

Anzac Day 2009

Musings on Power and Glory

Readers who follow the AFL might have seen our band, the Vagabond Crew, play a couple of songs at the MCG on Anzac Day in 2009 before the traditional match between Collingwood and Essendon. After we'd played, we were escorted by the very hospitable AFL people to our seats and then ushered into the Legends Room for a cold beer. As you might expect, the Legends Room was chock-a-block full of celebrities, major and minor, including one K. Rudd, then the Prime Minister of Australia, who was surrounded by admirers, young and old.

I watched, bemused, while various members of my band stood in the queue to have their photos taken with the Prime Minister and I reflected on the aura that seems to settle on people who achieve high office or who appear regularly on television. It's the whole "power-and/or-fame-makes-one-very-attractive" phenomenon. (You can't help wondering whether the phenomenon held true for Margaret Thatcher and George Dubya.)

I work, part-time, in the music industry and I also worked in Parliament House for three years. It is, perhaps, because of this that I am immune to the power/aura thing. Politicians hold scant appeal for me. I know and actively like a number of MPs and senators on both sides of politics but having worked with them or been on the turps with them at the Holy Grail on a Wednesday night, there's not a lot of mystique there. But I can understand why Australians who rarely see their leaders in the flesh scurry to press flesh and be photographed with them.

In the Legends Room that afternoon I worked out that in my time I've met more than my fair share of famous people, including four prime ministers - Hawke, Keating, Howard and K.Rudd. Howard might remember me, I suspect, if his memory was cattle-prodded. K Rudd does as we were both nondescript toilers in national life between 1998 and 2001 when I escaped. I encountered the other two, Hawke and Keating, in my capacity as an ideologically committed singer-songwriter. I doubt they would remember me if their lives depended on it.

I recall Hawke as a little bloke who dispensed with great ease the sort of insincere charm one develops in his position if one is not to go mad. (K.Rudd, it appears, has been to the same charm school as Hawke and has graduated magna cum laude.)

My favourite, from a distance though, was Paul Keating. I had an English teacher with the same sort of viperous turn of phrase as Keating and each lesson we lived in hope that "Sir" would unload on some other wretched student. There was the same delicious schadenfreude watching Keating in Question Time. But when I met Keating, I have to say I was disappointed. Rather than the lean, rangy figure of my imagination, I was confronted by a tallish, pale, stooped figure with a good suit and a limp handshake. In fairness, he might have been a bit off-colour....

I met Mick Jagger once and had a twenty minute conversation with him about how most drummers, with the notable exception of Charlie Watts, speed up during the show. Adrenaline, you see. For the first five minutes or so I was genuinely in awe but Mick was charming, funny, easy to talk to and impossibly small. Like Keating I imagined him to be tall and lean but in reality, he was shortish and skinny. He looked like he needed a good feed. Good job Mum wasn't there.

It's funny how power and fame affect the way we view people, at least at distance. To his credit, on Anzac Day K. Rudd was very patient with the well-wishers and those who wanted a photograph. In the pub later that night, as the band reviewed what was a pretty eventful day, I asked the boys what they thought of our esteemed leader.

Responses were pretty consistent.

"Oh, he was OK." "Nice enough. A bit boring, maybe." "He reminds me of one those nerdy little keyboard players with a DX7 from the 1980s." "He'd last about 10 seconds in our band, Shooey. You'd kill him."

I suspect, though, that K. Rudd is much happier as Prime Minister than he would be as a member of the Vagabond Crew. The pay is certainly better. Then there's the super. And the aura that comes with standing at the helm of the ship of state.