

His latest flame

Former Go-Between's deeply crafted seventh solo album achieves big things in modest ways, says **Ian Harrison**. Illustration by **Annie Ryan**.

Robert Forster



Inferno

TAPETE, CD/DL/LP

IN THE years since his 2015 solo LP *Songs To Play*, there's been much excited discussion of Robert Forster's old band, Australian laureates The Go-Betweens. In 2017 there was his superb memoir, *Grant And I*, which covered the group's story from the late '70s onwards, and the creative and personal relationship between its two songwriters, Forster and Grant McLennan, who died suddenly in May 2006 just as this perennial cult choice looked set to achieve the recognition they deserved. Last year saw Kriv Stenders' film portrait *Right Here*, where the other group members' verdicts, archive footage and telling visual metaphors met in a moving analysis of friendships lost and maintained, the nature of success, and ultimate vindication. Like *Grant & I*, it was a formidable piece of work.

With all this celebrated past, there could be less room for the present. Forster, who dyed his hair silver-grey in his dandyish late twenties to look more like ruthless oil magnate Blake Carrington off US TV soap *Dynasty*, was 61 last birthday. He only records when he's ready, and has enjoyed a sideline in prize-winning music journalism. Adding to the sense of benign, torch-passed semi-retirement, his son Louis has followed dad out on the rock'n'roll highway with his own band, Brisbane indie-rockers The Goon Sax. Yet here we are anyway, with Forster senior's seventh solo album, and third since he went it alone, again.

Clocking up nine honed songs in 36 minutes, this is a slim volume rather than a blockbuster epic, but one exquisitely presented and rendered in the kind of creamy white clarity that will not yellow or crack. Recorded in Berlin in the hot summer of 2018 with P.J. Harvey/Nick Cave producer Victor Van Vugt (who engineered Forster's solo debut *Danger In The Past* back in 1990), it has a clean, unified sound: the natural timbres of live players – drums, guitar, violin, piano, plus harmonies – are captured with intimacy and warmth, as Forster's familiar, fine-grained tones savour every word, alert to the quirk and seriousness of life, and the necessity of the finely-turned phrase. Thematically, big things are achieved in modest ways.

As he says, his are songs that "range around through life, and look back and forwards, and sideways." Choosing to begin the record with an adapted 1933 WB Yeats poem, *Crazy Jane On The Day Of Judgement*, is one such sideways move. But on an album whose lyrics read like verse, it's a suitable first note and mood-setter. Forster first sang it at the 150th anniversary of Yeats's birth, in Dublin in 2015: initially an ambivalent argument between a bishop

and the titular mad-become-sane heroine, here it becomes a more secular rumination on love and its imperfections, over a two-chord groove that sounds like it's been underway for some time as soon as it starts.

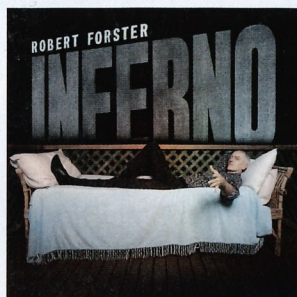
He's a songwriter given to finding ambiguous spaces where truth can break through. Leaning on the Velvet's New York rock of his and The Go-Betweens' earliest fantasies, several songs deal with the gamble and fallout of getting out of the small town to make your mark. Full of the comic, wondrous ennui of youth, *No Fame's* teen is bullish about his art and declares himself immune to the trappings of acclaim, before a subtle melodic change twists his words of assurance to doubt. Strutting and arena-facing, *Remain's* middle-aged protagonist talks about his films being ignored by the big city tastemakers ("I did my good work/While knowing it wasn't my time"), yet he sounds confident in his path. "I know what it's like to be ignored and forgotten/When yours is the name that doesn't come up too often" could be the ultimate sad-sack lines, but when followed by a "hey!" of perfect timing and audacity, by a guitar playing man of a certain age in a suit, it really doesn't seem that bad.

Elsewhere, Forster steps back from using his own career as material, with songs of a more domestic hue. Gentle, lulling acoustic rock, *The Morning* wields its blade deftly: initially an inventory of getting up and greeting the day, its subtly entwined references to the insanity of dreams, sleep as the cousin of death and, yes, the miraculous nature of life, finds some confounding opposites being reconciled. While you're reeling, gently, *Life Has Turned A Page* sits down and mellows even more with some bongos, xylophone and guitars. The song's a quietly devastating thumbnail of family life, existence's unexpected turns and the passing of the years. And as voice, lyric, melody and instrumentation meet in moments of realisation, the mundane is glimpsed with a renewed glow.

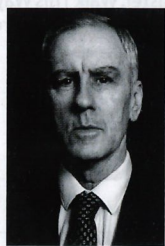
There's less overt comfort in mysterious closer *One Bird In The Sky*, a strange and oblique piece of Australian country that seems to feature a disembodied consciousness, charnel grounds and a determination to maintain a kind of aloneness. Yet, as wrong-footing as the Yeats-quoting opener, and featuring as affecting and classically-structured a tune as Forster has written, it imparts a satisfying symmetry.

It's worth repeating how right this record sounds: drummer Earl Harvin, who's also played with The The and Beyoncé, lends an effortless classic rock-soul feel, not unlike Al Jackson's always-on time work with The M.G.'s. The violin parts played by Forster's wife Karin Bäumler, meanwhile, cleave and enhance the songs in emotion-sparking ways which can't help but recall Amanda Brown-era Go-Betweens.

Fourteen years after that group's last record, other absent influences can still be felt. For those who obsessed over such incandescent, filmic long-players as *16 Lovers Lane*, *Liberty Belle And The Black Diamond Express* or final triumph *Oceans Apart*, Forster will always be half of a partnership. Though McLennan's poetry, hurt and melodic gift is lost, his partner's crafted vignettes are the closest we have to the timeless albums they made together. *Inferno* stands among them, a few steps down the line, and for Forster, like the rest of us, life turns another page.



"Forster's familiar, fine-grained tones savour every word, alert to the quirk and seriousness of life."



BACK STORY: HOT STUFF

● Almost-title song *Inferno* (Brisbane In Summer), an uptempo Eno-esque rocker, was written after a particularly sweltering night at home. The heat's a challenge for a smart-dressed man like Forster. "It is," he says. "You can't really do much, you just have to give in to the heat. You can still look OK in board shorts, T-shirt and Birkenstock shoes... it's why I look forward to getting over to Europe, or Melbourne or Sydney, I get to wear a coat, or a suit. In Brisbane, there's probably one day a year when you can do a coat."

Bleddyn Butcher

ROBERT SPEAKS! FORSTER PONDER'S HOUSE PARTIES, TIME, TRAVEL AND GRANT.

