

Fred Smith

It is about time Australia caught up with Fred Smith. This remarkable singer-songwriter - who at various times reveals influences that range from Paul Kelly via Lou Reed to Loudon Wainwright III to Leonard Cohen - keeps releasing amazingly accomplished albums. In tune with the times and prepared to reach beyond predictable folk formats, he is endlessly innovative and creative.

[Bruce Elder, Sydney Morning Herald]

Fred Smith has been a favorite on the Australian festival circuit for years much loved for his gentle wit, gift for story and melody, and sublime collaborations with Liz Frencham and The Spooky Men's Chorale. Now at last, the rest of Australia is catching up. He was the subject of a recent ABC Australian Story feature about his work in Afghanistan and the South Pacific. The title track from his acclaimed album, *Dust of Uruzgan*, has been covered by Lee Kernaghan.

Fred Smith has spent the last 20 years all over the joint: working on peace keeping missions in Afghanistan and the South Pacific, touring in America and travelling the Australian festival circuit. He has released about eight CDs, mostly solo but also collaborations with Liz Frencham and the Spooky Men's Chorale.

Fred cut his teeth performing comic and satirical ballads in bars and festivals in the late 90's. His early performances were described as "Noel Coward meets Loudon Wainwright". His debut album ***Soapbox*** gained cult status in his home town selling over 3000 copies in Canberra and about 7 copies in the rest of the country.

Around that time he traveled to work with Peace Monitoring operations in Bougainville, an island province of Papua New Guinea that had recently emerged from ten years of bitter civil war. Fred became something of a celebrity on Bougainville hosting his own pidgin language radio show and collaborating with the Australian Army and local musicians to record and release 20,000 copies of a cassette of peace songs.

Fred returned from Bougainville to record the award winning ***Bagarap Empires*** CD (pronounced 'Buggerup'). The CD won rave reviews and the National Film and Sound Archives award for Best New Release of 2002. It was described in Canada's Penguin Eggs magazine as "an

amazing piece of work. Truly folk music at its best – chronicling a period in a peoples’ history that few of us know anything about.”

In May 2003, Fred returned to Bougainville. Film-maker Nick Agafonoff followed Fred and his Bulmakau band around during the final weeks of the Peace Monitoring Group’s operations. The documentary ***Bougainville Sky*** was released in Nov. 2004.

Earlier that year Fred met Liz Frencham. He had written an album’s worth of songs for a woman’s voice and was looking for the right gal to sing them. He found Liz at a shonky gig on a Tuesday night in Petersham. They released their first joint album, ***Into My Room***, to critical acclaim in the second half of 2003 and have since gone on to become a major force on the Australian festival circuit. In 2007 they released their second album ***Lovethongs***- a collection of Fred’s love songs. The album was rated one of Top Ten Albums of 2007 by Sue Barrett in Rhythms Magazine and won rave reviews in the Sydney Morning Herald and Melbourne Age.

Meanwhile, Fred had moved to Washington DC in October 2004 and spent three years touring throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia. He returned to Australia in 2008 to release “Texas”. This CD captures the zeitgeist of an America divided in the second term of the Bush administration. It touches on subjects from Barak to Iraq with the insight, balance and irony that have made Smith one of Australia’s most beloved songwriters.

Then, on a Friday night at the 2008 National Folk Festival, Fred fell to drinking with Stephen Taberner in the session bar. This led to an impromptu performance a couple of nights later which saw the Fred Smith Band and the mighty Spooky Mens’ Chorale combine to spray manly odors all around the Merry Muse tent. This in turn led to the ***Urban Sea Shanties*** CD (which won the 2009 National Film and Sound Archives Award). It’s a collection of thinking man’s drinking songs.

In July 2009, Fred went to Uruzgan province, Afghanistan. His main job was to build relationships with tribal leaders in order to improve cooperation and understanding between the local community and the Coalition Forces, to act as a bridge between these two vastly different cultures. This put him in a unique position to understand both.

He served most of his 18 month tour of Uruzgan province on the Multinational Base in Tarin Kowt and at a Forward Operating Base in the Chora Valley. Smith put bands together from musically competent soldiers on base and they played regular concerts in Tarin Kowt where his songs were on everybody’s iPod. His comic ditty “Niet Swaffelen op de Dixi”, entreating Dutch soldiers not to do unspeakable things in the

portaloos, became a hit with the Dutch military and he toured Holland in November 2010 on the strength of it.

