

2012

Grey skies over Melbourne Grand Final Week 2012

This was never going to be an ordinary Melbourne week. After all this one has a name—Grand Final Week. The name refers of course to the deciding match of the Australian Football League (AFL) season. The Grand Final, traditionally played on the last Saturday in September, is the most well attended and widely broadcast climax to the seasons of the nation's various football codes. But it is much more than a single game of football. As the name suggests Grand Final Week is an extended celebration of the AFL code and its role as the winter heartbeat of Australia's most renowned sporting city. It is a week in which—usually—little else cuts through the Melbourne news cycle.

The story of Grand Final Week 2012 took shape as the two finalists, Melbourne's Hawthorn (Hawks) and the Sydney-based Swans, were decided by matches played on the Friday and Saturday of the previous weekend. Between the playing of these two Preliminary Finals, however, another event occurred that would dominate the news and push the Grand Final from the front pages in the AFL's showcase week. A woman disappeared from the streets of Melbourne.

This story has a second beginning. In late 1997 Melbourne-based folk-rock group Weddings Parties Anything released their final studio album, *River'esque*. The collection included "For a Short Time", a song that became a regular addition to their live shows up until they played the final gig of their "break up" tour in Perth in January 1999. "For a Short Time" quickly became a fan favourite, a gentle and meditative sing-along usually played at the tail end of a boisterous night.

"For a Short Time" was written by the Weddings singer and songwriter, Mick Thomas. By the time the group disbanded Thomas had guided them through fifteen years, a number of line-up changes and seven albums, while struggling to "make it" in the highly competitive world of Oz-rock. And although commercial success on the back of record sales was elusive, the Weddings developed a reputation as a formidable live band and built up a famously loyal following. The band regularly sold-out pubs and clubs around the country, but they also remained an intrinsically Melbourne band, with Thomas' songs peppered by stories about the everyday life of the city, and in particular its inner city suburbs and communities. Such was the impact of the band on its Melbourne audience that their final shows in the city were the subject of both an "Australian Stories" program on ABC TV, and a one-man play, *A Party in Fitzroy*, by Victorian dramatist Ross Mueller.

The lyrics of "For a Short Time" were somewhat elusive. For although the song clearly told the story of a brief yet remembered encounter between the singer and a woman,

the precise circumstances and the nature of the relationship were unclear. And while the song spoke of the woman being “gone for good”, it was not fully apparent if this referred to her having died or simply gone elsewhere.

Tell me how long is a short time, is it longer than two hours,
Or a bit less than a weekend, is it shorter than a year?
Is it the time it takes to not complete your business with a person,
With a friend you make in transit, to a daughter held so dear.

But these lack of specifics allowed the song to work as a generalised meditation on transitory meeting and parting, and as heard on *River'esque*—in the context of an album bringing the curtain down on the band's career—and performed on stages as the Weddings might their final trek across the country, “For a Short Time” assumed an elegiac tone. The tale of transitory meeting and separation allowed the song to serve as a farewell of sorts, an acknowledgement of the need to make the most of the “short time” the band and audience had together.

Sometimes you can say more, in a drunken hour or so,
Than some people get across, in a life of lying low,
And sometimes you can feel more, for someone you've barely kissed,
But you don't see it at the time, and the moment that you've missed.

After the demise of the Weddings the six band members went their various ways, either surfacing in other bands or returning to former lives. Thomas fronted a new band, The Sure Thing, with whom he continued to record and perform. Amongst the new repertoire he kept “For a Short Time” as part of his live sets, where it typically retained its position as the closing song. In performance, Thomas began to precede the song by telling a poignant, sorrowful but also humorous story of how the song came to be written. He recounted how the Weddings had a brief encounter with a young Australian female fan after a gig in Canada, and how she'd hung out with them for a time drinking and playing pub games as they wound down after the show. As they decided to kick on into the later night she was invited to join them for an extended party—an invitation she declined. They parted with vague suggestions of catching up later back in Australia.

Thomas' story—told over an occasionally strummed guitar teasing at the edge of the song's melody—recounted how this brief meeting had its unexpected sequel some time later at a gig in Australia where he was handed a note from the audience with a woman's name and the notation, “R.I.P.” Thomas shared the note with the band as they tried to discover who the girl was, and while at first they couldn't recall her, eventually the connection was made and memories of that Canadian night and the now deceased young woman came flooding back. Telling this story was presumably a strategy used by Thomas to have his audience share the full meaning of his lyric, to have them

understand his song and how the potential and fragility of this fleeting encounter became significant only in retrospect.

