

---

# THE BLACK SORROWS



## THE WAY WE DO BUSINESS

---

There's a Nina Simone song that Joe Camilleri has been known to perform from time to time. At the end of our wide-ranging conversation about The Way We Do Business, Joe Camilleri felt inclined to cite the lyrics of Do I Move You?

Do I move you, are you willin'. Do I groove you, is it thrillin'?  
Do I soothe you, tell the truth now. Do I move you, are you loose now ?  
The answer better be (Yes, yes) That pleases me

Audiences have been letting Joe know what he has been giving them for more than 50 years particularly when they have witnessed him in full flight live and been overpowered by his frenzied, almost out-of-body performance approach.

I've long described Joe as a musical sponge, able to absorb any music that connects with him and use elements of it in his own creations. That's why the sounds of the King Bees, Adderley Smith Blues Band, Lipp & the Double Dekkers, Pelaco Brothers, Joey Vincent, Jo Jo Zep & the Falcons, The Black Sorrows, The Revelators, Bakelite Radio and Joe Camilleri have been imbued with touches of reggae, zydeco, rockabilly, blues, soul, beat pop, swing jazz, big band, crooners, country rock, funk, rhythm & blues and rock'n'roll. "I have been a magpie" Joe admits, unapologetically. "But a song, any song, has to live on its own merits.

"I think sometimes it's pretty hard to play under the same badge, sometimes you wanna do something a little bit different. I cast a pretty wide net. Maybe I'm a bit left of centre to a lot of people these days but I always thought it was part and parcel of what you do." Though he didn't plan it that way, Joe has risen to the top of almost every pile he became a part of because, as he puts it: "I want to be the best I can be."

Over more than 40 years there has been 23 albums by The Black Sorrows, since Sonola arrived in 1984, the almost accidental result of Joe and friends being offered some gratis studio time at AAV which wanted to test out new equipment.

"I love the Sonola record and the Sorrows haven't stopped since." But they have evolved. There has been more than 40 active members, with the current line-up comprising James Black as MD on keyboards and guitar with Claude Corranza on guitar, Tony Floyd on drums and Mark Gray on bass. "We're beautiful together - we came together as a family - Claude

---

has been in the band for 30 years - we surf the same wave. We know how tight we can be and how loose we are. I pretty much stay with people I like."

At the core of the Black Sorrows is the remarkable songwriting association of Joe Camilleri and Nick Smith, who have co-written all of *The Way We Do Business*. The first flowering of the association was the song *Country Girls* on the fourth Sorrows album *A Place In The World*, which steered them away from being an outfit concerned with covers of familiar almost traditional songs. This liaison gave a new dimension to the Camilleri canon: "The first 30 songs are easy because you don't know who you are it's the next 400 .....

"The best time when I'm writing songs is when I'm writing with Nick and we're having a laugh and I think this is really fun to do. Nick doesn't listen to what I listen to - he likes music for different reasons. Perhaps because he's younger than me, he listens to bands like Television. I don't even see him that much these days - I live in the country and he's in the city. I sometimes think Nick is a dark human while I'm a bright human. Now with songs I work it out and send it to him then he puts the nuts and bolts together. Then at the studio, we go in, I play a demo of songs the musicians have never heard before. I give each of them about an hour and if I don't think it's happening, I move on."

That approach is not infallible. The eerie, voodoo-ish, Cajun-influenced *Evil Eye* was originally intended for the *St. George's Road* album but was passed over after being tried out in the studio. The one heard here is slower, moodier, laid over slithering Shannon Bourne guitar.

"My favourite song" Joe contends "is *Maybe The Sun Won't Shine*. It just fell off the bone; it has the joy of Bessie Smith." That may be because it is enhanced by the efforts of four girl singers: Atlanta Coogan, Rai Williams, Mimi Zaetta Thomas and Lauren Gillard (of course mighty girl singers have been an integral component to the greatness of the band. Think the Bull Sisters) and one of the three members of Jo Jo Zep & the Falcons used on the sessions - Wilbur Wilde who emits a seductive sax solo. "I know nothing about music. Wilbur he's the player, I'm the idiot. Yet I take him to places he'd never go. It's like a secret code we have together."

