

patrick emery has a few words with

Ed Kuepper

Ed Kuepper is speaking from his home town of Brisbane. In the background is the sound of construction work, and Kuepper apologises every few minutes for the noise that impedes his ability to hear my questions. Yet there's something appropriate about this sonic backdrop. Brisbane in the 1970s and 1980s – when Kuepper first came to musical prominence as the gun guitarist for the now legendary Saints – was the scene of confrontations between developers (backed by the government) and protesters eager to retain the city's architectural heritage. Kuepper's guitar work in the Saints was akin to an industrial saw cutting through the rigid musical structures of the day. And to round out the spurious metaphorical association, since leaving the Saints Kuepper has constructed a legacy of work with the Laughing Clowns and a solo performer that dominates the musical landscape like no other contemporary artist.

In 2005 Kuepper teamed up with former Laughing Clowns drummer Jeffrey Wegener for shows around the country, including a four-week residency at the Northcote Social Club. When I put it to Kuepper that my impression of him at the show was of someone truly playing with an almost child-like enjoyment Kuepper laughs before commenting "I guess that's as fair as any assessment. I do enjoy playing. My motivation and drive hasn't changed much so it's still pretty childlike in a lot of ways."

Kuepper and Wegener's set featured a number of covers, including The Rolling Stones' *Gimme Shelter*, Canned Heat's *On the Road Again* and The Stooges' *We Will Fall*. "In every case the covers were songs that at some point in my life really engaged me and kind of stand the test of time," Kuepper explains. "If you think of a song like *On the Road Again*, it's a really hard song to do because the original recording really nails it. It's one of the best recordings in the 60s in a lot of ways; I'm probably one of the only people in the world who thinks that but it has a lot of resonance to me. It's got a sort of haunted quality to it, there's something about the tonality of the voice, the simplicity of the arrangement yet it's one of the only songs I can listen to 20 times in a row without getting sick of it. And the same with a lot of the other tunes we were covering."

What about The Stooges' *We Will Fall*? "I'm probably one of the only people who'd covered that," Kuepper laughs. "I've got a real fondness for that first Stooges album. That's an unusual song that usually gets skipped over because people tend to go for the more full on rock kind of thing. It just seemed to sit. That was less a conscious decision and more something that came out of something else – we realised at a sound check or a run through that we playing that song and so we just threw it in there."

Kuepper explains that the decision to play with Jeff Wegener again was the result of a "kind of an accidental chain of events". "I was booked to do some shows in Europe playing to some short films and I had a drummer who quit at the last minute, or a week before we were due to board the plane. That put us in a slightly tricky situation. I happened to bump into Jeffrey, who happens to live not all that far away from me, and said to him 'hey are you conversant with midi stuff and do a tour of Europe' and he said yes." While Kuepper concedes that "there's shitloads of issues between us going back hundreds of years" he also adds that "the one thing that was kind of strong was an ability to get on artistically I suppose, which overrode everything else."

Whereas The Saints remain celebrated as one of the first Australian punk acts (if punk is considered a 1970s phenomenon), Kuepper's work in the Laughing Clowns is often overlooked. Kuepper is philosophical about the occasional critical and popular ambivalence surrounding the Clowns. "You've got to keep this stuff in perspective. At the time The Saints weren't all that highly regarded – it's kind of happened over time. You've had a punk revival and grunge revivals, that kind of thing. The Clowns are more complex than The Saints. The Saints were almost getting into the type of thing I explored with The Saints but we split before we went any further with that."

Kuepper has recently released a three-disc compilation of his solo work, *This Is The Magic Mile*. The songs on the compilation were hand chosen by Kuepper himself. "I thought they had to run well together so that the album was a cohesive listening experience," Kuepper explains. "At the same time I wanted to also focus on including as many songs as I could that I thought had been overlooked because in the 1990s I was putting out a lot of records and it seemed that every second album would get a little bit lost when the next one came out so I tended to lean towards the ones that I felt

didn't get a proper hearing in the first place."

One thing that strikes you in Kuepper's solo material is the quality of the lyrics; there's a narrative there, laden with colourful images of people and places, yet it's never linear. "I try to avoid a straight forward narrative – in fact I don't even have to try, I just don't do it. I try to write lyrics that are evocative and personal without getting too specific. I like to go for atmosphere in lyrics and I think that aspect is consistent over the songs that I've done," he says.

Kuepper has recently been involved in writing film scores, an activity he's keen to continue. "There's been some talk of doing some more in Europe later this year, and we'll try and fit that in with some other things. I thought it was pretty successful in as much as it's an ongoing process. The music changed as it went along. Ultimately I'm quite happy with it, and I don't see it as a completed thing and we haven't recorded it yet. It's certainly something I've enjoyed doing."

Ed Kuepper and Jeffrey Wegener, with Peter Oxley (ex-Sunnyboys), play on March 4 at The Corner.



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