



Peter Garrett

November 1990

I ONCE APPLIED TO BE the lead singer of Midnight Oil. I'm five foot six with nearly a full head of hair, and I can carry a tune. Instead, they chose a guy who's six foot six, completely bald and sings like Dylan on a bad day.

They made the right choice.

With Peter Garrett as its front man, Midnight Oil has become a national icon. Certainly, there's never been a band like it in Australia, nor a politician who could so successfully masquerade as a lead singer. Garrett is possibly the only aspiring parliamentarian on this planet whose position papers have been musically scored, and then sold on record, cassette and CD to millions of party faithfuls.

Every concert is like a political rally, driven along by a rapid-fire bass line and drum beat—thousands and thousands of young people mouthing angry anthems and saluting the human beanpole with the chrome dome.

For nearly 14 years, Midnight Oil has been playing music that is pure kinetic energy and writing potent messages that have captured an entire generation's antipathy to the status quo. On a range of social and political issues—nuclear disarmament, conservation, land rights, corporate plundering—Midnight Oil has articulated the sentiments of the young and socially conscious in a way that no-one else has been able to do.

It has maintained the rage.

And always, out in front, dancing like a dervish, has been Peter Garrett, the one member of the band who was capable of carrying Midnight Oil's torch into the political arena. In some ways, he is the nearest thing this nation has to a truly charismatic figure—a rock singer-cum-lawyer-cum-politician-cum-environmentalist-cum-preacher-man who is a 'walking

The Whites of their Eyes

icon of outrage', according to *Time* magazine. His influence, whether as president of the nation's umbrella environment group, the Australian Conservation Foundation, as lead singer of the Oils, or simply as Peter Garrett, opinion-maker-at-large, is immense.

What other Australian political figure could pull a huge audience anywhere in the country, at short notice, and have them pay to listen to him? Who else could fill Stockholm's Gothenburg stadium, New York's Radio City, Paris's Elysee Montmartre and have them thundering in the aisles?

Other Australian bands like INXS or AC/DC could. But we're not talking simply about a rock act. We're talking about Midnight Oil. A political phenomenon. And Garrett just happens to be the most visible—and vocal—manifestation of that phenomenon.

That's why his political future has always been of such enormous interest. Garrett entering politics is, in a sense, Midnight Oil's way of getting its message into the mainstream. Garrett has already run for the Senate. That was six years ago. Now he admits that he wouldn't say no to the prospect of being prime minister. He says he is not 'plotting' his way there, but concedes that he would 'give it a go'.

'I don't think at this stage of my life that I can say that it's something I would not do . . . that, no, I wouldn't want to be PM,' he says. 'Yes, I would be quite happy if enough people voted for me and there were a whole lot of people working with me to have a go at that job.'

But what kind of PM would he be? The on-stage Garrett is widely perceived as a hell-raising radical who would have the walls of the establishment torn down. But the private Garrett is a devoted family man and deeply committed Christian whose conservative views on such issues as abortion and reproductive technologies would probably shock many of his fans.

Garrett rarely speaks about his faith publicly, unlike Gary Morris, the band's manager and 'sixth member', who is a Christian of the Bible-thumping, born-again kind. 'He [Morris] is not unlike the Ayatollah in some of his utterances,' says a source who has known him for years. 'He is one of the most extreme people that I have ever met. Peter is not as full-on as that.'

'Talking about your faith,' says Garrett, 'is probably the hardest thing that a public figure has to do. I think that the great danger with it is that it's so capable of being taken in a way which will reflect badly upon it.'

One of the few times Garrett did speak about his religious convictions was on Caroline Jones's radio program, *The Search for Meaning*, on the ABC a few years ago. However, he refused to sign the standard release form that allows such interviews to be re-broadcast or published. Some critics suggest

Peter Garrett

that his reluctance to 'bear witness' is based more on the fear of alienating his supporters than on a desire for personal privacy.

But, says Garrett: 'I really don't want to make something about it because, intuitively, I feel that's the wrong thing for me to do with it. I hold it privately, inside me. I'm not seeking to impose it upon other people.'

It was in 1984, when the band was recording its *Red Sails in the Sunset* album in Japan, that Garrett is said by friends to have suffered a spiritual crisis and turned towards Christianity. Rob Hirst, the Oils' drummer, recalls: 'Pete became a Christian in that year and became a very different person in subsequent months. Most people who become Christian, or have some spiritual revelation, go through a very tortured period and he did, I believe, as well. In the process of becoming another person, if you like, you get ripped apart limb by limb.'

