

which is really hard to get right. I was so inspired by them as an ensemble; they are amazing classical musicians and totally open-minded."

Noonan had met Cassidy in Brisbane in 2011, when both were performing at the Queensland Music Festival. Her original idea was to create a project celebrating the work of beloved Aussie poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig ("I gave Paul a little book of Leunig's work") but distance made writing together difficult. (Leunig has been collaborating with Noonan and her jazz trio Elixir, with a live debut at Bennetts Lane Jazz Club in Melbourne last June following the release in February of an EP, *Peace is My Drug*.)

In 2013, Noonan found herself in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, doing a double take at the large brown building she had passed a zillion times before, the Judith Wright Centre: "I realised with great embarrassment that I didn't actually know who Wright was. So I went inside, found an anthology of her poetry and read it cover to cover. Her work just blew me away."

She read on, discovering that Thomas Shapcott, the Aussie poet who inspired Elixir's album *First Seed Ripening* (which won the 2011 ARIA award for best jazz album), had edited Wright's final book.

"Judith was also a founding member of the Marine Conservation Society, battling to protect areas like the Great Barrier Reef," says Noonan. "And when they had their 50th anniversary celebrations at QPAC last September I performed a song I'd written for them. Tim Winton was there and he told me he'd put Wright's poem *Surfer*, which happened to be the poem I'd chosen to score, on the opening page of his new memoir [*Island Home*]."

"Then just before Judith died at the age of 85 she was at the front of the march in Canberra for reconciliation and land rights. We began recording this album on Australia Day, which I haven't celebrated for years since I found out what it represents, and which is prompting some hard discussions right now, in the country where the First Fleet sailed from."

Wright's prose is more pertinent than ever, says Noonan, a former ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and an artist who has also gone her own way. "Judith was a very talented woman of conviction." She flashes a smile. "A bad ass, basically."

With financial blessing from the Australia Council, Noonan set about cherrypicking the project's composers, among them Carl Vine, John Rodgers, Richard Tognetti of the Australian Chamber Orchestra and previous Brodsky collaborators Andrew Ford and Iain Grandage. Her brief was simple: choose a poem by Wright and go for it.

"So yeah, I nabbed *The Surfer*, this Zen nature poem about a man and his relationship with the sea. But all the songs are beautiful for different reasons. Richard Tognetti's *Metho Drinker* has this sort of spiritual keening and moaning. Carl Vine has done a beautiful job with *The Slope*, a profit-before-environment poem with such incredibly haunting words."

She rummages in her bag for the sheet music and reads out the words that run under the dancing notes. "The core of suicidal Earth plotted them, then / That politician, his grey look sidling like a rat / These profit makers cheating for position ..." A look. "Isn't that powerful?"

There's *Failure of Communication*, a poem about "the space between" that was chosen by Rodgers, Noonan's former teacher at the Queensland Conservatorium and a man she calls a genius: "I still have an improvised vocal to do for that song. John's advanced improvisation technique course was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but he knows I really like improvising."

A keen experimentalist as well as a seven-time platinum selling artist, Noonan makes a point of breaking down barriers, of challenging herself. In a career spanning opera, jazz, pop, rock and dance music, she has performed in the pop-rock group George (sharing lead vocals with her brother Tyrone), the aforementioned trio Elixir and bands the Captains and, most recently, Vanguard. Her collaborations range from duets with her mother, Maggie Noonan, and projects with classical guitarist Karin Schaupp to all-female projects for the Cancer



JUDITH WAS A VERY TALENTED WOMAN OF CONVICTION. A BAD ASS, BASICALLY

KATIE NOONAN

Council's Pink Ribbon campaign and work across art forms with visual artists, theatre and dance companies.

Oh, and poets. In 2005 she teamed up with Grabowsky for the song cycle *Before Time Could Change Us*, which featured the words of Australian poet Dorothy Porter (and won that year's ARIA award for best jazz album). Porter, Shapcott, Leunig, Wright ... While Noonan's own lyrics tend to be thoughtful, often spiritual musings on personal and universal issues, her love of prose — Australian prose — has given some of our greatest bards a fresh platform.

