

# Plenty of cheese but hold the irony

Joel Sarakula's slick '70s sound is built on sincerity – really, writes **Bernard Zuel**.

**J**oel Sarakula has never seemed made for these times – that hair, those clothes, those soft-rock grooves.

Across seven albums, the Sydneysider, long resident in the UK, has perfected a style of music deeply rooted in the 1970s, drawing from sweet smooth pop, jazz-influenced rock, soul and the silkier end of disco. As shown on his new album, *Companionship*, it's golden hits radio material, but new; it's technically adept but hides its technique under big pop hooks; it's creamy and just enough cheesy, but made seriously. And that's the rub.

In Europe, he can tour widely, but in Australia, it would be expected – even demanded – that he be ironic, playing the songs with an arch sensibility.

"Yes, to do a complete piss-take," he says. "It's totally influenced by the '70s but there is a level of humour in what I do; it's not complete pastiche or homage.

"The concept of guys, basically middle-aged with glasses, coming on doing music, yacht rock, that was seen as sexy, smooth, back in the day, there is potential for humour in it. But there is sincerity and respect in what I do as well.

"I can honestly say that Steely Dan is one of my favourite bands of all time, and I can say that without a wink or a smile."

While he may be operating on a small scale, Sarakula's ventures into a cornucopia of styles means in Europe, he has fans in soft rock, soul, Britain's northern soul scene, and jazz-rock pockets, "and I've even snuck onto festivals that had ska bands and rockabilly".

"I thought 'how do I pull this

off?'" he says of one festival in Spain. "I looked out and there are all these rocksteady guys with suspenders and massive Doc Martens, and bald, and I thought 'this is going to be tough'. But by the end of the set, they were like dancing to my disco tunes."

So what appeals about a sound and a style that in Australia is more 2CH than Triple J?

"I've always been a bit of a jazzier, or wannabe jazzier, and that was a time when jazz connected a lot more with pop or rock music," he says. "I think it's potentially more about that, that I like those kind of jazzy chords that make things sound a little more '70s, just because they fell out of fashion

after that.

"But hearing songs like [Steely Dan's] *Peg* and [Doobie Brothers'] *What A Fool Believes*, it's amazing the sophistication and breadth of the

harmonies underneath the songs, and they were huge, huge hits. I want to regain that idea of doing a sophisticated song and still making a three-and-a-half-minute pop song that is really catchy."

If that makes him sound a bit out of step, Sarakula can live with that: "I know I sound like Homer [Simpson] when he says 1972 was the greatest year of music, though he's probably saying it for different reasons, and probably the bands he is thinking of are Lynyrd Skynyrd or someone like that."

Sarakula's attention to detail in his productions belies the budgets, leading him to say things like "one thing that I think has been lost a little bit: the craftsmanship in songwriting and production" and mean it. The old-fashioned way.

*Companionship* is out now.

*There is sincerity and respect in what I do.*



Sarakula has entry into different scenes.

## Please God, just one last dose of Wharf Revue chemistry

### CABARET

#### PHIL SCOTT & FRIENDS

★★★★

The Reservoir Room, June 27

Reviewed by **JOHN SHAND**

If *The Wharf Revue* goes ahead this October, it will be the finale of the show that, since 2000, has had politicians wondering why they bother to fund the arts.

The poor sods donate great wads of our money, and in return are rendered in a form that's of use only on the garden.

The fallacy, of course, is that, a few close friends apart, there are no great wads: look at the leaky life buoy belatedly and reluctantly thrown to the arts last week. The term "sink without a trace" springs to mind.

Let's just quietly pray we do get one last shot of the chemistry and



peppy wit of Phil Scott, Jonathan Biggins and Drew Forsythe at their best. Here they offered a lump of a primordial musical: initially a smelly concoction of mud, slime and Sondheim, that then peered out from the cave towards humanity's triumphant future, replete with colonic irrigations and Singapore slings.

This edition of the Reservoir

Phil Scott has corralled friends into a cabaret; Drew Forsythe and Amanda Bishop in previous collaborations with Scott.



Mary Rodgers and Stephen Sondheim's always-entertaining *The Boy From...* (with apologies to Antonio Carlos Jobim). Biggins helped Scott insert a stiletto between the state government's second and third ribs over its attempts to run what it amusingly calls a public transport system; Scott's jazz-bassist brother, Craig, joined for a quick bolt across Bach,

Bizet and Mozart; and dashing trumpeter James Sarno hopped aboard a galloping *Caravan*.

On his lonesome to begin and end, Scott told a funny tale of working with the formidable Bea Arthur in Edinburgh and closed with his impression of *The Entertainer* played by a pianist with polyester ears. He also had singer and Reservoir Room organiser Catherine Alcorn on hand for two numbers, including teaching Phil Collins' usually frightful *In the Air Tonight* to behave as a polite piece of lounge jazz.

Let's hope *The Wharf Revue* gets to fire its farewell salvo, and meanwhile The Reservoir Room offers startlingly high production values in these straitened times.

Phil Scott & Friends: [livestream.com/dreamchannel/events/9154762](http://livestream.com/dreamchannel/events/9154762).