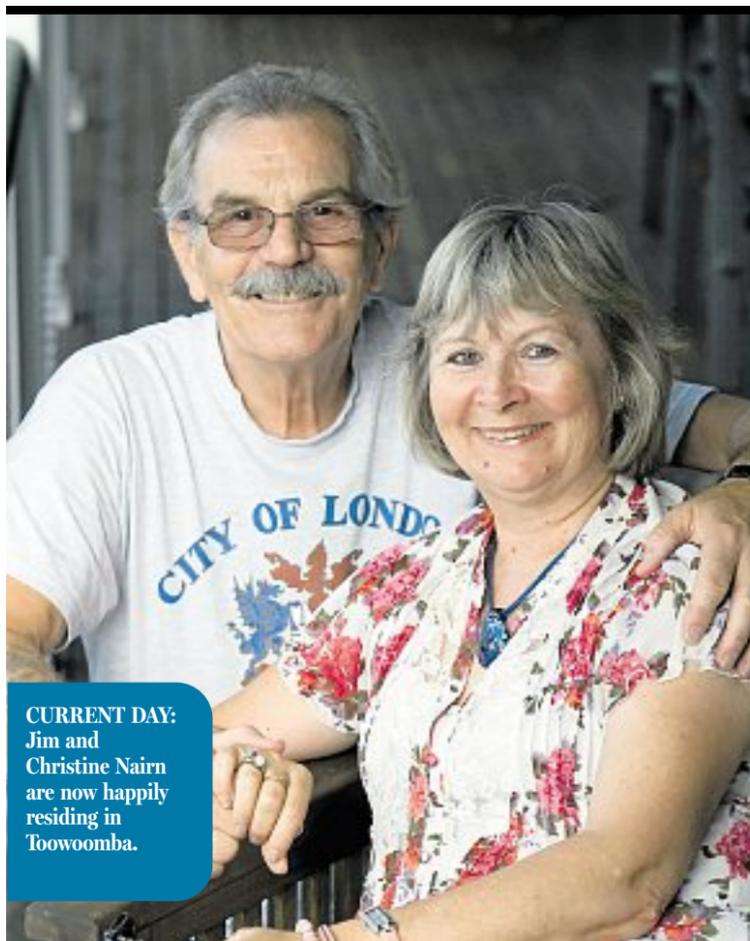


COVER STORY

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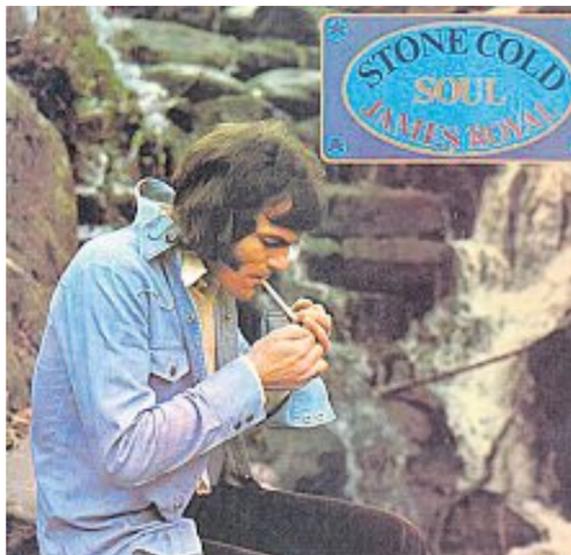
CURRENT DAY: Jim and Christine Nairn are now happily residing in Toowoomba.



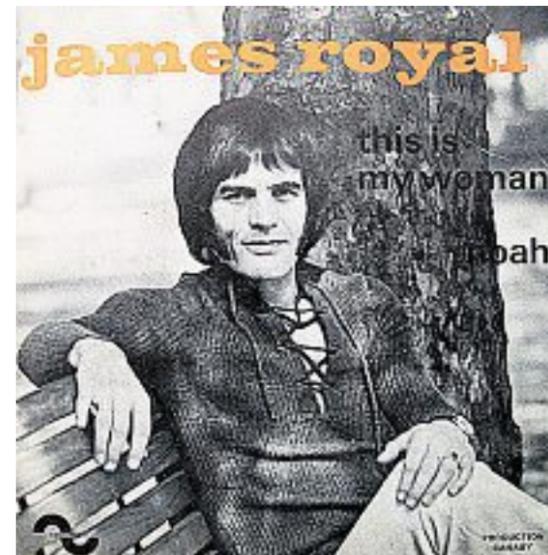
ORIGINAL CREW: Toowoomba taxi driver Jim Nairn (second left) in a publicity shot for Jimmy Royal and the Hawks with (from left) bassist John Savage, drummer Micky King and lead guitarist Terry Mabey.



THE CHOPS: Hit song House of Jack was featured on 1971 album The Light and Shade of James Royal.



