

Stay TRUE BLUE

In an age where heritage is too often sold to the highest bidder, musician John Williamson refuses to compromise his identity. He spoke to David Naylor about finding Australia's spiritual heart during a lifetime travelling its roads



PEACE OF THE BUSH: John finds sanctuary among the trees and birdsong of Springbrook where he rests when he's not in Sydney on music business.

The steely look in John Williamson's eyes tells me nothing will shift his resolve to hang on to 'True Blue', his most popular song.

"I've been offered all sorts of money to give it to some big company, but I refuse to flog it," he says. "It's me. It's mine."

John's resistance is like something from one his songs – a song like, well, 'True Blue':

Is your heart still there?

If they sell us out like sponge cake

Do you really care?

Hey True Blue.

"'I Still Call Australia Home' [the original Peter Allen hit] has turned into the Qantas song," says John, and he names other great songs that have sacrificed their original identity to become corporate anthems.

'True Blue' is his ultimate musical definition of being Australian and, like all his songs, it comes direct from the heart. Selling it to a corporation would be akin to selling his soul.

But even as I am talking to him, sympathising with his stand, I can't help thinking how perfect 'True Blue' would be for NRMA. It's a thought that illustrates how irresistible the song is for corporate Australia.

"Maybe it will be different when I'm not around," says John. "But while I'm here, it stays with me."

John's songs spring from who he is, and Australia seeps naturally into every lyric and melody. His latest album, *Hillbilly Road*, upholds this tradition.

We are talking in his PR team's Rozelle office on the eve of his national tour to launch the album. He and partner Meg Doyle have driven from the city apartment where they stay when on business here. Home is John's rural property inland from the Gold Coast,

at Springbrook, the inspiration for much of *Hillbilly Road*.

John talks easily about the beauty of this place, describing his enjoyment at building a stone wall, hearing the music of the birds and identifying the trees and native plants on the property...

"Flame trees, brushbox, firewheel trees, hoop pines, silky oak, red cedar, rosewood, staghorns..."

"There are little staghorns on the stone wall I've been building, from the spores coming up from the lowers."

One of his new songs, 'Drink A Little Love', mirrors our conversation...
*All I really want is to find a little peace
Watch a little tree come from the ground
Add a little rock to a long stone wall
And listen to the music all around.*

Growing up in Quambatook, on the edge of Victoria's mallee country, he learned the names of birds and trees from his mother, and they have become familiar themes in his songs. His first hit, in 1970, was 'Old Man Emu'. Many years later, he scored his next hit with 'Cootamundra Wattle'. 'Galleries of Pink Galahs' is perhaps his most beautiful song – the most poetic, says John – and the melody of his controversial 'Rip Rip Woodchip', about the destruction of old growth forests, is his interpretation of the pied butcher bird's call.

Of course, his songs are not confined to flora and fauna, covering the whole experience of being Australian, including Aussie humour. A generation of young adults have grown up with childhood memories of 'Big Bad Bushranger' and 'Boogie With M'Baby'. Armies of grey nomads who enjoyed 'Old Farts In Caravan Parks' now display 'old fart' stickers on their caravans.

'Old Farts' was inspired by John's own experience travelling through the



Kimberley, sometimes camping at the roadside, sometimes in caravan parks. He found the parks full of characters.

“Those people are proud to be called old farts,” says John. “And they love that song. We have a deal with the Caravan Association, selling CDs through the caravan parks. I put out a travellers’ album just for caravanners [*We Love This Country*]. It’s been a great thing for me.”

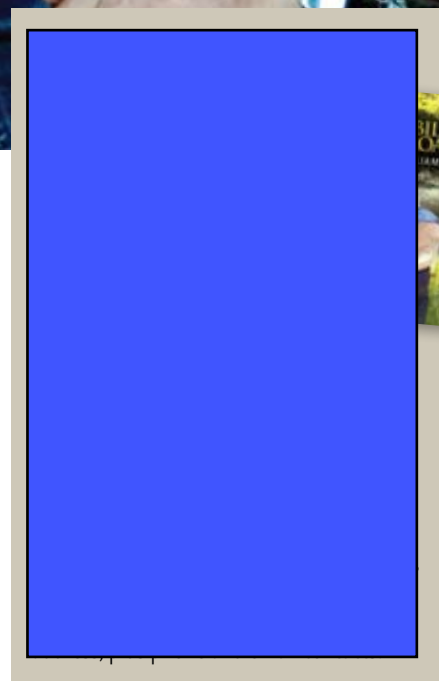
Hillbilly Road includes a song, ‘Australia Is Another Word For Free’, that pays tribute to Australia’s nomadic tradition, including truckies, bushies, indigenous Aussies, four-wheel drivers and caravan wanderers.