Garrett maintains that he had never lost sight of his faith, but that he 're-embraced that belief [in 1984] in a more real way. It was a turning point in terms of becoming invigorated. Well . . . I think you've got to get down on your knees and I think you've got to say, "I'm stuffing up." And I think you've got to let out a few screams.'

The image of a demi-god on his knees is powerful but it is, perhaps, one of the reasons Garrett can work such a spell over those who listen to and watch him. He has suffered both spiritually and personally, and through that has been made both strong and humble, although his critics would leave out the humble part.

When Garrett was 23, his mother burnt to death when their family home caught fire. He tried to rescue her but was unable to reach her in time. Some people have suggested that it is this psychic wound which has subconsciously fuelled his spiritual and political search.

Garrett sees it differently: 'I have never felt that it was particularly a signpost for me. Neither have I felt that, of and by itself, the incident and the tragedy of it was something that was telling in terms of what happened afterwards to me. I think that I'm pretty much the same person that I have always been.

'If you can talk about what happened in any way, you can say that it hurts but it also focuses you on what's important and what's real in life.'

And what are those important things? 'I am really reluctant to place myself in some kind of situation where I'm saying, "Hey, this is how I think it should be." But I guess, for me, what's important are the obvious things—the power of love and the necessity for love. And the necessity to be able to work and develop relationships with family and friends, and to be productive in civic life and creative life. Just to be productive and real—not just chasing phantoms and material things.'

The Whites of their Eyes

IT WAS NOT LONG AFTER the band returned from Japan that Garrett demonstrated how strong his commitment to civic life had become. In late 1984, he declared himself a candidate for the Australian Senate at the head of the Nuclear Disarmament Party ticket. He captured 9 per cent of the vote but failed to get elected because Labor passed its preferences to the Liberals—an indication of just how frightened the government was of Garrett's powerful pull on the young and disaffected.

Garrett is aware of the continuing strength of that appeal. His public admission that he would like to be prime minister is, perhaps, simply a part of the process of recognising the inevitable—that the lifespan of *Midnight Oil* is limited, but not so the political career of Peter Garrett.

'Generally speaking, when the [PM] question is asked I sort of just do an avoidance number,' he says. 'Not because I haven't thought about it a lot, but . . . I don't want it becoming anything like an issue.'

'But I think anybody who's politically active and who cares about what's going on and what the country could do . . . if they got given a ticket and the opportunity to participate in public life, I think they would say yes.'

'The chances of somebody like me getting into The Lodge are ridiculously infinitesimal. With the sort of things I'm on about—just take the deep green perspective for starters—there's a guarantee that there would be resistance from large sections of the community, and probably large resistance from [my] family. [Garrett is married, and he and his German-born wife, Doris, have three daughters.]

'It's honestly up to more people than me . . . but I'm prepared to sweat if I know that there's some people who are going to be there for the trip.'

Asked what, in the light of his Christian beliefs, his position on, say, an anti-abortion bill would be, Garrett offers a reply that would surprise many of his fans and disturb many feminists.

'I am basically opposed to abortion,' he says. 'But I am prepared to secure [the option] for people who are in a situation whereby they have a completely unwanted pregnancy, and where the present life and future life of child and mother are threatened, to say that there's a place for it and that it can take place.'

What about reproductive technologies like IVF?

'I'm opposed to reproductive technologies from a number of perspectives. The key driving force behind the development of reproductive technologies isn't the securing of contentment for the mother. It's the deliberate technological business of creating, manipulating or embarking on getting a new life up and running.'

'It almost sounds ridiculously heartless to say that people can't go through the process of getting presented with a child . . . and thus get

Peter Garrett

happiness. But in the long run that process is going to lead us in the same direction that genetic engineering . . . is going to lead us.

‘What we really need to be able to do is recognise that in some instances there are rights and wrongs. IVF is an example. And genetic engineering is an example. Euthanasia is another example. If you’re going to place certain values on life, somewhere you have to draw the line.’

MIDNIGHT OIL HAS NOT PLAYED in Australia for three years, except for benefit concerts in aid of Aboriginal rights, Tibet and Newcastle. During that time, its sixth album, *Diesel and Dust*, became an international tour de force, with more than three million copies sold overseas, one million of those in the United States.

