# 'Since the Mine Closed Down': Mining Town Closures in the Songs of Mick Thomas

## Paul Genoni

The Australian landscape is littered with the remains of former mining towns. There are various reasons for the passing of these towns; ore bodies drying up; falling demand for minerals; rises in the costs of extraction and processing, and mismanagement. Some of these former mining towns have been transformed into regional centres and survive on new forms of rural income, others exist as little more than tourist attractions, and some are all but forgotten.

The decline of mining towns is often accepted as an inevitable outcome of an industry which depends upon access to a non-renewable resource. Mine workers have learnt to live with their tenuous job security. In the wake of closures the workforce inevitably moves on, often to work in other mining centres, or perhaps to the cities in search of other forms of work. It is a social phenomenon that attracts only fleeting interest alongside the attention given to the broader political and economic impact of mine closures.

In a series of songs, Melbourne based singer-songwriter Michael (Mick) Thomas has focussed on the impact of mine and mining town closures on workers and their families. Thomas is best known for his period as the frontman for the band Weddings, Parties, Anything. The group released seven albums between 1987 and 1996, with most of the material written by Thomas. Since Weddings, Parties, Anything disbanded in early 1999 he has fronted a new group, Mick Thomas and The Sure Thing.

Although difficult to pigeonhole, Weddings, Parties, Anything is usually described as being a 'folk-rock' band. Certainly the two musical styles coalesce in the groups attitude and musical aesthetic, with their instrumentation melding a guitar rock base to ostensibly folk instruments such as piano accordion, violin and mandolin. And although the audience for the band was close to a mainstream rock crowd, their folk credentials were further evidenced by Celtic influences and an affinity for traditional Australian songs ('Streets of Forbes', 'Sergeant Small'), plus original songs by Thomas which drew upon a similar repository of colonial folklore ('A Tale They Won't Believe'). Canadian commentator Jeremy Mouat, in seeking to place the band within a post-colonial context, concluded that their 'music is largely concerned with the connections between past and present, whether it be the bond of memory or an identification with tradition'.[1]

Thomas's songs also frequently carry political positions and nuances which place him within left wing folk traditions. One element of this folk influence emerges in his dependence on storytelling as his preferred mode of expression, rather than the strongly rhetorical approach of more obviously political bands such as Midnight Oil. Thomas has stressed, however, that while his songwriting may not be overtly political, he is nonetheless acutely aware of the political implications of stories and songs which deal with the lived reality of working class lives.

I've always been a talker, telling stories… I reckon that's political in itself, in an age when entertainment is increasingly generated from electronic sources, and homogenized, and stories are watered down… I'm not a Marxist, but to use a Marxist term, I think the way modern media is generated creates a lot of alienation… The message it generally gives people is that your lives, your real lives, are not good enough for drama or fiction or songs... To sing about things that are real and honest and open is a political act.[2]

Accordingly, many of Thomas's songs are concerned with exploring the consequences when 'real lives' are determined by economic necessity. Be it the couple struggling with a relationship shaped by shift work in 'Step in, step out'; or striking nurses fighting to argue their case despite public indifference and media manipulation in 'Sisters of Mercy'; or the plight of strippers plying their craft in north-west mining towns in 'Five shows a day', Thomas has crafted stories-in-song which derive their political impact by exploring the lack of control individuals often have over their working and living conditions.

In so far as Thomas's songs are associated with any particular region or city, then it is his adopted home of Melbourne. His songs are peppered with references to the city's inner suburban areas, and he may be the only Melbourne songwriter to dedicate a song to one of the city's restaurants ('Stalactites'). He has, however, also written numerous songs dealing with rural and regional Australia. These include both the agricultural areas ('Hungry years', 'The year she went away', 'Where the highway meets the cane') and mining towns. And when Thomas has written about mining towns, he has often done so in order to stress their transience and the impact of mine closures on the lives of those who depend upon them.

