

MUSICIANS IN DETENTION

emotive song about a life on hold. The song features Bridie on piano alongside violinist Hope Csutoros from Bridie's chamber pop group My Friend the Chocolate Cake. The video, choreographed by the Melbourne City Ballet, sees dancer Bilal Zeine moving behind prison bars. Bandesh's artwork has been printed on T-shirts, and exhibited in galleries.

His plight – alongside that of fellow detainee, Kurdish singer-songwriter Mostafa 'Moz' Azimitabar, who was incarcerated on Manus for six years – has focused the ire of other high profile artists-activists including, variously, revered singer-songwriter Shane Howard (pictured right); Jim Moginie, the founding member and leading songwriter for iconic Australian rockers Midnight Oil; indigenous activist and Greens senator Lidia Thorpe; former Socceroos football captain Craig Foster, whose #GameOver campaign is focused on ending offshore detention and getting people to safety. "Farhad is a true artist and a proud, lovely man who has committed no crime. People want to engage with him," says Bridie.

In June 2019 Bandesh was evacuated on physical and mental health grounds to the Mantra Hotel, a makeshift immigration centre in Melbourne's suburban Preston. In late March 2020 he was forcibly transferred to the prison-like MITA government facility after peacefully protesting unsanitary conditions amid fear of COVID-19. Bandesh and detainees including Moz had tweeted photographs of them holding placards with words highlighting the situation at the Mantra, where guards are unmasked and social distancing protocols impossible.

Two nights after appearing via video link on ABC TV current affairs programme Q&A to discuss the protest, Bandesh was forcibly removed from the Mantra Hotel and taken 12km to MITA without warning, and without his personal possessions. Organisations including Amnesty International have demanded answers from Home Affairs, and express grave concerns for the 1,400 refugees in Australia's immigration detention regime, along with the hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers still trapped in Australia's offshore detention system.

Like Bandesh, the majority of detainees are unauthorised boat arrivals seeking refugee protection. Instead they have fallen victim to the Australian government's hardline policy of indefinite detention, aimed to deter and more surreptitiously, win votes. Australia is a co-signatory of the UN Refugee Convention, which states that it is not illegal to seek asylum. Lawyers for organisations including Amnesty and the Refugee Council of Australia argue that the conditions to which these refugees and asylum seekers are subject fall under the definition of torture.



Shane Howard's latest solo album *Dark Matter* (to be reviewed next issue) tells of Manus on the track 'Prison Island'. It's a Woody Guthrie-esque take on those caught up in Australia's offshore detention regime. 'I was born into conflict/My country besieged/To kill or be killed/Or scatter and flee,' he sings, his social



Singer-songwriter Shane Howard has been a vocal critic of Australia's detention system

Darren Donlen

conscience as sharp as it was when he penned the beloved land rights anthem 'Solid Rock', which he recorded with his band Goanna in 1982.

Howard launched *Dark Matter* in March at the Port Fairy Folk Festival. Between songs he told the crowd of Bandesh and his missing guitar. The donations rolled in: "Ewen Baker who plays fiddle and mandolin in my band, and his great friend the folk singer-songwriter Pat Evans, are both instrument makers. With their help we sourced a beautiful Cordoba guitar, made with nylon – not steel – strings according to regulations," says Howard. "Then came COVID-19. We were about to get the guitar through when Farhad began his silent protest and was transferred."

"Now the guitar also sits in limbo. 'While my guitar gently weeps...'," Howard quotes ex-Beatle George Harrison. "These are individuals who have fled persecution in their own country, and who we have abandoned," he continues. "No one wants to see people smugglers profiting from misery. But surely, in such an interconnected world, we could set up a system to help people in need."

"These Kurds hail from an ancient civilisation that has given the world so much in terms of music, literature, storytelling, art and poetry. There's such irony in the fact that Farhad's guitar and paints have been taken away." A pause. "There is also such irony in the fact that last February, here on the east coast of Australia, some residents and holiday