BIG SMOKE: James Royal's 1973 release Stone Cold Soul is now a rare collector's item.



LADIES' MAN: The cover of Jim's 1970 EP This Is My Woman / Noah single shows the fashions of the day.

Rock star looks back on career



CHRIS CALCINO looks at Toowoomba taxi driver Jim Nairn's secret musical past which has equipped him with a bottomless pit of rock and roll anecdotes

THE trademark mutton chops have gradually blanched and migrated to his upper lip, but Toowoomba taxi driver Jim Nairn remains rock and roll royalty.

In the late 1960s, a Cockney crooner calling himself James Royal was taking Britain by storm.

His soul drenched vocals earned respect and friendship from some of the biggest rock stars on the planet.

Love and a shot at Antipodean stardom eventually brought him to Australia.

His musical career reached its full potential — but what an incredible ride it was.

Armed with tales of dodgy managers, Johnny Cash's chickens and Jerry Lee Lewis' mascara-clad entourage, Jim Nairn is perhaps the most interesting cabbie in Australia.

Set for royalty

After leaving the Royal Air Force in his 20s, Jim caught the music bug and started a skiffle band called Jimmy Fleetwood and the Cadillacs.

When band mates fell out over a girl, he joined Don Wilson's Skyways — they too eventually fell by the wayside.

The next project was to be Jim's biggest — the James Royal Set.

"We were originally called Jimmy Royal and the Hawks, but we soon got over that," Jim said.

The Wimbledon con

Having found success in London pubs and clubs, Jim and the band met "aptly named" manager Mervyn Conn.

They had some hits under their belts, including their first number one Call My Name in 1966.

It took years before the band learned their manager had his hand firmly in the cookie jar, effectively preventing them from reaching the pinnacle of rock stardom.

"The Con' was a multi-millionaire — a brand new Rolls Royce MC3000 every year and a mansion overlooking Wimbledon tennis courts," Jim said.

"He even tried to rip off Marlboro Cigarettes and got bunged inside for that."

Brick toilet

The James Royal Set continued touring with some of the world's biggest musical acts, despite being sabotaged by management.

A regular gig in London saw them support musicians like Tina Turner, Tom Jones, the Moody Blues and Stevie Wonder.

But the star who had perhaps the biggest impact on Jim Nairn was "The Killer" Jerry Lee Lewis.

"I'd sit there with Jerry and his guitarist Ken Lovelace and the stories just came out," he said.

Topics included the time Lewis married his 13-year-old cousin and the public outcry that followed, especially in Britain.

"He was a monster, but what a great guy," Jim said.

"He had a road manager who used to wear make-up, Dick West.

"Mind you, he was built like a brick toilet, so I wouldn't say too much."

Purple Hearts

Long nights on the road with The Who taught Jim about more than just music.

"John Entwistle, Keithy Moon and I were a trio — not musically, just buddies," he said.

"John had terrible pyorrhoea, so you'd avoid sitting too close to him."

Legendary drummer Keith Moon introduced Jim to amphetamine-laced "purple hearts" after a gig.

"They were slimming tablets, but in the wrong hands..." Jim said.

He dropped the duo off in his Ford Zephyr and returned home with his head in the clouds.

"When the down started... it made you feel depressed and degraded, like the lowest scum on earth," he said.

"That was a lesson well-learned.

"Keithy, bless his soul, when he started coming down he'd just go back up again."

Folsom chicken blues

Touring across Europe with Johnny Cash was a tale in itself, but it was not until Jim met June Carter Cash that he learned the real story behind the Folsom Prison Blues.

Johnny had been on a binge.

"He had all these chickens in cages and he let them loose in his hotel room," Jim said.

"It was this beautiful hotel with chickens floating all around the place, so they locked him up."

Finding Christine

A decade of touring had Jim's nerves

worn thin when he met Australian wife-to-be Christine Dart at the Lyceum in London.

Without realising, he was on the verge of a breakdown.

Undiagnosed anxiety attacks had started to creep up on him.

"I was drinking too much, smoking like a chimney and I'd had a marriage go wrong," he said.

"It happened to a lot of bands, but in the end I just had enough."

Jim and Christine married in England and made the trip to Australia in 1988, settling in Toowoomba.

The winter years

Jim intended to continue chasing his musical dreams when he arrived in Australia.

It soon became apparent he would have to start at the bottom — a slap in the face for a man who called rubbed shoulders with the biggest names in rock and roll.

"I tried a few things that never worked out, but I'm very happy here in Australia," he said.

Music fell by the wayside until two years ago when he joined The Jerry Hat Tricks, a Toowoomba band with sporadic pub gigs.

Jim and band mate Tony Lingard are now in discussions to bring a cabaret-style An Evening With James Royal show to Toowoomba.

"It will be all the stories mixed with the old songs," Jim said.

Keep your ears to the ground — James Royal could soon finally make his comeback to the stage.