
Sam Hunt: A Poet's Life

Sam Hunt threatens a bank heist. He possesses the most idiosyncratic of voices, magnificent, melodic and instantly recognisable. Certainly not conducive to criminal capers and I point this out to him. "I wouldn't have a speaking part, Jamie," is the dulcet rebuke. "I'd turn my balaclava around the other way." And so it goes...

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces
Photo: Dean Mackenzie



VERVE MAN

The myriad offers that Sam receives are mostly refused, "mostly politely." He did an advert for Vogel's Bread once, which "was fun, plus I owed the tax department a hell of a lot money, so they were happy." A recent approach to front a bank ad however would have been a step too far, he'd rather rob them. "I'll do one when we're done," he laughs. "Little do they know that I'm on my way!"

Sam's not long returned from Wellington where he was honoured with a Literary Award by Prime Minister John Key for which he was thrilled.

"We were treated very well by all at Premier House," he says. "We left as The Hobbit Plane arrived. I wanted to get out of the way very quickly."

You're not a fan of Tolkien?

"No, I find the Polynesian Middle Earth far more interesting than Tolkien's. I'm suspicious of fashions and generally suspicious of professors too."

It's a suspicion that he has harboured since his days at St. Peter's College, a Catholic School from which he was expelled. I ask if he feels he was a misunderstood youth.

"I wouldn't say that. I'm certainly not traumatised by it, I never was. My childhood is filled with good times, my parents were very supportive. No one ever told me to stop writing poems, just that there were more important things in this world. Of course, they were wrong."

Do you carry religious beliefs from school?

"I don't believe in 'a God,' as such – Gods, rather. As a poem says:

*'and all you true lovers remember this –
That when you kiss it is a God you kiss...'*

"My religious background gave me a lot, influenced, abstractly, my sense of style and performance. I've always regarded poems as prayers."

Do you still get nervous before performing?

"Shit yeah! If you're a tightrope walker, you have to have a respect of heights."

Sam talks fondly of his early tours and the difficulty of balancing work and play.

"I rarely got that right, fell off the tightrope a few times," he says, mischievously. "Fortunately, it hasn't happened for a while. It can be quite scary."

His antics, appearance and stage presence undoubtedly have a rock 'n' roll quality.

"Many rock stars tell the songs far better than the so-called poetry buffs," says Sam. "Most of my close friends are musicians, some of whom I have worked with. I see them all as poets."

The interview is peppered with snippets of verse, lyrics and prose from Sam's seemingly infinite memory, work of his own

and the many artists he admires – classic and contemporary – in all fields. He is as keen to discuss others as much as himself.

"I first went to New York in 1983 and picked up a book of John Berryman's, whose poetry I'd never been able to get near. But having been in his city for a couple of weeks, his poems started jumping off the page to me and it was because I had finally heard New York."

Sound, for Sam, is as significant as mere sight.

"I like to hear poems," he says. "The poet's voice, I believe strongly, is the key to their work."

He says that he doesn't choose when the poems arrive, he must be patient and equates the initial creative burst to the birth of a child, labelling himself a "midwife" ensuring the safe passage into this world of those brand-new words:

"As a certain poem reads, 'another ten-toed ten-fingered miracle,' nothing equals that creation when I hear it in my head for the first time. I always make sure I get up early in fact so that I am the first to hear it and no other bugger gets it first!"

Supporting Leonard Cohen during his 2009 New Zealand tour was a "great honour" for Sam:

"The first time we gigged was in Wellington. Stage lights are dazzling and you come away half blinded. Someone guided me down the steep stairs and when I reached the bottom, someone else took my hand in the dark. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw that it was Leonard. He looked at me, leaned closer and simply said, 'that's poetry.'"

Feedback is important for you?

"It's rewarding in a very genuine way when someone thanks me for a poem, especially when it has meant something to them at a significant time in their life. Whether it be the birth of their first child or the death of their father, as happens to us all..." There's a slight pause. "Yep, anyway, I think I've said enough about that."

We continue chatting for a time and then Sam tells me that he is a little tired and has a few errands to run. It's been a pleasure chatting, he says. Sam Hunt is a gentleman. I ask how he'll be spending the festive season, but he doesn't go in for all that and says if Christ came back "he would soon disassociate himself from Christianity and Christmas," though adds that of course he hopes it's a time of peace for all. But he must dash, he says, he must drop his youngest son's lunch off at school and "go get a stitch removed from my leg."

Age and fatherhood have no doubt mellowed the erstwhile hellraiser, now 66, though his spirit of mischief, wit and romanticism remains unquelled. He asks if I have enough material and reluctantly I admit that I do, though I could quite happily sit listening to him all day.

There goes Sam Hunt. Icon, iconoclast and perhaps one of the last of a dying breed. A poet.

Sam Hunt's new book, Knucklebones, is currently available from all good bookshops.

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