Joe also nominates *That's What I'd Give* (with a mature vocal and a sound that could have been borrowed from a Barry White track, one which he laughingly calls a 'baby maker'), *Livin' The Blues*, *Crazy Look* (which has Nick Smith on backing vocals), *Who's Laughin' Now?* and *City Of Soul* (featuring the other two Falcons alumni, Tony Faehse and Jeff Burstin). Though that could well change day to day. Particularly when concert reaction comes into play (Joe plays over 150 shows a year, before 300-400 people up to three times a week. Catch Joe Camilleri live and you get a glorious *mélange* of the music that pours out of him).

The gestalt is still there on these tracks as Joe switches easily from reggae to swamp rock, to piano roll blue to jazzish tones. It is what has made the Black Sorrows so invaluable. The deft song structure which attracted people like Elvis Costello is honed to perfection. And is not hard to identify Joe's influences and heroes. Listen carefully and you'll hear shades of Ry Cooder, Leon Russell, Willy DeVille, Garland Jeffries, Robbie Robertson, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, John Lee Hooker, Delbert McClinton, Ray Charles, Captain Beefheart, and Linda Ronstadt's Mexican album, among others.

Joe was initially thinking of Harley & Rose or maybe *Chained To The Wheel* and *Don't Let Me Go* when he said "You've got to find a place in a song and put yourself in it. It has to come to you or it doesn't work. I live by the belief of learn the song, respect the song and be in it, then you own it and we all feel part of it. Only then it works. If you're not real it's not worth anything, people can smell that a mile away."

*One Door Slams* grabs you by the throat with its energy and vitality. Not surprisingly it is the album's first single, "I found a way in to that song and it turned out better than I expected."

---

Recorded in the Woodstock Studio, which he once owned, and the roomier Empire Studios in Melbourne, this extensive album – Joe's 55th – features an array of guest players, most notably master guitarists Shannon Bourne and Shane O'Mara along with John McAll on piano, percussionist Alejandro Vega, Mitch Cairns on bass, Simon Starr on double bass and horn players James McAullay, Nick Ryan-Glennie, Paul Williamson and Tony Norris.

This album was supposed to be produced by the Grammy-winning Pete Solly, who turned Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons into a formidable chart entity with the Screaming Targets album in 1979 and its hit singles Hit & Run and Shape I'm In – which had these ugly buggers screamed at on Countdown and resulted in substantial European breakouts and a performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival. Pete had returned to Australia to produce the previous Sorrows' album, 2021's Saint Georges Road and it was hoped he would return to helm The Way We Do Business. Sadly throat cancer intruded on those plans, with Joe travelling to his American home to be with him during his final days.

So it fell to Joe Camilleri to sit in the producer's chair for his inaugural ABC Music release. Of course, such chores are not unfamiliar to this musical polyglot, a 2007 inductee into the ARIA Hall of Fame, whose production credits include Sports, Renee Geyer, Ross Wilson, Jo Jo Zep & the Falcons and Jane Clifton. "I have a great love for the things I do. I've been in the studio for a lot of years now, learning things. You've got to feel you're going forward. We can make as many mistakes as you like as long as we're going somewhere.

"I like playing with other people. I'm not an island. I do like being with people who I like to play with. The essence of playing with really great people is trying to extract the feeling, not their technical brilliance. You're trying to find that magical moment that the song deserves. Some people like playing golf, I like playing music with people. I think sometimes it's pretty hard to play under the same badge, sometimes you wanna do something a little bit different. I cast a pretty wide net. maybe I'm a bit left of centre to a lot of people these days but I always thought it was part and parcel of what you do. Even back in the days of Lipp & the Double Dekker Brothers everything was elastic and free. We were listening to Robert Johnson, but trying to play it like John Coltrane."

Camilleri, emigrated to Australia in 1950, aged 2, with his Maltese parents and nine siblings and he now has five children of his own.

"People say to me, 'why are you making another record? One came out 15 months ago!' I say, 'Because I have to!' I've just gotta do it. That's what I do – the money I save on not smoking and not drinking, that's what I spend it on!" However he willingly admits I haven't always enjoyed the Sorrows. There were times when we were doing 300 gigs a year. It was pretty hard."

I think the thing with The Black Sorrows for me, was something I learnt from The Falcon years, you have to be elastic and able to let go and say 'we've got to get some new guys, get some new blood, because this is not working any more.

When they open the Tamworth Country Music Festival with a gig at The Longyard, the elastic Black Sorrows will add some new players for the occasion, though Joe is not exactly sure who yet. But every one will need to subscribe to their leader's belief in the importance of owning a song so they all feel part of it, .because "only then it works".

GLENN A BAKER AM