It was a football match that led Thomas to resurrect Weddings Parties Anything in June 2005, when the band played at the annual Community Cup charity match. Thomas declared that the reunion wasn't permanent and that the band would simply come together for occasional shows. Several short tours followed, but generally performances have remained few and far between. One regular date the band has established in recent years is a one-off Melbourne show on the eve of the Grand Final. For long-time Melbourne fans the Weddings Grand Final eve gig is as much a part of Grand Final Week as the Brownlow Medal night, the Grand Final Parade, and the match itself.

And so it was that the members of Weddings Parties Anything gathered at the Palace Theatre, Bourke Street, on Friday night September 28th, 2012. By any measure this annual gig came at the end of an extraordinary week in Melbourne. Jill Meagher, an Irish-Australian woman, had disappeared from the commercial and recreational precinct of Sydney Road, Brunswick, in the early hours of Saturday morning. The news of Meagher's disappearance was spread on social networking sites across the weekend as her husband, friends and family instantly realised that something was terribly wrong, and on Monday morning Melbourne awoke to hear that a young, attractive and vivacious woman was missing without explanation. The news was conveyed continually by the broadcasters and newsreaders of every radio and television station in the city, but most urgently by those at the ABC where Meagher worked. Their concern about the well-being of their colleague and friend was apparent in every word.

As the hours progressed fear for Meagher's safety grew as details emerged of her night out with work colleagues; the missed opportunity to be escorted home; the late night phone call made in the minutes before she disappeared; her missing handbag located in a laneway; the removal by police of personal belongings from the apartment she shared with her husband. In those few days it was impossible to walk the streets of Melbourne; or sit in the city's cafes, bars or restaurants; or ride its trams, and not overhear, or be part of, conversations about Meagher's fate. And as the press competed for new angles the story increasingly became of Meagher herself—of her background, her schooling, her role at the ABC, her husband, and her family in Perth and Ireland. Coverage was fleshed out where possible with an ever growing array of photos showing the missing woman at parties, on holiday, with family and friends, and at her wedding. Jill Meagher became seemingly "known" by the whole city, and the personal element became as integral to the story as her last known movements. Many women in particular expressed the sudden vulnerability of realising they had walked those streets, been to those bars, and taken similar unescorted walks through the normally unthreatening suburbs. Meagher's story was also personal to Mick Thomas. Thomas had lived in Brunswick after moving to Melbourne from Geelong, and his affection for the suburb was expressed in the song "Brunswick" written for the Weddings second album. The

song was a fondly remembered portrayal of an inner city working-class community, underpinned by a nostalgia for the people, sights and smells that had been the songwriter's introduction to big-city living.

Another, less benign portrait of Brunswick, and another crucial piece of Jill Meagher's story, emerged mid-week in the form of some thirty seconds of CCTV footage taken on Sydney Road minutes before her disappearance. It showed Meagher being confronted by a man, his face largely obscured. The "meaning" of the brief interaction was unclear, but it suggested something cajoling, perhaps intimidating on his part; hesitancy and very likely fear on hers. Suddenly the story of Meagher's disappearance became even more compellingly personal, as television relentlessly recycled the vision of these critical few seconds. The CCTV footage was clearly a breakthrough in the police investigation. Within 48 hours a man had been charged with Meagher's rape and murder and police announced shortly after that her body had been recovered from a makeshift grave in outer Melbourne. On Friday, just as the Grand Final parade featuring the Hawks and Swans wound through the city centre, the accused man appeared before the Melbourne Magistrate's Court. And as the day unfolded spontaneous memorials sprang up around the city—on Sydney Road where those final images were recorded; at the spot where her body was recovered; at the entry to the ABC offices; on the walls of inner city laneways. Meagher's ABC colleague John Faine mourned his friend on air, noting the enormous impact of her death on the city, and proclaiming that "Jill's death must not come to define us. That is not what it is like to live in the Melbourne we know."

It was into this atmosphere that Weddings Parties Anything stepped that evening to play their Grand Final gig—their only performance for the year. They were met at the Palace Theatre by a roomful of faithful fans and Friday night revellers. Doubtless many were hoping to indulge themselves and forget how tragically the previous Friday night had ended, and how relentlessly the week since had unfolded.