Thomas's earliest song dealing with the changing fortunes of a mining town was 'Industrial town'.[3] The song was included on the first record released by Weddings, Parties Anything, a four song collection issued in 1985, and it was also included on the band's second long playing record, *Roaring Days*. Although the 'industrial town' referred to in the title is not specified the song appears to be autobiographical. It tells the story of Thomas's relationship with the town of Yallourn, where he spent a part of his childhood. Situated in the La Trobe Valley, 130 kilometres south east of Melbourne, Yallourn is at the heart of an area that has been a coal mining centre since the 1880s. The town was designed and built during the 1920s as a rare Australian example of a model town, in order to house the growing population working in the mines and associated power industry. Yallourn grew rapidly following the Second War, only to have the announcement in 1969 that it would be demolished to allow for the expanded mining of brown coal deposits. Demolition took place throughout the 1970s and was completed in 1982.

Despite coming early in Thomas's career 'Industrial town' is one of his most sophisticated songs. The song is broken both lyrically and musically into three quite distinct sections. It opens with Thomas singing *a cappella* for the first verse, with a slow elegiac tune - almost a hymn - emerging as he commences the second verse.

Down in the valley, the valley so low,
Lay the town over and hear the winds blow,

> Lay the town over and dig it all in,
> For what we once had will not come again.
>
> The people are crying, the people are down
> They look at the crevice where once lived a town,
> And it's not for the money, they cry not for the blame,
> They just cry for a ghost town, such a great shame.

This lamentation invokes a group of mourners, a mining community, standing around a graveside where the body of their town has been laid to rest. At this funeral, however, the grave is a 'crevice' – the open cut pit - which marks where the town once stood. Tellingly, it is for the town itself that the mourners shed their tears, rather than from concern for any financial implications the town's closure may have for them.

The second section of the song is introduced by the addition of a heavy drumbeat which transforms the still nascent tune into a funeral march. The singer has now become the town, voicing bitterness about its own demise. It is a bitterness which confronts and challenges those who have come to expedite the town's demise or gain mileage from its passing.

> Take six politicians to dig me a grave,
> Take six intellectuals, my soul try to save,
> And six union workers, a red flag to wave,
> And one stupid singer to rant and to rave.

The opening of the third section of the song is heralded by a short intense drumburst, followed by a sudden uptempo shift. Thomas is now transformed into that 'stupid singer', and the rest of the song is told in his own voice, as one of those who have only memories of a place that was their home. His intention is not to debate the political implications of the town's demise or to apportion blame, but to record the personal loss for those who made up the community.

The singer is thrust back into his childhood memories of the town, a change of perspective which is indicated by the use of a familiar nursery rhyme, 'Old King Cole'. The punning on Cole, also reveals that this was a mining town where coal was 'king'; a benevolent monarch who provided a secure home for those who lived there.

> Now Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
> Such a merry old soul was he,
> Cause he fed my dad, he fed my mum,
> He fed us children three,
> And I remember the Old Coach Road,
> And the pine trees by its side,
> And I remember the playground there,
> And every swing and slide.

The song then enters the chorus for the first time. It emphasises the emotional attachment between the singer and the town, as he addresses the town as his 'friend', and returning to the elegiac air of the song's opening, he has come to say farewell.

> It's goodbye to you my old grey friend,
> Soon your days are at an end,
> They'll dig you up, tear you down,
> Goodbye to you - Industrial town.

The reminiscences tumble into the following verse. The singer declines the opportunity to make a political point about the living conditions in the town, choosing instead to proclaim his attachment to a place that provided him with a secure childhood.

> In the morning when the sun came up,
> On commission housing there,
> You could feel the ash from the mine some time,
> Come floating through the air,
> But times were good and we didn't mind
> About the chimneys and their mess,
> Three meals a day, a sleep at night,
> We couldn't have cared less.

In the final verse the singer regains his adult perspective, recalling how he returned to the town after a dozen years to find its streets and houses deserted. As the music gathers in intensity, he finally cries out in anger and frustration at the demise of his town.

> Time moved on, we moved away,
> How a young child soon forgets,
> Twelve years later I returned,
> And I see with regret,
> Empty houses, empty streets,
> Not a single soul to meet,
> Sold right out, damned on a whim,
> Sing this chorus, sing this hymn.

That final line pulls together the different musical and narrative threads. The singer calls for a last chorus of farewell to his town, and the use of the word 'hymn' recalls both the mood and the funereal setting of the song's opening. The final chorus is granted, followed by some more rapid fire drumwork and the song slams to an end.

