

MUSIC & SILENCE

Courtney Barnett is the biggest thing in Australian music at the moment. And she's found fame by following no one's star but her own. By David Leser.

Photography Gen Kay

Imagine you suffer from shyness and, at times, crippling anxiety – and here you are waiting to go on stage to perform in front of millions on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

It gets worse. The person you're about to follow is none other than the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, who's just brought the house down with a rousing, hip-thrusting dance-off with the host herself.

If that weren't enough pressure to make you want to disappear through the floor, DeGeneres then announces to her expectant audience: "Our next guest is one of my favourite new artists. I love her so much. Here to perform *Depreston*, all the way from Australia, please welcome Courtney Barnett."

And out comes a bashful 27-year-old woman in jeans and a white Darren Hanlon T-shirt with a guitar slung around her shoulders to sing a lovely, slow-walking song about looking for an affordable house in Melbourne.

This is March 2015, and it isn't the first time Courtney Barnett has taken herself into the "petrified zone" to present her musical and lyrical offerings to an enormous television audience. A year earlier, while promoting *The Double EP: A Sea of Split Peas*, Barnett had appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* playing *Avant Gardener*, a song about waking up in the garden on a 40-degree day suffering an anaphylactic attack: *The paramedic thinks I'm clever cos I play guitar/ I think she's clever cos she stops people dying/ Anaphylactic and super hypochondriatic/ Should've stayed in bed today*.

It was all too true. Barnett had suffered an anaphylactic attack – caused either by an allergy or anxiety – and the lyrics were paraphrasing the real moment. "The paramedic was trying to put me at ease because I was freaked out," Barnett says. "She was like, 'What do you do?' And I go, 'I play guitar in a band.' I was kind of crying, trying to breathe, and she was just trying to make general conversation and calm me down."

"And that's why I thought it was important to put it in the song, because she was like, 'Wow, that's so cool. I wish I played guitar.' And at that moment I was like, 'There's nothing impressive about it. What you're doing is impressive. What I'm doing is whatever.'"

Courtney Barnett's "whatever" is a fast-growing catalogue of romping, ragged tunes that have won international acclaim over the past two years – from Melbourne to Madrid to New York and beyond. Her songs combine a unique left-handed picking style with a deadpan singing voice and sprawling lyrics that lurch from the heartbreaking to the prosaic to the downright hilarious.

Songs of love and loneliness. Songs of lying awake at night and having breakfast on the run. Songs that explore her own troubles and vulnerabilities, as well as that of her generation. Songs that aim – in their purest form – to inform the way we all might relate to one another.

"I suppose I'm trying to make small, subtle changes in a positive way," she says with disarming, halting modesty. "I think that's why lots of my songs are looking at small moments ... all those

basic elements of treating other humans in positive ways. And animals and nature ... Not being selfish."

In 2013 *Avant Gardener* was named track of the year by Pitchfork Media, a Chicago-based online music magazine. That same year, *A Sea of Split Peas* was named album of the week (actually two previously released EPs put together for the international market) by music website Stereogum, and one of its songs, *History Eraser*, was nominated for song of the year by the Australian Performing Rights Association (APRA). Suddenly, Barnett was being written up in prestige journals like *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone* and being touted as a young Australian Patti Smith.

And that was all before the release in March this year of her debut album, *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*, which led leading American music writer Rob Sheffield to comment: "Courtney Barnett makes it sound so insultingly easy. Why aren't there three or four rock'n'roll singer-songwriter records this loose and frisky and funny and stout-hearted every year?"

I meet the "stout-hearted" Courtney Barnett on a leaden, windswept October afternoon at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, in anticipation of her "Twilight at Taronga" concert in late January. The singer-songwriter is wearing a check shirt, black jeans – with a de rigueur hole in the right knee – boots and green socks with grey koalas on them in honour of her favourite animal.

It is a historic day, and not just

because Barnett is getting to pose for a photo with her marsupial friend.

A few hours earlier she discovered she had been nominated for seven ARIA awards, including best female artist and album of the year, and is expected to clean up at the November 26 ceremony.

In the meantime, she's already won best cover art for *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit* at an ARIA pre-awards ceremony. "I never thought I'd win an ARIA for something I drew with a felt-tipped pen on printed paper," the former art school student said when called to the stage.

And just getting up on that stage required, yet again, considerable nerve-steeling. "I was caught off guard and got up and said something unintelligent," she says as we take shelter from the wind inside one of the zoo classrooms.

"I'm not good at public speaking. I have never accepted an award before. It's my worst nightmare. I always seem to avoid awards nights. I get too nervous. You want to say something profound and intelligent and I just get all shaky-voiced and freeze up. It's terrible. I'm sure it stems back to my high school drama class. I would come on stage and panic."

