



PHOTO: NIC WALKER

Looking forward, looking back

Fifty years ago Don Walker left his family's Carrs Creek farm and Grafton behind for academic pastures. While excelling in physics it was his commitment to song-writing that eventually saw him transform an Adelaide covers band into an Australian rock institution. A new book explores this lyrical journey which, it transpires, has plenty of its roots right here in the Clarence writes LESLEY APPS

Don Walker's songwriting has always transcended the sweat-filled back rooms and bourbon-soaked dance floors his band Cold Chisel annihilated fans on in the late 1970s.

There are also compositions that can be heard in less rowdy circumstances: on film soundtracks and documentaries, news stories and at funerals. No environment seems to be off-limits when it comes to the body of work amassed by one of the finest songwriters this country has ever produced. Such is his knack for telling Australian stories through song, they touch all walks.

A new book to be released later this year showcases his aptitude for lyrical phrase, a chance to soak up his work on a

page as opposed to its traditional vehicle, vocals – screaming, lilting or otherwise.

And while a collected works by the lauded songwriter has been a long time coming, it hasn't been without lack of encouragement.

"I'd been approached over the past decade and always said I wouldn't do it. I was a purist and thought the only place for lyrics was in the song not on the page. But then contrary to that, on albums I've always printed lyrics, so there you go."

The book, which is presented in chronological order, goes "right back" to the '60s and '70s up until now, including songs that were never recorded "but may be one day" as well as the expected classics. "*Flame Trees* kicks off Chapter 3," he said in anticipation of the next question.

Although Walker has been referred to as Australian music's unofficial poet laureate on occasion, he doesn't see his writing this way.

"Lyrics aren't a form of poetry. It's quite different. It is designed to be read, at least in the last 1500 years, and lyrics are designed to be performed and experienced. Whether anyone cares for this kind of release, we'll soon find out," he grins.

Apart from the lyrics, the other fascinating element to this release are Walker's personal notes, the relatively private musician offering some insight into his music's history and process, snapshots in time for fans and fledgling composers to perhaps pore over. "Sometimes it's a page, sometimes a paragraph, just talking about where I was and what I was doing

in that couple of years."

These stories and their lyrical counterparts, kick off in 1970, the year after Walker left Grafton. "But of course the years before then pretty strongly inform what gets written after 1970, he said. "Learning piano, my introduction to music, that was all Grafton."

Walker wasn't born in the Jacaranda City, that trophy goes to Ayr in Queensland, but he arrived soon after, aged 4, when his family returned to the place their roots lie, where Donald Hugh Walker spent his hoods, boy, man and musician.

His parents were his introduction to music, his father played all the popular tunes of the 1930s on his harmonica, his mother Shirley a competent piano player.

The keyboard of course is Walker's signature piece of equipment, the first instrument "and only" he was taught while growing up on the farm that yield corn, potatoes and a few cattle.

He and his younger brother Richard were sent along to a neighbouring property "on the end of the pennisular" where Dot Morris lived with her two brothers. "I think we might have been her only pupils. She played for her own amusement but she had a beautifully tuned piano and a lovely piano room in her farmhouse."

Despite the potential for romanticism, Walker said it wasn't love at first sight when it came to the instrument he has spent his entire life around. "We learned the piano because we were told to. As we headed into senior high school we managed to prevail on the parents to let us give it up. My brother managed to give it up earlier and became a teacher. He's a very good piano player, but it was all playing by ear. I'm a good ear player too, but not as good as him. I was bit more disciplined with the theory."

The Walker family were church-going people, something that may seem at odds with the rock and roll path their eldest son found himself on in the ensuing decade in Grafton, but its influence was never too far away.

"I can say there was a minister there in my teenage years, who I didn't know in my adult life but spent most of it referring in my mind to, 'what would he think about this or what would he think about that?'"

The family's place of worship was St Andrew's Presbyterian and "what was the Methodist Church around the corner".

"It was my Sunday church right through my youth and teenage years. That was a lot of my social life, every week right up until I went to evil university."

Walker's first real band came out of that environment, the Grafton High student playing with a couple of bands around the



HEY DAY: A 1978 photo of Cold Chisel members (below) Ian Moss, Don Walker, Jimmy Barnes, Steve Prestwich and Phil Small.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

TODAY: Cold Chisel members (left) Phil Small, Don Walker, Jimmy Barnes and Ian Moss. PHOTO: STEVE BACCON

HIS PARENTS WERE HIS INTRODUCTION TO MUSIC ...



place in his final two years there.

"I was initially with a band made up with a combination of school mates and church guys. It was a 'what can we possibly play with our limited skills' band. The first band, for all of us.

"I played a little organ we'd found in the classified ads. It was a parlour organ and the volume pedal was a knee lever. That little band and the other people in it, that consumed us for nearly two years. We played at the Battle of the Sounds at the Garden Theatre. I think we came third but we played an original song which was unheard of."

And while it's tempting to claim that moment as the beginning of what went onto be an illustrious career in composition, Walker said it was no pinnacle to be hanging anything on.

"It was the first song I wrote for a band, but there's no recorded version of it, or record of the lyrics, fortunately, because, from what I can remember, it was pretty bad."

His debut band disbanded after the HSC but by that stage there was a bunch of older guys that had piqued his interest. "I spent my last summer here playing with them. That band didn't really have a name but it played paid gigs and had very accomplished players.

"Jeff Eggins was the leader of that band. A very good Grafton guitar player. Terry Barnes was the bass player. The drummer was initially Errol Amos who's in Sydney and in touch with, and Carl Rose who lives in Coffs who I'm also in touch with." After pausing he surmised, "That was a good band."

Once school went back, Walker headed straight up to Armidale to begin his degree in science and maths, the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14