Whereas 'Industrial town' is sung from the point of view of a member of a mining family rather than a mine worker, and evokes the loss of a fondly remembered home, in 'Rossarden'[4] Thomas focuses on the individual miner who needs a job in order to support his family.

The Rossarden tin mine in north-eastern Tasmania was closed in early 1982 after half a century of operation. The mine had been acquired the previous year by Kerry Packer's Forestwood Holdings, who initially invested substantial sums on upgrading the mining equipment and the miners' accommodation. The closure was therefore sudden and unexpected, and unions and miners believed that the acquisition, expansion and subsequent closure of the mine had been part of an elaborate tax

avoidance scam. The workforce left the town rapidly in the wake of the closure, and the entire town was auctioned off in October 1982.

The song opens with a summary of the Rossarden situation, in which the workers welcome the good times and ignore the prospect of trouble ahead.

> It wasn't all that long ago when our mine changed hands,
> We were getting mechanised and the money flooded in,
> But some remained sceptical, and spoke of future falls,
> But since our mines been flooded we've not lacked for mates at all.

But if this opening brings the promise of community, it is immediately shattered by the first use of the chorus that follows. It is a powerful two line burst of anger, cried out over an intense, hammering beat, which announces the mine's closure and tells us that the shutdown has turned the community upon itself.

> An ugly vicious rumour has been flying through this town,
> Nobody says much to your face since the mine closed down.

In the second verse the singer puts the workers' case; that the closure of the mine is due not to the lack of profitability, but rather the tax benefits that can be accrued for the ownership by using the mine – and the miners - in this way.

> Don't tell me it's not workable, all know that it is,
> It always has been, things ain't changed, there is plenty of tin there yet,
> There's plenty there for us to do, if they would let us back,
> But it's more use to the owner as a way to dodge his tax.

It is part of the singer's estrangement as registered in the chorus, however, that he believes the workforce are unsupported in their crisis. The owners and the management are 'playing God', controlling not only their asset but the lives of the workers and their families. The singer, however, feels equally neglected by his union, and his condemnation of them is also swift and brutal.

> Now some like playing football, some like playing God,
> But none like being out of work, when the kids they must be fed,
> Where was our glorious union, when Rossarden felt the crunch,
> Well they debated ideology, perhaps just out to lunch.

Thomas chooses not to pursue the political issue of responsibility for the closure, or the particular outcome for the singer and his family. Rather, a final verse pulls the listener into the aftermath of the closure. Just as in 'Industrial town' there came the point of reflection provided by the singer returning to the town to find it stripped of life and meaning; a similar moment, accompanied by a momentary halt to the restless drive of the music, serves as the climax of 'Rossarden'. On this occasion it is through the eyes of uncomprehending tourists that we glimpse the now deserted town that such a short time ago had provided a living for the singer and his family.

> And the tourists they stare blankly now,
> When they pass through our town,

> For Rossarden is not a pretty sight,
> Since the mine closed down.

In yet another song, 'Walkerville',[5] Thomas provides a further example of the impact of a mining town closure on an individual. In this case it is not the damage done to childhood memories or the hopes of a father trying to support his family, but to a young man and his relationship which is forced to a premature conclusion by the closure of a mine.

'Walkerville' uses as its setting a former limestone mining town of the same name located on the coast 190 kilometres south east of Melbourne. The limestone was loaded for Melbourne where it was used in the construction of the mansions and large public buildings in the rapidly growing city. The mines were eventually closed in the 1920s after some fifty years of operation.

The song leads off with violin, piano accordion and a lightly strummed guitar, which carry one of Thomas's loveliest melodies. The tune is simple but immediately engaging and satisfying, and brings with it a deep feeling of acceptance. When the delicately delivered vocal commences, it carries the same sense of resignation that is implied by the music, and made apparent in the lyrics.

> For the last time, I'll walk down to the jetty,
> Watch the ships arriving and unloading at the quay,
> For the last time I'll ask for news of Melbourne town,
> Though now I am heading homewards it means nothing much to me.

The first appearance of the chorus establishes the singer's reluctance to depart.

> I never thought that I would be the one so sad for leaving,
> As they're loading down the houses from the town upon the hill,
> It's a peculiar respite, it's a bitter valediction,
> As the morning sun was breaking on the cliffs at Walkerville.