Whilst in Afghanistan, Fred wrote a collection of powerful songs about his experiences and the realities of life for soldiers in this difficult war. These songs were released in 2011 on ***Dust of Uruzgan***. The album won featured reviews and front pages in The Australian, The Sydney Morning Herald, and The Melbourne Age.

John Shand Sydney Morning Herald, November 2013

“finely observed snapshots of a harsh, sad and funny reality, laced with an optimism that is probably the mark of the man...In concert he has a knack for balancing drama and humour ...towering artistic achievement: truth”

Bruce Elder, Sydney Morning Herald ‘Review of the Week’ 6–7 August 2011

“... a cycle of songs that are raw, remarkably honest and suitably ambivalent about the nature of war... a collection of songs that offers an intimate perspective on the war in Afghanistan.”

Warwick McFadyen, The Saturday Age, 30 July 2011

“These 12 songs have a singular power and emotional honesty, because Smith was actually there”

John Huxley, Sydney Morning Herald, 28 July 2011

“... the music of Fred Smith comes straight from the front line...raw, ribald, but also capable of moving grown men to tears.”

Ian Deardon, Trad & Now, August 2011

“This album is, without doubt, a masterpiece”

Stephen Fitzpatrick, Weekend Australian Review ‘Cover Story’ 30–31 July 2011

“continues a tradition of profoundly affecting Australians-at-war ballads that includes Eric Bogle’s *And the band played Waltzing Matilda*, Don Walker’s *Khe Sanh* (Cold Chisel) and John Schumann’s *I was only 19*”

In May 2013, Fred went back to Afghanistan where he worked for the last six months of the Australian mission in Uruzgan province. While there, he conducted a series of filmed interviews with Uruzgan tribal leaders soliciting their reflections on the Australian contribution to the province. These interviews were the only serious attempt to document Afghan perspectives on our contribution to the province and are likely to become an important document for historians in years to come.

In October that year, ABC TV’s Australian Story ran a feature on Fred’s work as a diplomat and songwriter. The feature was watched by over 1

million viewers and was one of the more popular programs in this ever popular series. It is still up on the ABC's website.

Fred returned from Afghanistan in November 2013, and toured his ***Dust of Uruzgan*** show to regional theatres around Australia through the winter of 2014. The show combines the songs from the album with stories and a stunning set of photographs from Afghanistan. It is a complete and entertaining account of the Australian involvement in Afghanistan.

In spring of 2014, launched a new album, ***Home***, and has been touring it ever since. A gentle and more whimsical album than ***Dust of Uruzgan***, ***Home*** is mostly an album about coming home and calming down. It has earned some generous reviews:

"Singer songwriter par excellence...The most accomplished recording in Mr Smith's bulging back catalogue"

Tony Hillier, Rhythms, November/December 2014

"Smith's writing, like all good drama and fiction, is predicated on an ability to see the world through another's eyes"

John Shand, SMH, **Review, 10 January 2015**

"Smith's life as a diplomat has taken him to places most song writers never see... Producer Shane O'Mara delivers a great sound but it Smith's songs that carry the day, none better than the two war songs, *Going Home* and *Derapet*...If *Derapet* doesn't rock you to the core, I don't know what will."

Noel Mengel, Brisbane Courier Mail, ** Review, April 2015**

"The tracks speak to you, and you find yourself listening closely to every word...playful and serious, awkward and kind, poetic and sensitive...you can't help but be moved or confronted or entertained or something in between by the words Smith forms."

Arne Sjostedt, SMH

"An acclaimed purveyor of finely crafted contemporary folk songs...One of Australia's most outstanding songwriters"

Daniel Sanderson, Panorama, Canberra Times

In 2016, Fred wrote up his experiences in Uruzgan into a remarkable memoir, ***The Dust of Uruzgan*** which was published by Allen and Unwin. The book has been moderately successful and is even on sale in Australia Post! It was described by Channel 10 political editor Hugh Rimington "as convincing a picture as we will ever have of the tragedy, hope, oddness and courage of Australia's Uruzgan enterprise. To read it is to be sad for the many losses and grateful for his rare clarity before history and other distractions lead us forever away."

He set out to have a quiet winter in 2017 but ended up producing a double arm called 'Great'. Drawing on his love of Americana music formats, the album swings from raucous comedy to sublime folk balladry in its exploration of American history, myth and pathologies.

Fred Smith

0403 816 311