



# SIMON BEVILACQUA

**T**HE pandemic has exposed the neglect with which our society treats musicians. Aside from the brightest stars, most musos live in poverty, boosting meagre income with one-off grants, side jobs and the dole.

Then the pandemic killed public performances and swept even the crumbs from the table. There's talk from governments about fast-tracking projects to get tradies on construction sites, but nary a word about society's poor cousins, the musos.

But where do brickies, barmaids, teachers, journo, sparkies, polliies, painters and plumbers turn when their relationships crumble or they feel blue? To music and musicians.

A poultice for tragedy, a soothing balm for fear, a fanfare for triumph, a rally cry for politics, a soundtrack to joy, music is a cure and an intoxicant. Shakespeare said it is the food of love. It can march us into war, leave us in tears, wrench us from misery's depths and walk us back from the precipice.

Musicians save lives as surely as surgeons, but when a specialist retires to his swanky city digs for a 12-year-old scotch and a soulful evening with Tom Jones on the turntable after a torrid day with the scalpel, musos are sleeping rough or couch-surfing or crowded in cold, filthy share-houses.

Musos are woefully undervalued. They devote their lives to their art. For some it's years of study. For others it's a brave commitment to live with their hearts on their sleeves so they can honestly express shared truths of the human condition on our behalf, while stoically plucking the frayed nylon strings of a rickety road-wearied guitar.

**A**T this point, I declare an interest. I am selling something. Allow me this rare indulgence, and divergence from my usual column, since my sales pitch relates to genuine Tasmanian swamp music and in a small way, hopefully, the common good of our island.

In the early 2000s, I played guitar at a series of jams in the home studio



of Launceston guitarist and sound engineer Jolly Walter. They were magical sessions attended by scores of musos, with no audience other than a small contingent of hangers-on and fellow musos sitting out.

Jolly has held weekly jams since the 1990s, the roots of the sessions go back to the 1980s, and he has over 600 hours of recordings to prove it.

The underground scene continues today in Launceston — colloquially known as The Swamp because its sodden colonial foundations squelch in the Tamar River mudflats.

If The Velvet Underground was subterranean in New York City in the 1960s, this scene at The Swamp has been grooving under the mantle,

teetering on the rim of the molten core, for decades without so much as a wink from the wider community.

Ask any streetwise local muso and they will have heard whispers about the jams, if not sat in on a session or two in the haze after a rollicking gig.

If I had been able to make a living from the sounds we made in the 2000s, I would have stayed to play because music is where my heart is.

I turned to journalism because it offered rare insights into worlds I would otherwise not have known and, to put it bluntly, it paid.

Every few years, I return to visit those who starve for their art, and on one visit Jolly played me some jam tapes, and the injustice hit hard. Here



was music of rare beauty and freedom by skilful musos, committed heart and soul to their muse, but it was utterly unheralded and unrequited.

Not any more, I pledged, and took the tapes to The Green Room studio in Hobart where I have worked for the past couple of years in my spare

time with accomplished Hobart sound engineer and gifted musician Michael Shelley to create an album.

The core of the original jams is Jolly and I on guitars, Bob Sheey on bass, Mick Doyer, a train driver with locomotive rhythm, on drums, and Daniel Zachary and Jack Van Den Berg on vocals.

I proudly paid local musicians — including sax virtuoso Jesse Bowden, stellar vocalist Katy Raucher and maestro Kelly Ottaway — to record overdubs to mix with the original recordings and draw the “eyebrows” on, as Frank Zappa once described it.

Mastered by Launceston wiz William Bowden, who rose to fame for his work on Gotye's global hit Somebody That I Used to Know, the album *The Legendary Knights at the Magic Swamp* was born.

I had grand plans for videos and marketing but, alas, along came the pandemic. It's so long since the album was finished, I have decided to have a soft launch now and release it on CD, available on a groovy website wired up by talented Hobart designer Dan Moody, from design id.

We plan to launch the album properly at some stage when, and if, things settle. And I have visions of one day pulling together a small, versatile, nimble company to produce music and video for niche markets in a post-pandemic world, employing Tassie musicians, composers, artists and filmmakers. The talent is here.

The full story of *The Legendary Knights* is told in a 12-page booklet that comes with the CD.

The album art by Mercury cartoonist and artist extraordinaire Christopher Downes is sublime.

It is genuine Tasmanian swamp music — improvised rock with a funky blues inflection and a distinctly Tasmanian twang. It's best played loud on a great sound system, or with good headphones. It will be available to stream in a few days or go now to [www.thelegendaryknights.com](http://www.thelegendaryknights.com) to buy a CD or four to properly support Tasmanian music and musicians.



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