

Stayers

‘The guitar’s all right for a hobby, John, but you’ll never make a living at it.’

His long-suffering Aunt Mimi’s warning was not only ignored by the brilliant but wilful Lennon, but – for obvious reasons – later became a favourite family joke.

Poor Mimi. On the balance of probability she was right; most people who make a living from guitars do so by selling them, or teaching other people how to play them. And John Lennon had no interest in either. He was a stayer.

Half a world away and half a century later, not much has changed. We all sing into a hairbrush, or in the shower, or jam in someone’s garage; maybe even do a gig or two while dreaming of The Big Time. But eventually we decide our Aunt Mimi was right, look to the future and knuckle down to The Business of Life. We get proper jobs, mortgages and family sedans; forget the chords and misremember the lyrics, and the guitar lies in a corner, taken up only in moments of nostalgia or drunkenness. Or both, for the two are friends.

But the stayers that abound in the Australian rock music industry are a breed apart, who hang in there when everyone else has packed up and gone home. Some trade their university courses or promising careers for this profession that takes no prisoners and eats its young; and choose instead to serve long apprenticeships with a harsh and unforgiving master. Some flirt with the fickle vocation before being spurned, the sweet memory a lifelong source of warmth; others court her all their days with barely a flicker of interest in return. Still others move – by design or default - into other areas of the music profession, using their hard-won expertise for the furtherment of other musicians, or of the industry itself.

Those the music industry deigns to favour in the long term find she’s not so pretty in the cold light of day; she’s changeable and inconsistent; and at times, just plain bloody difficult. Her demands are unreasonable, the hours long and arduous, her family insufferably critical.

But at her finest she’s a joy, her bounties intoxicating and her lure overpowering all resistance. She brings out the very best in those she favours, the fulfilment she provides incomparable with any other. And this is why so many of those who find success continue plying their trade long after they can afford to take it easy, or when audiences and venues are growing ever smaller, increasingly spartan and farther flung. As with any commitment made with passion and for the long haul, they take the rough with the smooth, the good times and memories getting them through the bad, because even in the darkest of times, there’s simply no place they’d rather be.

Somehow, like John Lennon before them, the stayers of Australian rock music have always known their Aunt Mimi was wrong.