In the second verse he declares his reason for not wanting to leave the town – and it becomes apparent that his primary affinity is for a woman rather than the town itself.

> From 'round by Stamford Bridge she came, arrived here with her Dad,
> He earnt his money at the kiln, though I could never earn his trust.

It appears that the woman's father disapproves of the relationship because of the difference in the lovers' social standing. Her father is a company man while the singer labours in the mines. The couple have, however, managed to establish a clandestine relationship:

> But there are venues adequate, between Liptrap and Walkerville,
> For a mis-match made in heaven, when needs they turn to must.

The incipient relationship is, however, thwarted by the closure of the mine. It is a closure ordered by the company, and the same social and financial privilege which

opposed the singer's relationship is now exercised in a manner which ensures that it is brought to a definite and premature end.

> When the mine had finished, the company sent orders,
> And you were bound for Melbourne town,
> But I was heading home.

Although the singer twice declares that he is heading 'home', it seems that he will do no such thing. Home for him is simply the next mining town where work can be found. The music and the lyrics both expand to fleetingly capture the possibilities seemingly offered by the truncated relationship, and which for the miner at least, must now be transferred to the prospect of his next job. Despite the rupture in his personal life the singer's voice sustains the song's note of acceptance. There is nothing, he is saying, that can be done about this situation, and he will 'give thanks' for what love has come his way under these unlikely circumstances.

> They're finding pearls up in the north-west,
> Diamonds out in Africa,
> Gold up on the Palmer, it's all money in the bank,
> But I never thought I'd be finding love here in South Gippsland,
> But that is where I found it, and for that I must give thanks.

As the song climaxes we learn the importance of the reference in the chorus to the 'bitter valediction' on the 'cliffs of Walkerville'. The cliffs have been the place where the lovers finally parted. Accompanied by rising guitars that suggest the difficulty of the separation, the singer finally embraces his personal loss:

> Could you feel my heart-a-shaking on the cliffs at Walkerville?
> And could you blame my soul for quaking on the cliffs at Walkerville?'

The guitars carry the song and the tune to what seems to be their troubled conclusion, but both are finally resolved by the re-emergence of the violins and the melody that opened the song and now serve to re-establish the prevailing note of resignation.

'Walkerville' has a companion piece in Thomas's repertoire, in the song 'Lights of Devonport'.[6] Both were first issued on the 1996 album *River'esque*, and like 'Walkerville', 'Lights of Devonport' is also a story about a man leaving a difficult relationship that has commenced in a mining town.

'Lights of Devonport' features another violin led opening. On this occasion the tune scrambles up from an abyss, the violin supported by a jagged guitar which invokes the anguished tale to come. The singer is escaping an unspecified Tasmanian mining town, and the song takes its title from his final view of the island as he departs for the mainland. As with 'Walkerville', this song also commences with the singer on the point of leaving the town in the wake of an abruptly terminated relationship, but this time the lyric and its delivery carry a tension quite removed from the grace and lightness of tone which characterised the other song.

> Can't say I'm sorry to be leaving here tonight,
> But there's not much that I will miss,

>    And anyway to say I feel betrayed is not quite right,
>    But like betrayal this all started with a kiss.

The singer's departure on this occasion is not driven by the closure of a mine or town, but by the town's disapproval of his relationship. The exact nature of the offending relationship is not specified, but there is a suggestion that it may have been a homosexual liaison;

>    But how could they understand,
>    That a man could get so lonely?
>    Could they ever realise what it takes,
>    To be the one and only?

If such relationships are a by-product of male dominated mining environments, they are also inevitably bound to attract the opprobrium of those towns. As the singer notes, 'in this mining town the only thing not mined is your own business'. Whereas 'Walkerville' was concluded at a point of regret married to optimism, the conclusion to 'Lights of Devonport' is unremittingly agonised, with the singer confronting the extent of his rejection and isolation;

>    I don't know quite where I'm going,
>    I don't know quite where I'll stay…

And unlike the sense of acceptance which characterised 'Walkerville', 'Lights of Devonport' features a rising note of resentment. The barely contained tension that characterises the verses explodes with each repetition of the chorus, which is spat out with increasing venom as the song progresses.

>    And the bastards in the bar,
>    I bet they say good luck good riddance,
>    And I say each to their own,
>    You pack of filthy sodden pissants.