That was an extraordinary feat for a band that has claimed it couldn’t care less about international success and which has almost made a religion out of being anti-establishment.

Ever since the late 1970s, when the band emerged out of Sydney’s northern beaches with a deafening, strident version of rock, it has been thumbing its nose at the conventional by defying promoters, booking agents, record companies, the media, and just about anybody who has anything to do with traditional routes to success.

Except the fans, of course. Part of the reason that the Oils hold such a cherished place in Australian rock history is the way they treat their fans. One legend celebrates the time a Sydney pub manager insisted at the last minute that only men wearing collared shirts would be allowed into a Midnight Oil gig. Knowing that just about every one of their supporters would turn up in a T-shirt, the band bought hundreds of collared shirts and handed them out at the door.

In some ways, Midnight Oil has become synonymous with the battle and with the noble cause. Their lyrics are at once odes to the bush and steaming attacks on greed, exploitation and militarism. That they tend to match words with deeds makes the band even more notable, and more of a target for iconoclasts. ‘I’m like most Australian public figures,’ says Garrett. ‘I bear the scars of the tall-poppy syndrome.’

Midnight Oil has raised money for the homeless, the unemployed and drug addicts. It has poured funds into myriad anti-nuclear, pro-peace, pro-environment and indigenous land-rights causes—so much so that a journalist once described the group as a ‘one band community service’.

Just recently, the band held up traffic in downtown Manhattan while it performed a string of songs outside the Exxon building. It was done to remind Americans that the largest energy company in the world had still

The Whites of their Eyes

not been held properly accountable for the oil spill in Alaska last year. All proceeds from the video of that performance are being given to Greenpeace to help clean up the mess. Even the album cover and CD sleeve of *Blue Sky Mining*, the band's latest album—and most melodious to date—is made from recycled board and paper.

And yet the group, like Garrett himself, is not without its contradictions.

Midnight Oil consists of five men who are essentially unchanged by international stardom. As Garrett claims: 'We're not drawn into contemplating Monaco or Switzerland or the Academy Awards. We're talking about amps and surf and home and footie and politics and film and that sort of thing. We're just not high fliers.'

On the other hand, Midnight Oil has become much bigger than the sum of its individual parts. It has become an international caravan with an infrastructure that needs feeding. One hungry mouth is the record company, CBS, which, according to Garrett, believes *Blue Sky Mining* is set to be the next *Thriller*. (It's unlikely to be.)

As a result, the band is careful to the point of paranoia about the public image it projects, going so far as to vet journalists' work closely before agreeing to an interview, as well as insisting that photos come from the Midnight Oil-approved selection.

'They have a nasty habit of cultivating journalists and broadcasters who are Oils-friendly,' says one journalist, who says he is on good terms with the band. 'You are either an enemy of the revolution or a friend.'

As for their private lives, it is as though a hermetic seal has been placed around them. 'They are like startled gazelles in a forest,' says another observer. 'Any twig breaking and they're off.'

It's an extraordinary comment on the band that very few of the people spoken to for this article were prepared to be quoted by name. It's the sort of response you might expect when investigating a sensitive political issue, but not a rock band. Music journalist Ed St John once wrote that Midnight Oil had 'fostered more distrust, loathing and hatred than any other band in the music business'.

The Oils' contradictions, however, manifest most palpably through their music. On one level, their lyrics are ringing maledictions against violence and oppression. On another, their music and antics reek of aggression. It's almost as though they are playing to two different audiences—those who share a common philosophy and probably wear anti-nuclear badges to prove it, and those who look like they keep guns in their bedrooms.

'A lot of the people in their audience look like they want to beat the hell out of you,' says one radio journalist, summing up the air of violence that often permeates a Midnight Oil concert. 'They sing about being kind

Peter Garrett

to Aborigines, and that sort of thing, but I wouldn't want to be an Aborigine at one of their concerts.'

According to one source, who didn't want to be named, but who accompanied the Oils on their 1986 tour of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, dealing with the band was like dealing with a group of 'tyrants. There is a basic hypocrisy about Garrett and the Oils. They talk all the time about freedom and how bad Big Brother is and yet they were acting like absolute dictators. Peter Garrett was like a colonial overlord saying, "You can do this, but you can't do that," laying down the law. I believed in what they were doing, but I didn't like the way they were doing it.'

Says another long-time observer: 'It's an amazing conundrum. In one sense, they're sharing and caring people. In another sense, they don't brook any opposition.'

