

JB Eulogy

September 5, 2018

My name is Boris Kelly and I am honoured to have called John Baker a friend for nearly forty years. John and I attended the same western Sydney high school - the infamous Rooty Hill High. The school motto was "Persist", which speaks volumes of the faith the school hierarchy had in its students. It was the motto of last resort the sub-text of which was "Look, you don't have much going for you but if you keep trying something good might happen. So, good luck." And yet, in my own life, I often reflect on the Zen simplicity of that singular piece of advice. So often, we are left with only one option in the hard times: Persist. Keep at it. Don't give up.

John was a model of persistence. As a musician and writer, he did the magical 10,000 hours in pursuit of excellence many times over. He did it as a labour of love underpinned by what started as a latent, god given talent only to be crowned in the last weeks of his life by the recognition of his peers and his audience as an inductee to the South Australian Music Hall of Fame. He also did it with a disarming insouciance, a kind of casual ease and distance that made it all look so easy, so natural. Ten percent inspiration was offset by ninety percent sweat, just as should be for the true artist.

When Gayle asked me to say a few words today, I was honoured, of course, but I was also hit by a feeling of shame, in a sense. It occurred to me that when a loved one passes we are faced with all the things we never said to them. A eulogy is a chance to say what may have remained unsaid between you in life. We reach for the right words, the right tone to match our true feelings about the one lost to us. But then I thought how weird it would have been if I'd said these things to John over a cup of tea. I can imagine John's face, his head nodding, saying "Wow, thanks man" while thinking "This is some heavy shit you're sharing me with me here, man."

So, let's reach for the heavy shit.

As a teenager, John was a rough diamond. We knew each other through a shared obsession with music, guitar playing and football, by which I mean the World Game, not the other inferior games. He was a talented midfielder who could have played at the professional level if music hadn't broken his stride and an awkward tackle hadn't broken his ankle. He was very light on his feet. He danced with the ball. I often thought that he would have made a great boxer. And we saw that light-footed dancing emerge on stage as his music flowed through him. The dance was especially strong when he played solos. Some of you will know what I mean.

John trod lightly on the earth in other ways. He was a complex person. The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, spoke about the "hero with a thousand faces" and it could be said that at the end of his life John had become a diamond with a thousand facets. He had this way of bending his personality to the person or people he was with. He was deeply empathic. Each of us might see a different John at different times. He was also a contemplative person, intensely private in some ways, as if the deepest things in him could only be shared with a very small circle. Possibly a circle of one: his wife and collaborator, Gayle. His faith, for example, was very deeply held and strengthened as he faced the greatest of life's challenges but, to me at least, he never pushed or proselytised. He held it quietly only to reveal glimpses and hints in his song lyrics.

John had many friends and admirers. He was impossible not to love. Our friendship was bound by personal history and shared interests. He was a big Adelaide City supporter. Whenever the Socceroos were playing we would play couch commentators by text, praising and admonishing our players by turn and agreeing with Foz most of the time but Martin Tyler all of the time. As a musician, I enjoyed the mongrel in John the most. It's a Rooty Hill thing. We each knew what was meant by that term. A kind of poetic savagery that lives coiled inside but can rip through the fabric of the song, the solo to reveal something primal and preternatural. Flamenco dancers call it *duende*. A kind of

reaching beyond the bounds of the possible propelled from the gut. John had *muchos duende*.

I want to pay tribute to Gayle. In many ways, Gayle was John's gem cutter to his rough diamond. I say that because I believe John reached the height of his talent through his collaboration in life and music with Gayle. Gayle shaped the man into his own image. I know John would be saying "That's very true, man. She certainly has wily feminine powers" or something to that effect. Gayle, we were lucky to know Private Baker.

As a lyricist, a poet John captured both the profundity and the whimsy in the everyday. His characters were often drawn from his life. He was an acute observer. A great story teller with a playfulness in his turn of phrase. But he was also a philosopher of life who saw and felt and told something deeper in the ordinary. In *Caravans*, one of my favourite tracks on The Baker Suite's 2009 album *A Quartet for Car Horns & Brakes*, produced by Paul Grabowsky, John says this.

You know there's something strange about the in-between

Airport lounges, hotel rooms where we have been, where we'll go again

We'll soon be gone, without a trace

But tonight, we found our place.

Vale Diamond John Baker. You trod lightly on the earth. Thanks for the heavy shit, man.