

Rise up

From Xavier Rudd's heartbreak comes some powerful new music

BY LYNN SAXBERG, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 15, 2010



Xavier Rudd was crushed by the collapse of his marriage. But the Australian known for his joyful festival shows channelled the anguish into a new disc that contains some of the strongest songwriting of his career.

Photograph by: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

The sudden demise of his 10-year marriage sent Xavier Rudd into a long, dark tunnel of pain, anger and emotional turmoil. For most of 2009, all was not sunsets and beaches for the barefoot, Earth-loving, didgeridoo-playing father of two little boys.

A festival favourite on several continents, the Australian troubadour has a devoted grassroots following. His career was built on dynamic one-man performances that left audiences glowing with joy and wanting to care for the planet. He's a soft-hearted surfer unaccustomed to such torment.

But Rudd got through it with the help of bassist Tio Moloantoa and drummer Andile Nqubezelo, two South African musicians he first met at a festival in Europe where they were playing with reggae legend Eddy Grant. Rudd recruited them for some shows, and happened to be touring with them when his world collapsed.

"I had a hard time but I was gifted with these beautiful African spirits," Rudd said in a recent phone interview from his home in Australia. "We had a really strong connection. They carry a heavy spirit with them."

Ultimately, they also helped Rudd channel his anguish into music, resulting in the excellent new disc *Koonyum Sun*. Rudd's sixth studio album, it contains some of the most powerful songwriting of his career, and is musically more diverse than anything else he's done. The rock-reggae groove digs deep, while worldbeat-inspired melodies soar. Lost-love songs like *Set Me Free*, *Love Comes* and *Goes* and *Woman Dreaming* pretty much document the crumbling relationship with his Canadian-born wife.

Rudd brought his new musical friends to the laidback town of Byron Bay on Australia's north coast to record, dubbing his new band *Izintaba*, which means "mountain." For them, it was a chance to branch out.

"They've played reggae pretty solidly for a bunch of years and that's one reason why they really started to play with me," Rudd says. "I like to explore different styles, and they enjoy it. It's a challenge."

In a studio near the ocean, the musicians soaked up the tropical vibe and connected with the Aboriginal community. Named after the nearby *Koonyum* mountain range, the hypnotic title track seems to capture the spirit of the moment, expressing it with didgeridoo sounds and a contribution from Rudd's older son, Joaquin.

"When I wrote that song, I was playing by the fire, looking at the mountains," Rudd says. "I was singing and playing that guitar riff and my son just started singing that line. I wrote the song around our story that day and what he was singing."

Overall, Rudd feels the experience of breaking up, as devastating as it was, led to a creative rebirth.

"I have a whole new energy about me on stage now," he says. "With the changes, it's like a new decade. I just feel very blessed to do what I do, and lucky to have my music and this journey that I'm on. I've never felt this good energy. I feel very comfortable, very open."

"My voice is freer -- everything seems to be free."

Xavier Rudd

When and where: 8 p.m. May 17 and May 18, Bronson Centre

Tickets: \$35 advance, at 613-755-1111 or www.ticketmaster.ca