Courtney Barnett grew up in the bushland arcadia of Church Point on Sydney's northern fringe, before moving with her older brother, Blake, and their mother, a dancer, and father, a stage designer, to Hobart when she was 16.

She first picked up a guitar at the age of 10, and begun listening to songs from mix tapes that her neighbour had given



“A LOT OF MY SONGS ARE LOOKING AT SMALL MOMENTS ... ALL THOSE BASIC ELEMENTS OF TREATING OTHER HUMANS IN POSITIVE WAYS, AND ANIMALS AND NATURE...”



Feeling reflective: Courtney Barnett's conversational songs, often about unusual or everyday topics, have earned her a devoted international following.

her and her brother: Jimi Hendrix, Nirvana, Guns N' Roses, Presidents of the United States of America, and a song she kept playing over and over, EMF's *Unbelievable*. Slowly, tentatively, she began trying to sing and play at the same time – but always behind closed doors.

"I was too afraid to sing in front of anyone," she says. "I didn't do that until I was 18. Once I started learning guitar, I'd sit in my room and start singing along to songs – and that was a big enough challenge, doing two things at once.

"I don't really know where [the shyness] comes from. I think it's just a kind of modest upbringing. 'Don't step out of line too much. Don't draw too much attention to yourself.'"

She began writing "stupid love songs" from a child's perspective, and then songs drawn from what she saw around her – objects, snippets of conversation, the smallest details of life – until, in year 10, her English teacher asked her class to deconstruct one of Paul Kelly's most enduring songs, *To Her Door*:

THREE FACTS: *COURTNEY BARNETT*

She hadn't ever been overseas before being invited to play at the CMJ Music Marathon in New York City in 2013.

Her drawings and photography are acclaimed in their own right, having been exhibited in Australia and beyond.

Courtney and her partner, Jen Cloher, run a small record label called Milk! Records, founded in Courtney's bedroom.

"THE MUSIC I LOVE IS WHEN SONGWRITERS TAKE A RISK TO BE VULNERABLE. WE ALL HAVE AN AUTOMATIC SELF-DEFENCE ... BUT WHEN YOU LET IT DOWN YOU CAN CONNECT."

He was shaking in his seat, riding through the streets/In a Silver Top to her door.

What had happened to this man? Why was he shaking? And why did it work better calling it a Silver Top, rather than a plain old taxi?

"I think that was a bit of a turning point, lyrically," she says, fixing her eyes (left green, right blue) on me. "For me, it was a pretty big realisation, that kind of attention to detail."

The influence of Paul Kelly would persist, and when, nearly a decade later, she found herself working on songs for her debut album, it was Kelly's critically acclaimed memoir, *How to Make Gravy*, that she kept by her side for inspiration.

"He's just got a way with words," Barnett observes, a compliment Kelly feels only too happy to return.

"Well, she's droll, offhand, sly," he says in a reply to an email requesting his thoughts on the singer-songwriter. "I like the way she sings like she's talking. She keeps her ears wide open. The best songwriters create their own world and

she's done that already. What would you call it? 'Barnettian', I suppose. I wish I'd written *Nobody Really Cares If You Don't Go to the Party*."

There is a moment of silence in our zoo classroom before Barnett exclaims, "Wow, PK. When did he say that?"

This morning.

"Wow, that's so cool."

Ask her now why she thinks her songs have resonated so widely and she says, "I try not to analyse it too much ... but I would assume it's just that quiet, plain, honest view on things.

"Maybe that vulnerability opens up something when they listen to it. The music I love is when songwriters take a risk to be vulnerable. We all have an automatic self-defence ... sometimes you have to have it. But when you let it down every now and then ... I like it when people do that. You can connect."

Earlier this year Barnett not only appeared on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and *Conan*, where she sang about possum road kill on the Hume Highway, she also returned to *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* with a barnstorming version of *Pedestrian at Best*, with its ironical, fame-flouting chorus: *Put me on a pedestal and I'll only disappoint you/Tell me I'm exceptional, I promise to exploit you*.

This evening she'll be returning home to Thornbury in Melbourne to celebrate her swag of ARIA nominations with her romantic and creative partner of four years, singer-songwriter Jen Cloher.

"I think we're cooking pizza," she says. "I'll cuddle my cat and eat pizza."

What, no big party? "I'll probably have a beer at the airport and a little Courtney moment," she replies.

And what does a "Courtney moment" look like? "Taking a moment to just collect my thoughts. And maybe then I'll say, 'Good work, you've done good.'"

What about the fact that you've been nominated for all those ARIAs, you're about to play the Hollywood Bowl in LA, followed three days later by a concert in New York's Madison Square Garden, then a world tour? Surely that's worth a big "Courtney moment"?

"Yeah, but I haven't cured cancer," she says, laughing, but you can tell she's deadly serious. •

Courtney Barnett will be playing in Victoria, NSW and WA in late December and January.