

“My job is to play like myself”

Making a living from drumming was never a given for Jim White, but with a lot of sweat he made it a reality, writes **Jane Cornwell**

It's the final boarding call on a flight from Melbourne to Adelaide, and a wild-haired older guy wearing an open-necked white shirt and a tattered black blazer has joined the queue, clutching a drum-shaped carry case.

Anyone familiar with Australia's alternative music history might recognise him as Jim White, formerly drummer with such seminal Eighties post-punk outfits as Venom P. Stinger and The People With Chairs Up Their Noses.

Or more probably, as engine room for veteran instrumental rock trio Dirty Three, feted by critics and fans (including super fan Nick Cave) as one of the world's best bands ever.

“We're haven't played together in a while,” White, 60, will tell me of his ongoing collaboration with Melbourne-based guitarist Mick Turner and violinist Warren Ellis, a long-time resident of Paris. “But no one has ever quit. It's great that we still exist.”

Each musician is busy doing his own thing: Ellis is a core member of the Bad Seeds and Nick Cave's go-to sideman. Turner paints, and plays and records solo. But of the three it is the New York-based White – ensconced in his Melbourne birthplace over the interminable lockdown – who is easily the most multifarious.

Today he's on his way to play the WOMADelaide festival with Springtime, a new art-rock threesome featuring singer/guitarist Gareth Liddiard (The Drones, Tropical F**kstorm) and Chris Abrahams, pianist with Australia's other mythical instrumental trio The Necks.

After which White will head to New York to take part in a memorial concert for the late producer Hal Willner, playing in a house band supporting a starry line-up including Tom Waits, Elvis Costello and Cat Power, with whom White regularly collaborates.

As he does with a long list of alternative music greats: Bill Callahan, Marianne Faithfull and Beth Orton. Courtney Barnett, Nina Nastasia and Will Oldham. More. White's penchant for experimentation has seen him drumming inside a glass box for More Up A Tree, a performance piece commissioned by BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) featuring dancer Claudia de Serpa Soares, and continuing a musical partnership with experimental filmmaker Jem Cohen and producer Guy Picciotto of punk outfit Fugazi.

Fame has never been a motivation, insists White, sitting in a shipping container-cum-dressing room at WOMADelaide's Botanic Park, where Springtime's thunderous free-for-all flushed the birdlife from the trees and the world music purists from a gleeful crowd.

“Does it sound fresh? Does it sound alive? Does my body feel good when I'm playing? That's all that concerns me,” he says, crinkly-eyed and amiable, his tattered blazer hanging over the back of his chair. (“He has the placid expression of someone who might not mind sleeping in his clothes,” wrote The New York Times, reviewing More Up A Tree).

“My job is to play like myself.” He pauses and smiles. “But never in exactly the same way.”

Having formed in 1992 then toured incessantly for years, the Dirty Three's open-ended, often astonishing workouts gave White time and space to hone his playing style, all off-kilter beats, fluid shifts in body weight and slow-mo left overarm strikes. More recently, thanks to much jamming and playing in Xylouris White, his acclaimed duo with Cretan laouto master George Xylouris, he has developed “the drop” – in which he lets a mallet tumble from cymbal to tom to the ground then catches it on the upward bounce.

Superlatives follow him. PJ Harvey, another collaborator, has said that White plays like a ballet dancer. “An action painter behind the kit,” declared the New Yorker. SPIN magazine deemed him one of the greatest alternative music drummers of all time.

It makes sense, then, that White has been announced as artist-in-residence at next month's Rising Festival in Melbourne, where he will grace four separate projects: Xylouris White (which happened to wow WOMADelaide in 2017). The Double, an act that sees White and American guitarist Emmet Kelly deliver a pummelling new beat alongside moves by dancer/choreographer Jo Lloyd. There's the Australian debut of his duo with classically trained American folk experimentalist Marisa Anderson; and then there is Ed Kuepper with Jim White, in which the Aussie alternative music legends recast anthems by the Saints and Laughing Clowns into new exciting shapes.

