



DON'T CALL ME TRACY!

» Mark Wilkinson is a sultry chart-topper now, but he got his break singing on the street. Matt Myers talks to the next big thing in Australian music.

DNA: Many people have mistaken your voice for Tracy Chapman. You do know this?

Mark Wilkinson: Yeah. When I first started playing gigs, people would come up to me quite a lot and say, "You sound a bit like Tracy Chapman," which is a huge compliment because she's an amazing songwriter with a beautiful voice. But at the same time I thought: *should I sound like a woman?*

She can sound like a man. Yeah, true. I guess it was just the initial shock [laughs]. But the funny thing is, not long ago I was in a café with music quietly playing in the background. I thought it sounded familiar and said to my friend, "Who is this? It sounds familiar, I think it's Tracy Chapman." And after a while I realised they were playing one of my albums. So even I have mistaken myself for Tracy Chapman! I certainly can't complain about others making that mistake.

Your voice has become familiar to a lot of Australians thanks to last year's Nescafé commercial. How did that come about?

It was pretty random. I was busking at The Rocks in Sydney and a guy from the commercial's PR company just happened to work nearby. He heard



me playing, became a bit of a fan and decided to use *Middle Ground* for the ad. I guess it was a real stroke of luck.

***Middle Ground* is such a beautiful song.**

Where does your writing inspiration come from? Sometimes it's a personal experience, but you can't always draw on personal experience because sometimes there's just not enough going on in your life! So, other times it'll be observations about different people's lives or things that have inspired me. From seeing a movie or reading a book I can project my feelings onto those situations.

Who are your divas? Of course I also love Tracy Chapman. I love Sia. But when I was younger I also listened to heavier stuff like Pearl Jam and Nirvana and I also like the singers in the same mold as myself, like Dave Gray and Jeff Buckley.

Your song, *Benny's On The Rooftop*, is quite poignant and deals with bullying and suicide. Is

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there a story behind that? I was actually thinking about my time back in school, and there were a couple of guys in particular who got picked on quite badly. It's not something that I experienced directly, but I saw the impact it made. So that was the kind of message I was trying to get across in the song: how much you can effect people without even realising.

That would sound familiar to many gay people.

Yes, absolutely. I have gay friends and I can understand how it must be a difficult thing to go through when you're surrounded by the kind of people who insist on *making* it difficult. My heart goes out to them.

Do you ever have to edit-down your lyrics because they may be too personal? After I've written a song, I've kind of allowed myself to already go there. I don't know if certain stuff is off limits, but maybe if something is a little too close to the bone I might code it in less definitive language, but I think writing about personal

things is quite therapeutic. It can bring out some real emotion and I think that's where people connect with me.

Being a singer/songwriter who has had great success on iTunes, what did you think of the free U2 download controversy? I think it was a bit of a mad call from them, but I don't think they were the devil for doing it. It hasn't bothered me having it on my phone, but I guess it's that idea of having something forced on you, which no one likes. So I think that's where it fell down and for me that's where it also devalued it. I wouldn't have done it, but I don't think they should be chained up for it.

What would be the campiest song that you secretly get into? Hmm... there are a lot of songs that I can get into that wouldn't be the first thing I'd admit to [laughs], but I remember getting into Ricky Martin's *Cup Of Life* which was a big hit back in the day. I've been out on the dance floor to that a few times. I don't know if that really classifies as camp, though? What about Whitney Houston? I really like *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*.

Wow, I had that on vinyl and used to dance to it singing into a hairbrush! But I'm gay, what's your excuse? [Laughs] I don't have one!

If you were gay, who would you go for? Roger Federer. He's freakishly talented, makes the game look easy and plays with a flair that no one else has. On top of that, he seems like a great bloke and is just a very cool dude. He'd be my man crush!

In 2009, you performed for Australian troops deployed in the Solomon Islands. What was that like? That was awesome. It was fascinating to see the work the servicemen and women are doing over there. They really embraced us, got into the concerts and went out of their way to show us around. I didn't really know what to expect, but I found everyone was really giving and they were a selfless kind of people. Part of the drive for what they were doing was for the local community, and I was really impressed.

You're about to tour with Icehouse. What is it you like about them? *Electric Blue* was one of the first songs I remember really liking. I was a young kid and that song was number two on the charts on *Video Hits* and I always wanted it to get to number one. I'd get up every Saturday morning to watch the show and it'd still be at number two [laughs]! I think they're awesome and it's amazing to be able to play some shows with them.

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