Rare breed

Why frontman for the legendary Australian band The Go-Betweens, Robert Forster, still demands your attention.

By Anthony Elliott

n anyone writing a history about independent music in the late 20th century, when it came to surveying exemplary Australian contributions, would find themselves automatically reinventing Robert Forster. Cool, charismatic, formidable and probably one of the most eccentric songwriters this country has ever produced, Forster is a kind of meandering chronicle of everything from Creedence Clearwater Revival to The Monkees, LP Hartley to Jack Kerouac, post-feminism to postmodernism.

Forster himself, having left his native Brisbane with University of Queensland band-mate Grant McLennan, became frontman of one of Australia’s most quirky, hip, left-of-center bands – The Go-Betweens. Like so many indie musicians of the 1980s exiled to London – the Birthday Party (Nick Cave), the Triffids (David McComb), the Laughing Clowns (Ed Kuepper) and the Moodists (Dave Graney) – Forster had been rejected by Australia and its pop culture of hip, left-of-center bands – The Go-Betweens.

Forster penned beautifully poetic, luxuriant songs such as ‘Spirit of a Vampyre’, ‘That Jack Kerouac Built’ and ‘Love’. His songs had an uncanny knack of taking on projects that no other Australian singer could aspire to. His work (music, journalism, plays) disdains all bounds, crossing effortlessly from David Bowie to Samuel Beckett, the culture of 70s soft rock to the metamorphosis of fame. Forster is, to be sure, a rare breed indeed.

Forster did not so much introduce poetry to Australian music as reconfigure it through a cleverly crafted literary sensibility. This is about as far away as one can get from the kind of Aussie pub rock which thinks that lyrics are merely a fill-in between guitar solos.

But the result was more than just a mixing of the languages of pop and literature. Forster’s poetry is, in fact, contained in the wholeness of his art. There is the sense, with Forster’s songs, that one encounters a constellation of diffuse thoughts or angles, after which ‘reality’ will always look different. “Why do people who read Dostoyevsky look like Dostoyevsky?” he wonders in a song about modern city living.

Forster may display a striking poetic sensibility, but he’s a poetic maverick. He always delivers the unexpected – “Can I come to your place, and can I wash your hair?” he casually intones in one Go-Betweens classic. “Why do people who read Dostoyevsky look like Dostoyevsky?” he wonders in a song about modern city living.

Forster shows few signs of slowing. He has a new studio album out later this year, Songs To Play. There is also a book in the pipelines charting his time with The Go-Betweens.

He appeared at this year’s Adelaide Festival in Eric Mingus’s reinvention of The Who’s classic rock opera, Tommy. He recently narrated Big Gold Dream, a film of the post-punk indie scene in Scotland. Later this year, he will appear in a “provocation on Yeats” – Blood and the Moon – at the National Concert Hall in Dublin.

Outside of perhaps only Nick Cave, Forster is demonstrating that he’s capable of taking on projects that no other Australian singer could aspire to. His work (music, journalism, plays) disdains all bounds, crossing effortlessly from David Bowie to Samuel Beckett, the culture of 70s soft rock to the metamorphosis of fame. Forster is, to be sure, a rare breed indeed.

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Alice Blanch, Box Brownie Panorama #18 (detail), 2015, giclee print on paper, 60 x 127 cm, courtesy of the artist