“There's a mystery to making music, a feeling of going into the unknown, that has always appealed to me,” says White. “Sometimes the sticks are just flying through the air and you're sort of just steering the momentum, this freedom in your hands.”

The second of three children born to a university professor and a teacher, both activists, White grew up in Clifton Hill in Melbourne's inner north. His earliest musical memories involve listening to Bob Dylan, Peter Paul & Mary and other LPs left behind by a house guest, the poet/radical Adrian Rawlins (“He'd scrawled his name on them”), and being taken to concerts by Ike and Tina Turner and Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis.

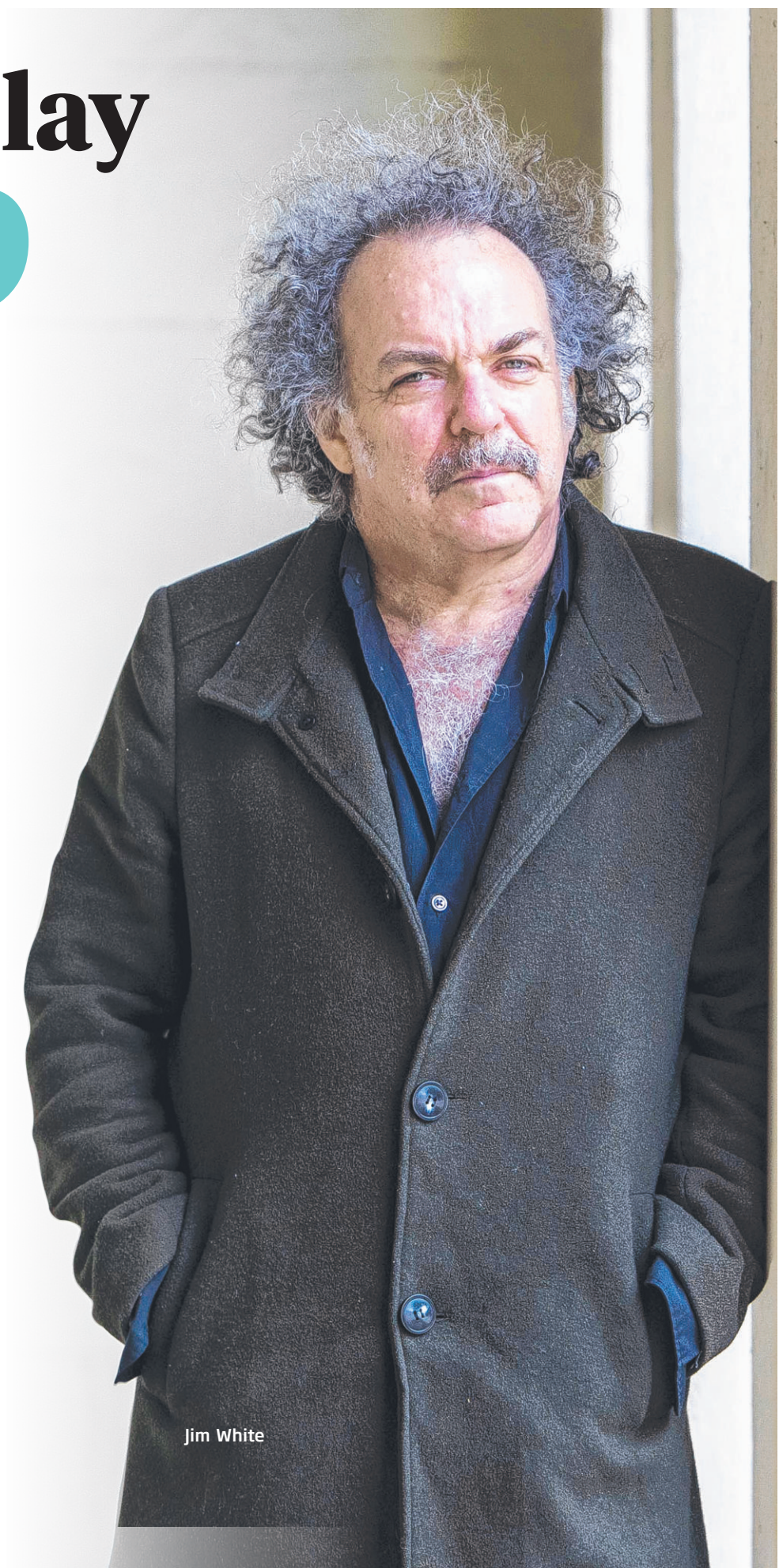
While no one in the family played music, creativity was encouraged. Both his sisters pursued dance (Anna White's 2021 short film *In My Mother's House* uses dance as a metaphor for the mother-daughter relationship); Jim, in the middle, also had rhythm in his DNA. Aged 14, inspired by the raw power of Stooges-era Iggy Pop and Rock'n'Roll Animal by Lou Reed, White drummed on chairs and practice pads until his parents bought him a drum kit. “There wasn't a culture of playing in bands at my school, which was 70 per cent Greek, 20 per cent Italian. Which added to the mystery.”

