

## Interview

### **‘It’s not normal, what I’ve seen’: the rise and rise of rapper Tasman Keith**

*The Gumbaynggirr artist counts Peter Garrett among his fans. But when success came, he found himself overwhelmed with traumatic memories*



*‘It’s OK to not be OK’ ... rapper Tasman Keith.*

Sat 9 Jul 2022

**During** what should have been one of the best months of his life, rapper Tasman Keith fell apart. He had been chosen to support Midnight Oil on tour – a dream booking for a musician on the cusp of cracking the big time – but after the shows, he would come back to his hotel room and cry.

“I was down and out,” Keith says, sitting outside a Sydney cafe on a chilly winter morning. “I would get offstage after doing the verse to *Beds are Burning*, which is wild ... But then it was like, damn, I’m really on this tour by myself, with a bunch of dudes who are in their 60s and 70s. It was a setting where I had to be completely to myself that entire time.”

Keith, a Gumbaynggirr man, has witnessed a lot in his early life. Alone in those hotel rooms with an overabundance of time, painful memories began to surface: the phone calls to tell him a beloved aunt or uncle had died, the thought of how many coffins his school-aged sister had seen lowered into the ground.

“I’d sit there and just think about how many deaths I’ve seen in my life and in my community, or [things like] seeing cousins shoot up right in front of me while I’m playing them my new single. That is something I don’t think I’ve ever sat with before and been like, this isn’t normal, this isn’t OK. And it’s OK to address that.”

But if you don’t know the name Tasman Keith yet, odds are you will soon. The 26-year-old has spent the last few years releasing serious, sharp and whip-smart raps that have earned National Indigenous Music award nominations and been championed by youth radio station Triple J (as well as catching the ear of one Peter Garrett). And with his debut album out this week, Keith’s star is only set to rise.

While he now lives in Sydney’s inner west, in an apartment above the cafe where we’re having coffee, Keith spent much of his early life in Bowraville on the NSW mid-north coast. That small town loomed large in his early music, as Keith used his bars to celebrate the old Aboriginal mission where he grew up as a site of pride and resistance – so that when his cousins Googled their hometown, the search engine would spit out something other than the shameful murder of three Indigenous children in the 1990s. Keith remembers his childhood as fun and loving, but, he says, “there was also a lot of shit that happened”.

During his early years in Bowraville, Keith was raised around a tight-knit network of aunts, uncles and cousins. When he was eight, Keith and his immediate family moved to Sydney, where he became aware of “just how little money we had”. He and his siblings shifted between inner-city public housing flats while his mum worked multiple jobs to keep them afloat. Eventually, when Keith was 14, his parents took them back to Bowraville. That return home allowed him to forge stronger connections with family – something he’s grateful for – but also exposed him to the cycles of incarceration and addiction that ensnared some of his cousins.

It was back in Bowraville that Keith first started making music. With little else to do in the tiny town, which Keith describes as “one main street, surrounded by a river”, he and his cousins would cram into the youth centre’s tiny recording studio. They’d stay there for hours, happily writing and recording rhymes in a room that had egg cartons and foul-smelling carpet stuck on the wall for makeshift soundproofing. Hip-hop was already the family business: in the early aughts, his father was a rapper called Wire MC. While his dad is now regarded as a pioneering figure in Australian hip-hop, at the time, it felt like there was a ceiling for artists of colour, stopping them from rising higher in the overwhelming white local scene.

“I listen to some of his music today and I’m like, what a bar, or that line is incredible,” Keith says, reflecting on his father’s career. “I just think Australia wasn’t necessarily ready for what he had to say.”

Rap quickly became the teenage Keith’s mode of expression. At 17, he made his first mixtape and drove around Bowraville selling it out of the boot of his mum’s station wagon. By 22, he’d moved back to Sydney and released his breakthrough EP, *Mission Famous*, in 2018. Keith’s incisive lyrics got the attention of Midnight Oil and, in 2020, he was tapped to collaborate with the band on the Aria award-nominated track *First Nation* – a meeting that would eventually see him invited on tour.

The same year, things started to come to a head in his personal life. Keith's older cousin, known affectionately as Knoxy, passed away suddenly from a heart condition. It wasn't Keith's first experience with grief, but with the pandemic pausing the music career that had been keeping him so busy, he was no longer able to distract himself from his feelings with work.

"That was the first time when death has come up in my life where I was like, 'OK, I have to sit here, because I have nothing going on, and face it,'" he says.



*'I read something a few weeks ago about how you start to face trauma and you're ready for it. I think I was very ready to deal with it.'*

Keith began to process the loss by pouring his emotions into song. Within a week, he had "channelled something [higher]" to write the start of a raw, startling track called Tread Light, which he describes as a conversation with death, told from both his own perspective and that of his late family members.

"It's me getting out a bunch of things I've always wanted to get out and reassuring myself that it's OK," he says of that song. "Like, it's OK not to be OK. It's not normal what you've seen. All this death ain't normal."

Tread Light eventually became the centre point of Keith's debut album, A Colour Undone, which documents the journey of "breaking down who I am to build myself back up again". He wrote the bulk of it in six days soon after that Midnight Oil tour, where he was hit by the full weight of his cousin's death. Penning the album was a way to begin examining the trauma and loss that has swirled through his early life – work he's now continuing with tools such as therapy and meditation, after realising that music shouldn't be his only outlet. It was a painful process, but a necessary one.

“I read something a few weeks ago about how you start to face trauma and you’re ready for it,” he reflects. “I think I was very ready to deal with it then. Because it had always been there.”

But *A Colour Undone* isn’t only the story of Keith’s dark night of the soul. There are moments of joy and levity, including the lovestruck Jessica Maubouy collaboration *Heaven With U*. The album’s lead single is a pop-tinged break-up song called *Love Too Soon*, in which Keith wears his heart on his sleeve singing about heartbreak over a soaring, dance-down-the-street beat.

For a rapper who made his name writing the fiercest and most incisive bars, it was a curveball – one that he only had the guts to release because of those challenging nights alone on tour.

“If I didn’t go through what I did go through, sitting in those hotel rooms, I probably wouldn’t be comfortable within myself to step out the gate with *Love Too Soon*,” he laughs. “Dancing on a pier and doing the most un-Tasman Keith shit possible.”