ONE THING THERE'S NO ARGUMENT about is the vital role the band has played in helping shape Australian cultural life over the past decade. Today, the band's musical prowess is more obvious than ever. *Blue Sky Mining* is a powerful testament not only to Garrett's improved voice, but also to the influence of new bass player and vocalist Bones Hillman.

Rob Hirst remains the band's linchpin. He is regarded by many in the industry as the best drummer in the world, and a superb foil for guitarists Martin Rotsey and Jim Moginie. Moginie has been described as the band's 'musical genius', the one who has written, alone or with Hirst, most of the songs for which the band is famous.

It is rather curious that Moginie, the quietest member of the group, has been responsible for some of their most powerful messages. Those messages have conveyed all the rage and fear and cynicism and burning idealism of an entire generation. They have articulated its horror of the Bomb and disgust for the corporate profiteers; its rejection of the political and economic status quo and its belief, ultimately, in an alternative way.

For the vast majority of young Australians, who live with their backs to the Dead Heart of the continent, Midnight Oil has been the symbol of an awakening white conscience. A group of former private schoolboys, they have raised the banner of Aboriginal land rights more effectively than their backgrounds could ever have hinted at.

At the same time, they have managed to invoke a reverence for the land—and a despair over the way it is being ransacked—that few have achieved.

The Whites of their Eyes

*So you cut all the tall trees down
You poisoned the sky and the sea
You've taken what's good from the ground
But you left precious little for me*

*You remember the flood and the fall
We remember the light on the hill
There should be enough for us all
But the dollar is driving us still*

*River runs red
Black rain falls
Dust in my hand
River runs red
Black rain falls
On my bleeding land*

*So we came and conquered and found
Riches of commons and kings
Who strangled and wrestled the ground
But they never put back anything*

*Now I'm trapped like a dog in a cage
Wherever the truth is pursued
It must be the curse of the age
What's taken is never renewed*

Hirst/Moginie, *River Runs Red*

It is the purity of this message—and the integrity of the messengers—that resonates longest and loudest. The Oils have always played the music they wanted, regardless of its commercial appeal. They have always insisted on controlling their own affairs, on remaining true to a stubborn but noble credo. That they have become millionaires—and remained utterly modest men in the process—is probably a miracle.

The dilemma now, however, is that their very success requires the kinds of compromises that they are increasingly unwilling to make. Hirst, for example, becomes visibly upset when you talk to him about touring the world, because it impinges deeply on his family life.

'It's simply not emotionally easy now to leave a newborn baby behind and say, "Goodbye, I'll see you three-and-a-half months later,"' he says. 'It's the sort of thing we promised would never happen—that we wouldn't be absentee fathers.'

Peter Garrett

Garrett agrees that the growth in the band's international stature can't continue much longer without a corruption of the principles he holds dear.

'I think we've reached the limit,' he says. 'But if we haven't reached it, I think we're reaching it . . .

'It's quite a pathetic thing to be insisting on ozone-friendly cups for drinking coffee out of, and then pumping out I don't know how many billion watts of power every night and [then] jumping in a 747 and blasting back home every three months. Some people will say, "You got to do what you got to do." But for me it's also like, "You've got to live what you say."'

Playwright Stephen Sewell once observed that the band 'plugged into the passionate commitment to human values that is at the heart of left politics. That they are there and have an audience is a significant breakthrough for the left. They have achieved something for social change.'

It's ironic then, that for Midnight Oil to best achieve what they have been talking about all these years, they would have to disband. That, at least, would be the way to get Peter Garrett to stop dancing around and finally answer his other calling.

Postscript

Nine years after this article was written, Midnight Oil were still a considerable force in the Australian music industry and about to celebrate 22 years together as a band. Although cutting back significantly their overseas engagements, they had recorded four new albums since 1990, including the compilation, 20,000 Watt R.S.L., and probably their toughest record in years, Red Neck Wonderland, a howl of protest at Australia's new conservatism and, in particular, the rise of One Nation.

In keeping with their passionate commitment to environmental and political causes, the band members had also thrown their weight behind Australians for Native Title, the fight to save Hinchinbrook Island and the battle over Kakadu National Park.

Peter Garrett left the Australian Conservation Foundation in 1994 to take up a position on the board of Greenpeace International, only to return as president of the ACF in 1998. 'I still have that deep feeling about looking after country,' he said by way of explanation.

In 1997, Garrett was voted one of Australia's national living treasures.