely convinced. "I could qualify that, but basically, I've done what I've wanted to do for my entire musical life. I haven't had to work a day job through most of that time — that is successful, yeah. Whether that's successful enough is another matter, but I'm not complaining about that. But just because of that, I don't think I should just cop it on the chin if something annoys me."

What gets Kuepper's goat is the way his post-Saints career is sometimes forgotten, as it was in recent TV histories of Australian rock.

The Saints claimed their place in rock history in late 1976 with the independent release of the 7-inch record (*I'm Stranded*, a raw slab of uncompromising adolescent energy that made them hot property in Britain, pipping most English punk bands at the post. (Kuepper has never subscribed to the idea that the Saints were a punk band, but that's another story). This was quite an achievement for an unknown Brisbane band.

The Saints went to England at the behest of EMI, which quickly lost interest in them when it became apparent that they weren't prepared to be marketed as punks — that is, wear safety pins or torn clothes. Their last album, *Prehistoric Sounds*, paved the way for Kuepper's



direction with the Laughing Clowns: influenced by jazz but decidedly rock. They were often adventurous if not discordant harmonically, with saxophone and sometimes trumpet as likely to shriek as play melodic lines.

And this is where the trouble starts. The word "unique" is routinely abused in the promotion of rock music, but the Laughing Clowns sound like no other band, period. It is not hard to see that they could be left out of historical surveys that look for trends and movements.

"With that recent spate of [Australian] rock history documentaries," says Kuepper, "suddenly the Clowns had been written out of it. I was pissed off about that and made no secret about that whatsoever. And it wasn't just the Clowns that were

Ticket Day (1992) and *Serene Machine* (1993) won him two successive ARIAs for best independent album. Kingsmill calls *Honey Steel's Gold* "a masterpiece" and adds to this inspired bunch *Character Assassination* (1994).

"What a run of albums!" Kingsmill says. "It was so exciting to hear these records come tumbling out of him. That's enough of a body of work to put anyone in the great category, but Ed's done that and five times more."

While albums of new songs kept appearing over the rest of the '90s, there were also live albums where material was drastically reinterpreted, such as *With A Knapsack On My Back* (1997), and instrumental fare such as *The Blue House* (1998) and *Starstruck* (1996). Does

productive for Kuepper, he has written little since moving back to his home town of Brisbane in 1999 — his last album of new material, *Smile ... Pacific* was released in 2000. But Kuepper says he would be disappointed if he didn't release something new this year and is writing and setting up a studio. Over the last year he has been performing with Laughing Clowns drummer Jeffrey Wegener after a gap in musical communication of nearly 20 years, and this renewed acquaintance should bear fruit in the studio soon.

"We got back together almost by accident," Kuepper says. "It was on the eve of the tour of Europe we did the year before last. I had somebody quit at the last minute, and bumped into Jeffrey, 'cause he lives in Brisbane. I mentioned it to him and he said 'I can do all that', so I said all right, you're on. The fact that he couldn't do all that was beside the point. It led to some hair-raising performances at times."

"But generally it's been great. He's got a particular aesthetic that he brings to what he does that is quite different to a lot of musicians — not better necessarily, but he brings something to the table that is uniquely him."

When prompted, he hastens to add that "it's not some sort of old comrade reunion thing at all. It's much more tense than that."

The European tour that Kuepper refers to was of festivals and galleries, performing instrumental accompaniments to the animated films of New Zealander Len Lye. If a return season in Europe goes ahead later this year, this work may well result in another record and make 2006 not just a year when Kuepper's history was repackaged, but one where his muse gets back into gear.

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Another case in point is the success of his 1991 record *Honey Steel's Gold*. Like much of his best work, the epic forms and transparent arrangements shimmer like the heat haze of the Australian landscape. The album heralded the arrival of the independent sphere as a force to be reckoned with, being the first indie album to debut in the Top 50, where it stayed for 12 weeks.

Though *Honey* is Kuepper's biggest seller to date, it was but one of a clutch of great records he released in the early '90s. He recognises 1990's *Today Wonder* as a rebirth of sorts, the songs dressed just in acoustic guitar, drums and echo. *Black*

Kuepper himself see his career in phases?

"I only see distinct phases because if it's a band that's operating as a particular entity, that forces a cut-off point. You can easily see overlap between what the Saints were doing, especially towards the end, and what I went on to do with the Clowns, and what the Clowns were doing and what I went on to do with the solo stuff."

"I'm aware that at various times in my career people have said I'm some kind of artistic or musical butterfly that jumps from one thing to another, and I don't think that's actually true. I think there's a greater cohesion and that's one thing that these compilations have emphasised."

While the '90s were incredibly