Creative freedom is vital to Noonan, who is rarely seen at openings or in society pages and never on reality television singing shows, and who has moved between record labels, reluctant to be tied down. Her most recent album, *Transmutant*, was enabled through a Pledge crowd-

funding campaign that reached its target in just 48 hours, with donations going to mental health charity Beyondblue; first single *Quicksand* was accompanied by a black-and-white video featuring Charlene Yap, principal dancer with the Sydney



Katie Noonan, main picture and right; top, the Brodsky Quartet, from left, Daniel Rowland, Ian Belton, Paul Cassidy and Jacqueline Thomas

Dance Company, and a newly shorn and peroxided Noonan. "It was a physical representation of the album," says the former redhead, "and the fact I'd gone through some tough stuff, losing people and being badly let down by a friend, and come out different and stronger."

A text pings in from the other side of the world; Noonan laughs as she shows me a photo of her young staffordshire terrier, Sassy, wearing a pair of headphones. "She likes the mixes," Noonan's saxophonist husband, Zac Hurren, has written underneath. Pics of her two fair-haired sons, Dexter, 10, and Jonah, 9, follow. Family is vital to Noonan, who does not allow a TV set at home ("I want to preserve their innocence for as long as I can") and tours only projects she loves ("I'm not going to leave my family if I don't want to do it").

The daughter of journalist Brian Noonan and one of the Australia's best-loved sopranos, Maggie Noonan, Katie and her brother Tyrone, seven years older, grew up in a house filled with music. For a while she intended to be a concert pianist, having learned the instrument from the age of three, until she realised how solitary it was and how intensively she would have to practise.

"[French pianist] Richard Clayderman was my childhood crush; I had his piano book with those Vaseline cover photos and thought he was sooo handsome. I loved Glenn Gould's Bach stuff and I really loved Keith Jarrett.

"Brisbane was like a big country town back then," she continues, "which I think was hard for my mum, who taught singing and piano at home after moving up from the big smoke of Sydney. I just spent my days reading books, riding my bike, listening to music."

She entertained the idea of becoming an investigative journalist, doing a Year 11 work experience stint in the ABC newsroom. The muse, however, was calling.

"I'd heard Bjork, Jeff Buckley and Tori Amos and these other artists who didn't sound like anyone else, and started writing songs. Then I moved into this big creative student household, getting into the opera degree at the Conservatorium, and completely by accident forming George with an actor in the house named James Stewart, his twin brother Nick and my brother. Much to our surprise our [2001] debut album, *Polyserena*, went platinum."

At 20, Noonan wasn't prepared for the effect her self-penned songs had on listeners. The hit single *Special Ones*, which featured her French horn arrangements, had women twice her age stopping her in the street to thank her for giving them the impetus to leave a violent relationship.

"I was like, 'Shit, that's not how I meant it,'" she says.

"It was beautiful that people reacted like that but it was actually written about someone who had a serious addiction and wasn't a good person to be around.

"I didn't know how to respond to these really strong reactions but I've got better with age.

"*Quicksand* is a sort of grown-up, less angry version of *Special Ones*; it's about a breakdown of trust with someone who was really close to me, a person I thought really knew me and accepted me but didn't know me at all, and figuring how to function after that." She pauses and shrugs.

"But then I've had people who've emerged from the depths of mental illness writing to say that the song exactly describes their journey. And I'm like, thank you for telling me.

"Music is the most powerful tool to bring people together. I love looking out at my audiences and seeing a tattooed, pierced renegade sitting next to a beautiful older couple in their 70s. And the Brodskys' audience is equally varied."

Thus reminded, she stands to go. The four musicians are waiting in the studio next door; there's still that improvised vocal to be done.

Noonan flashes a grin. "For me, making music is a privilege," she says. "A privilege and a responsibility."

Katie Noonan and the Brodsky Quartet's national tour begins in Brisbane on April 28.