“Australians are real nomads, probably

more than anyone in the world,” says John. “We get around a lot.”

An NRMA Member since the mid 1960s, John has enjoyed owning a succession of utes and cars going back to his time working as a young farmer near Moree. He has a restored FJ Holden “in the shed” at Springbrook. It was exhibited in the Australian National Museum for about five years.

“It’s got my original Fair Dinkum flag that I designed, on the side. There are signatures from a whole lot of people on the dashboard, including Slim Dusty’s and Buddy Williams’. There was a photo on the back of *Boomerang Café* [his 1988 album].”



His most recent driving adventure was in the Blacktown to Batemans Bay Bash, organised by Variety, a charity for special needs children. The bash took John and Meg on a route through Mildura, Mt Gambier and Cooma, in Meg's old Humber Snipe. It broke down regularly, giving John plenty of contact with the back-up crew or 'sweep', which included some NRMA patrol officers.

"It was embarrassing driving a Pommy car," he says. "Bad for my image. I'm looking for a ute for my next bash."

In Cooma, John put on an exclusive woolshed solo concert for his fellow bashers, a preview of the long national tour he has now started. He performs at 10 NSW venues throughout September and early October, accompanied by Aboriginal singer-guitarist Warren H. Williams, who also plays on all *Hillbilly Road* tracks.

Warren, from central Australia, first came to public notice when he started singing 'Raining On The Rock' with John about 10 years ago. He is now an important part of the show.

"He really is a great guitarist. He can play just about every kind of music on guitar. Between the two of us, plus the foot box and harmonica, you don't really need any more. Lyrics, atmosphere, the stories – that's what's important."

John's own story would be incomplete without two of its most significant symbols – Uluru and 'Waltzing Matilda'. The mysterious spirituality of both seems to permeate a lot of his thinking and music.

He sees Uluru as a giant red heart – "it's actually shaped like a heart and was a type of Mecca for the Aborigines" – and has written to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd asking for a program to send all Aussie children to visit it.

"If every Aussie kid walked around the Rock at about age nine, it would really put them on the right track, especially kids brought up in the poorer suburbs. It would give them a sense of pride that they may not have otherwise – a realisation of what this country really is."

John's fascination with 'Waltzing Matilda' became obvious when he started singing it at rugby matches between Australia and New Zealand, leading the crowd in a response to the All Blacks' *haka*.

He says there is something strongly Australian about everything in the song, from the story (rebellion against authority, the right to personal freedom) to the rhythm and tone, which, like John's own songs, reflect Australian speech patterns and rhythms.

"This is why it means so much to us. There is a wave of spirituality when it is sung, especially by Australians away from home."

With his own music, John wants to create the same feeling, by tapping into the natural warmth of our distinctively Australian speech. He says this happens in most cultures. An example is American country music, which reflects the rhythm and twang of speech in the southern states.

"We want to be proud of all things

If every Aussie kid walked around the Rock at age nine, it would really put them on the right track



NSW TOUR DATES

Sept 12: Hornsby RSL Club. **Sept 13:** Blacktown Workers Club. **Sept 14:** The Mean Fiddler, Rouse Hill. **Sept 19:** Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL Club. **Sept 20:** The Cube – Campbelltown Convention & Ent. Centre. **Sept 21:** Bathurst Panthers Leagues Club. **Sept 27:** Club Forster. **Sept 28:** Wests Leagues Club, Newcastle. **Oct 3:** Mingara Recreation Club, Tumby Umbi. **Oct 4:** Regent Theatre, Wollongong.

Australian and one of my aims is to create a music genre Australians can be as proud of as the Americans are of theirs.

"A lot of people still think I'm mainly successful in the bush, but I'm mainly successful in the cities. City people do love to hear about their country now.

"Slim Dusty always felt that he did not have the respect in the city he deserved, and I'm carrying on that fight to have the bush and bush music recognised seriously."

Hillbilly Road is John's 38th album. You can order a copy at his official website, johnwilliamson.com.au.



OLD CARS NEVER DIE: John with his FJ Holden before it became a museum piece (left), and struggling with a Humber Snipe in the Blacktown to Batemans Bay Bash.