At 18 he got his licence, stuck his drums in the boot of his old sedan and threw himself into Melbourne's vibing live music scene, depping in Hunters & Collectors, playing percussion on an ironing board in People With Chairs Up Their Noses and joining pianist Conway Savage (later of Bad Seeds) in bands including country rockers Feral Dinosaurs. White was enrolled in a maths course at Melbourne University when Laughing Clowns, a new group founded by guitarist Ed Kuepper of proto-punks the Saints, played a lunchtime gig in the Student Union. The drummer Jeffrey Wegener blew him away.

“Jeffrey was just really different. Totally in control of his rolls, but with a punk-rock energy matched to what I understood jazz to be like. I felt totally inspired.”

White duly quit his studies. Shortly afterwards, he was offered a practice space in an inner-city squat overlooking the GPO: “An artist/performer named Kate Buck gave me a key. I'd take a book for reading during breaks, and go there every day and make shit up.”

“Kate's little brother Eddie Midnight used to hang around, wearing his school uniform. Later, when I was in the Dirty Three, he found this vintage 1920s snare drum in a house somewhere, covered in dirt and shit, and gave it to me. I learned to love the open sound these old drums have, particularly as the Dirty Three doesn't have a bass player, so there's a lot of room in the



Jim White

Aaron Francis

bottom end to move into.” He gestures toward the very same snare drum, now tucked back inside the carry case he brought as hand luggage. “That drum has been around the world with me like a hundred million times,” he says. “I'd love to know its original story.”

Making a living from drumming was never a given. “Early on it felt ridiculous to think so. But one of the reasons why Melbourne was so great back then was you could play every night if you wanted to, and I knew that you had to play a lot to get good.”

“When the Dirty Three had the chance to go to America we jumped on that adventure. We played hundreds and hundreds of shows. Words got out. Different labels came to see us. We opened for bands like [indie heavyweights] Pavement and the Bad Seeds.”

White got good, became great. He developed an almost professorial approach that recalled the first principle theory of his maths background, breaking down complicated manoeuvres into basic elements then reassembling them from the ground up.

“When I did math I would memorise the formulas eventually,” he says, “but I could always

figure out how to derive them from nothing. It's the same with playing music. I'm not trying to make things different on purpose, like I used to do in the early days.

And in that nothing, at its core, lies mystery, magic, imagination.

The pull of the unknown is what fuels his playing and collaborations, his peripatetic musician's life. It's what took him from a base in London to living in Chicago to his long-time home in New York.

But always, there's been Melbourne. An ever-changing constant.

“I've come back most years to see my mother, father and sisters, and I'll always play some shows,” he says. “But this pandemic period is the longest I've spent here since I moved away permanently.”

He sighs, smiles. “Being away, then coming back, I've realised just how Melbourne I am. That who you are is so much about where you're from.”

Jim White is *RISING's* artist in residence and will perform at the festival with long-term collaborators at various venues on June 1, 3, 8 and 9.