

"The 2008 CD "Wake up the dead" is the latest in a long line of Melbourne-based Neil Robertson's independently released CDs, and embodies a high level of musical acumen arising from his many years of writing, performing and recording.

There are songwriters I call "street-writers", whose songs reflect urban life in poignant vignettes. Paul Kelly is one of these, and so too, I have discovered, is Neil Robertson. The twelve tracks on "Wake up the dead" give us an insight into the whimsical and slightly fatalistic urban philosophy of Robertson. Through his generally well-crafted lyrics we glimpse the ambivalence of his spirituality and his "looking down from above" observations of contemporary life.

I enjoyed walking the night street images of Melbourne in "City of the Free", I endorsed Robertson's scorn for the cult of celebrity in "Wake up the Dead", and I acknowledge that the pragmatism of having to pay the rent subsumes nobler global ideals in "Change the World". This is a lyrically compelling CD, with some magic lines, such as "I spent time in a metal can in the heart of a solar melt", and of turning the TV on to "shed some light to rest my eyes upon". Curiously, within the broader sweep of brilliance we also discover some rare clunkers, like "I've lightened my load": how many times have I heard that line before?

On this CD, Robertson is supported variously by Nick Carrafa on kit, Pete Howell on bass, Chris Pain on harmonica and Moira Tyers on fiddle. Moira also contributes backing vocals, as do Kelly Auty, Wendy Ealey and Leticia Maher. Robertson's guitar is the thread that links these tracks, though he also plays all other instruments. This is a tight and tasteful group of musicians, who strike me as having a keen rapport with Robertson's music. Musicianship is of high quality, as are the arrangements. Robertson has an expressive voice, he sings with confidence, and (perhaps unsurprisingly) with a strong concordance to the lyrical content of each track. I detect some vocal influences (for example, a hint of Tom Petty), but importantly, the uniqueness of Robertson is dominant. The backing vocals are skilfully arranged and a great complement to the sonic landscape of the CD (though they are slightly hazardous on "Beggar's Gold").

The overall recording is great. The crisp richness of Robertson's guitar shines (a credit to Joe Ferguson who recorded it), and the clarity of the mixing gives all instruments a space in which to shine. The kit is clean and deftly not overplayed, and mandolin and fiddle, both easy to butcher in a recording, retain their acoustic vibrancy. I might have preferred to hear the bass given more presence in the mix; it tends to play a definite background role. This, though, I guess, is better than too much! I was pleased to hear a distinct lack of technological gimmickry in the recording, with only one lapse being the panning of the phrase "circular song" at the end of the CD, and I can forgive that quite easily; it kind of makes sense.

This is a CD I enjoyed listening to very much, and will join my list of favourites. It really is a wonderful creation, and it has been my pleasure to review it. - *Mike Raine, 2008*"