On this bitter note, the song builds to a turbulent swell before finishing on a protracted scream from a guitar.

Elsewhere, however, Thomas does take a more romantic view of the possibilities of mining town closures, by suggesting that even after the mines are closed and the pits are quiet, that the spirit of the former inhabitants may still linger. 'The Ghosts of Walhalla'[7] is situated in the former mining town of Walhalla, located in the Baw Baw ranges in south eastern Victoria. Now all but deserted, at the end of the Nineteenth Century it was a major gold mining centre. The most substantial reminder of the town's former prosperity, and the focus of the song, is a sporting ground. A cricket club had been formed at Walhalla in the 1880's, and due to the lack of suitably flat ground, the top of a hill was flattened in order to acquire sufficient level playing space. The field survives as an attractive arena surrounded by tall trees.

The song opens with Thomas lightly sketching in the history of the town:

As the century waned well a town came alive,
They came in their thousands and tried to survive,
In knockabout shacks, in a valley so steep,
Where the river ran softly, the gold dust ran deep.

The singer pauses to reflect on the fate of the town, and to ponder the accidents of history that separate those towns that survive from those which perish.

They say luck's a fortune and fates a surprise,
While one town kicks on then another dies,
Did the war come too soon or the rail come too late?
But swift was the verdict and cruel was the fate.

But even though the town may be gone in the usual sense, Walhalla remains a true 'ghost town'. Time and fate may have accounted for the town's physical presence, and the former miners and their families have moved on and passed away, but so long as the cricket field remains their spirits shall both linger and play.

Now the ghosts of Walhalla are playing tonight,
On a ragged old cliff, in the pale moonlight,
On a mountain top high, where the crowds never roar,
The ghosts of Walhalla are playing once more.

In the chorus Thomas names a ghostly cricketing trio, who undefeated by temperamental metals or economic fluctuations, and defying the levelling of the town where they once made their living, continue to test their skills.

Stewie-the-gov'nor and Teddy McGee,
They're still slugging it out on the pitch in the trees,
Hitting a big score off Arthur-the-kid,
He's not bad with the bat but he can't bowl for quids.

These ghosts of Walhalla serve to provide something which was lost to the singer of 'Industrial town' - a form of social memory which allows the past to be perpetuated, and perhaps to stave off some of the desolation and loss that inevitably follows in the wake of a town closure.

In a recent discussion of the lack of academic consideration of ghost towns in Australia, Perrie Ballantyne argues that they are troublesome in that rather than embracing the dominant narratives of 'comfort and permanence' they 'have often been a focus for thoughts of rootlessness and alienation'. She concludes that 'For a nation which has invested much in its histories of settlement and progress, the idea of its settlements disappearing is particularly chilling'.[8]

In addressing the impact of mining town closures on the individuals directly affected, Mick Thomas focuses on these anxieties of permanence and belonging, while eschewing the imposition of a political meta-narrative. His songs address sympathetically the dilemmas 'of rootlessness and alienation' faced by those whose lives are coerced by the fate of failed mining ventures, while only rarely and briefly touching directly upon the political issues raised by these stories. Thomas nonetheless

manages to remind us that the closure of a mine or mining town involves not only a loss of jobs or economic potential, but a profound personal loss of place and community. Such closures are therefore political in the most personal sense imaginable.

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*ENDNOTES*

[1] Mouat, J., 'Making the Australian past/modern: The music of Weddings, Parties, Anything', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, 6, 1991, p. 8.

[2] Michael Thomas, quoted in Mouat, J., p. 3.

[3] Weddings, Parties, Anything, 'Industrial town', *Roaring Days*, WEA Records, 25-54301, 1988.

[4] Weddings, Parties, Anything, 'Rossarden', *The Big Don't Argue*, WEA Records, 25-67964, 1989.

[5] Weddings, Parties, Anything, 'Walkerville', *River'esque*, Mushroom Records, TVD 93467, 1996.

[6] Weddings, Parties, Anything, 'Lights of Devonport', *River'esque*.

[7] Weddings, Parties, Anything, 'The Ghosts of Walhalla', *River'esque*.

[8] Ballantyne, P., 'Unsettled country: reading the Australian ghost town', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 70, 2001, p. 35.