Appropriately the band opened with "The Swans Return", Thomas' good-natured account of the departure of AFL team South Melbourne to Sydney some thirty years before and the loyalty of their hard-core fans waiting for their return to Melbourne. From there the lengthy set wound through highlights from the band's substantial back-catalog, mixing Thomas' songs—many replete with footballing references ("Is there anywhere that you'd rather be than with me at the MCG?")—with well-established covers that fitted seamlessly with Thomas' own stories. So that his song of colonial excess "A Tale They Won't Believe" was matched by the traditional "Streets of Forbes"; the depression era-based "Hungry Years" was echoed in Tex Morton's "Sergeant Small"; his version of the Australian pastoral in "A Decent Cup of Coffee" faced its image in The Triffid's "Wide Open Road"; and joyful tales of inner-city Melbourne in the form of "Under the Clocks" and "Roaring Days" met headlong with the Strange Tenants' sardonic "Grey Skies Over Collingwood".

After nearly three hours before a typically enthusiastic crowd the band came to their final encore, and their last song of the night. Correctly, the crowd anticipated “For a Short Time” as the closing number, but Thomas prepared them anyway. Dispensing with the by now familiar story behind the song, he spoke briefly of Melbourne, of community and unity, of *this* night before the city’s big day, coming as it did at the end of *this* week. Surveying the crowd and taking its measure he commented on the presence of rival fans standing side-by-side, wearing the colours of the Hawks and the Swans, adding that this capacity to come together despite difference was something to “love about Melbourne”. He noted that since the Weddings had played at this venue on Grand Final eve twelve months previously “we are missing a few people.” The band he said had lost three friends, before adding, without need for detail, that Melbourne “has lost more as a town.”

The crowd was stilled as Thomas led the band into “For a Short Time”, as they heard it remade from a story about a Canadian night, many years before, and an unknown woman, into a story from their own place and time, and a woman now known to every member of the audience. On the back of the familiar melody and lyrics and Thomas’ own vocal the crowd found its voice, singing both the verses and the chorus, finding in the lyrics a story that had now grown to encompass their own recent experience of a life briefly glimpsed and so finally lost.

For a short time, she was standing there, and you saw her,
She saw you and you recall the colour of her hair.
For a long time, you never thought of her,
Then you heard she was gone for good,
You might have cried then if you could,
Would have looked foolish if you did,
Somewhere the tears are falling in your mind,
For a short time.

The final verse of “For a Short Time” is something of an apocryphal lyric in the Weddings canon. It was not included in the recorded version of the song, and not always performed when played live. When sung it arrives as a final poignant coda added at a point where the song has seemingly reached its logical conclusion—a last wrenching confirmation of the nature of sudden, unexpected and final separation. On this occasion as the band arrived at the song’s close Thomas reached for this final verse. As he did so the music fell away, at first seemingly slowed, and then silenced, by the weight of the crowd singing and whispering the familiar words. The band let their instruments fall and stepped forward to sing *a capella*, sharing the burden with their singer and the audience.

Faces come and faces go,
In the ragged life you lead,
But you just file them all away,

You recall them as you need,
When a face just disappears,
You report it as a crime,
Against yourself, against the world,
For a short time.

As the song reached its hushed conclusion some of the crowd cheered and clapped their appreciation; but many others turned away in silence, wiping tears from faces.

Thomas singing “For a Short Time” in this way, at this time, could of course no more change the fate of Jill Meagher than singing “The Swans Return” could alter the outcome of the Grand Final. But it did have the power to change how those present might understand that event; of the explanations that might be given to the inexplicable, and of the capacity for a community to draw heart and hope at a time that might otherwise have seemed heartless and hopeless.

The next day the MCG played host to 100,000 spectators as the Swans did indeed return—at least briefly—and took the AFL Premiership Cup back to Sydney after an epic Grand Final. Questioned after the game as to whether the loss was a tragedy for his team, losing coach Alastair Clarkson drew the curtain on his week by declaring that the Grand Final was merely part of the “theatre of sport” and that Jill Meagher’s death was an example of a “true tragedy.” And on the day after that 30,000 people gathered on Sydney Road on the back of word-of-mouth and a social networking campaign, and walked together in a show of grief and despair, and in memory of a woman and a story that had shifted the heart of a city.