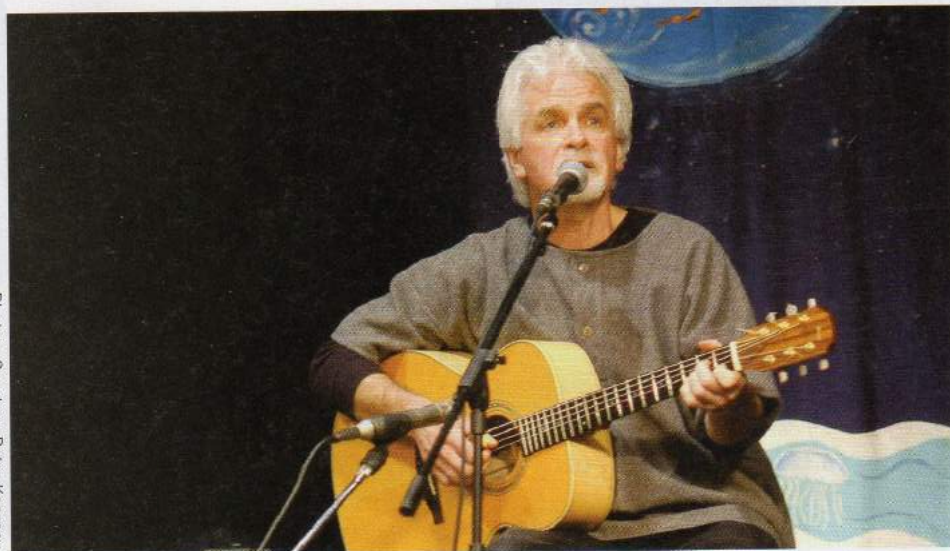


In tune with the Holy Spirit

WORDS Tracey Edstein

Peter Kearney is a self-taught musician and composer, who uses his song-writing as a form of prayer.



Photos: Courtesy Peter Kearney

“To write a good song you’ve got to go to some place which is like prayerful space ... a place meditation would take you ... a mysterious space ...”

Is writing music a form of prayer? Peter Kearney thinks so.

‘To write a good song you’ve got to go to some place which is like prayerful space ... a place meditation would take you ... a mysterious space ... There’s a feeling of the sacred in that creative space where it’s not just you but something you’ve plugged into.’

Peter Kearney has been entering that prayerful space and writing good songs for more than 50 years, and one outcome of his creativity has been songs that worshippers of a certain age know and love.

One of his earliest songs, ‘Fill My House’, has lodged itself in the collective Catholic mind and its lyrics are no less challenging today when many parish communities struggle to ‘fill the house’.

*Fill my house unto the fullest
Eat my bread and drink my wine.
The love I bear is held from no one.
All I own and all I do I give to you.*

Peter grew up in the southern Sydney suburb of San Souci, the eldest of seven children in what he describes as ‘a staunchly Catholic family’. Peter now lives in the Southern Highlands and became an unofficial ‘dual citizen’ of Ireland when he married his Irish wife, Madge O’Brien.

It’s easy to name the significant influences in Peter’s spiritual and creative lives as he acknowledges two men generously and frequently.

As Sydney University student, Peter met Fr Ted Kennedy who became a lifelong friend and

mentor. Peter has fond memories of spending time with Fr Ted and other students at an old country house at Araluen. ‘I sang a couple of songs I’d written and Ted must have seen promise because he encouraged me to have a go at writing some folk hymns. It was 1966, just after Vatican II and there was a call for new music.’

Peter is a self-taught musician and composer. He knows his mother had learned the piano ‘but I never heard her play and there wasn’t a piano in the home’.

Fr Ted Kennedy, parish priest at Redfern for 30 years, was renowned for his welcome to Aboriginal people and his openness to learning from the poor. Peter recalls, ‘He was someone who read the gospels in a certain way, especially the counter-cultural themes and the significance of the poor in it all. It was the stone that was rejected that became the keystone – an image of the kingdom as an inversion of dominant values.’

“The peace and justice that the kingdom promises and which Peter’s songs embody have universal appeal.”



Pictured left: 1966 Araluen NSW. Fr Ted Kennedy with group of students from Sydney Uni. Ted was Uni chaplain. Says Peter, 'It was here I first sang a couple of my songs to Ted. Later he encouraged me to have a go at writing some folk hymns.'

Reading and listening has formed his theology and that formation is an ongoing process that is reflected in Peter's musical output. Perhaps parishes and schools picked up on his 'Mercy is one of God's Names' during the recent Year of Mercy?

The other significant influence on Peter – in fact the inspiration for what he calls 'the big work of my creative life' – is St Francis of Assisi. Peter 'met' Francis through a book he borrowed from Basildon Library (while living in England as a young man), *In the Steps of St Francis* by Ernest Raymond.

'There's something quite extreme about Francis' life – he renounced the world, as monks do, but he did it within the world. He lived very simply yet had this great joyfulness about him. I've always been a seeker and a searcher and I was attracted to the life Francis lived.'

Peter began to write songs inspired by Francis' commitment to 'Lady Poverty' and gradually, a grand dream began to take shape – a musical narrative of the life of St Francis.

It took 24 years to realise the project – titled *Good Morning Good People* after a favourite greeting of St Francis. Bringing the dream to life was a *magnum opus* and it's since been performed many times in many places.

One audience member described attending a performance of *Good Morning Good People* as 'a pilgrimage of the heart through the life of St Francis'.

In fact, pilgrimages have become increasingly important to Peter and he has walked three Caminos in Europe and Ireland. He says, 'These connect me to Francis and his simplicity because when you do a long walk you simplify life to what you can carry on your back. I find that good'.

The peace and justice that the kingdom promises and which Peter's songs embody have universal appeal. He calls it 'working in the small time and not wishing it was the big time'. Peter's familiar hymn, 'The Beatitudes' is emblematic of his life and while it's not been a lucrative career, it's one that has enriched people all over the world.

Let a woman (Ann), who wrote to Peter after a concert, have the last word: 'I'm afraid you are lumbered with the gift of prophecy – whether you want it or not and whatever your personal struggles – there it is, the Spirit is in your music.'

You can learn more of Peter Kearney's music at <http://peterkearneysongs.com.au>