SOFTWARE & TECH

Paul Kelly How To Make Gravy

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Introduction: The Unlikely Anthem of an Australian Christmas

In the pantheon of Australian music, few songs have achieved the cultural saturation of Paul Kelly's "How To Make Gravy." Released in 1996, this storytelling masterpiece has transcended its origins to become a seasonal fixture, played on radio stations and in homes across the country every December. But why does a song about a prisoner writing a letter to his brother on Christmas Eve resonate so deeply with millions of listeners? The answer lies not in its surface narrative, but in its profound exploration of regret, family, longing, and redemption. This article explores the rich layers of Paul Kelly's "How To Make Gravy," examining its lyrical genius, its cultural impact, and the practical recipe it immortalizes, all while unpacking why this song remains an essential piece of Australian identity.

The Story Behind the Song: Paul Kelly's Narrative Masterpiece

Paul Kelly is widely regarded as one of Australia's greatest singer-songwriters, a poet of the everyday whose work chronicles the nation's soul. "How To Make Gravy" appeared on his 1996 album "Songs from the South," and from the moment of its release, it was clear this was something special. The song is written as a letter from a man named Joe to his brother Dan. Joe is in prison, and he is writing on December 21st, just days before Christmas. He apologizes for missing the family gathering and, in a moment of tender practicality, instructs Dan on how to make the gravy for the Christmas meal. This simple framework becomes a devastating portrait of isolation and love.

Kelly has often spoken about how the song came to him almost fully formed. He was inspired by a newspaper article about a man in prison who wrote home with cooking instructions, and the human drama in that small detail captivated him. The song's genius is its restraint; Kelly never tells us why Joe is in prison, leaving the listener to fill the gaps with their own imagination. This ambiguity makes the song universal. It is not about a specific crime, but about the universal experience of being separated from those we love during moments of togetherness.

Lyrical Analysis: A Letter From the Heart

The lyrics of "How To Make Gravy" are a masterclass in storytelling. Kelly uses the letter format to build a world in just a few verses. The song opens with a date, "Hello Dan, it's Joe here," immediately grounding the listener in a specific time and place. The writing is conversational, natural, and full of the small details that make characters feel real. Joe mentions the prison food, the latest football scores, and his nephew's school report. These details are not filler; they are the brushstrokes that paint a portrait of a man desperately trying to stay connected to a life he has lost.

The central metaphor of the song is, of course, the gravy recipe itself. Gravy is a staple of the Australian Christmas meal, often served with roast turkey or ham. It is a comfort food, a symbol of home, warmth, and

family tradition. When Joe instructs Dan to "add a little bit of flour, and then a little bit of water," he is not just giving a cooking tip; he is handing over a piece of his domestic identity, a role he can no longer fill. The line "And if you want it extra rich, you can add a little bit of gravy from the pan" is both practical advice and a poignant metaphor for adding richness to a life that feels thin and depleted.

The Power of the Chorus

The chorus is where the song's emotional weight is concentrated. "And it's a long way from the big house to your house," Joe sings, "but I'll be with you in spirit when you're eating up the gravy." This line is heartbreaking in its honesty. Joe acknowledges the physical distance and his captivity, but asserts that love can traverse walls and miles. The chorus is sung with a gentle, almost conversational melody, making the pain feel real and immediate. Kelly's delivery is understated, allowing the words to do the work. He does not wallow in sorrow; instead, he offers a kind of stoic grace that is profoundly moving.

The Cultural Impact: How a Prison Letter Became a Christmas Classic

In Australia, "How To Make Gravy" has become an unofficial Christmas anthem. It is played on radio stations alongside Mariah Carey and Wham!, but it tells a story that is uniquely Australian. The song speaks to the Australian values of mateship, resilience, and family loyalty. It acknowledges the sadness that can coexist with celebration, the empty chair at the table, and the love that persists despite absence. For many families, listening to the song has become a Christmas tradition in itself, a moment of reflection before the festivities begin.

The song has also inspired a widely shared joke: "It's not Christmas until Paul Kelly tells you how to make gravy." This phrase has entered the Australian vernacular, a testament to the song's deep integration into the national psyche. Each year, as December approaches, media outlets republish the lyrics and the recipe, and new generations discover the song for the first time. This annual ritual ensures that "How To Make Gravy" remains not just a song, but a shared cultural experience.

The Actual Recipe: Paul Kelly's Own Instructions

Paul Kelly, a keen cook himself, has published the actual gravy recipe that corresponds to the song. It is a classic pan gravy, simple and rich, designed for a roast meat dinner. Here is the recipe, based on Kelly's own instructions and the details embedded in the song lyrics:

- Ingredients: Pan drippings from a roast (beef, lamb, pork, or chicken), approximately two tablespoons of plain flour, one to two cups of stock or water (depending on desired thickness), salt and pepper to taste, and optionally, a splash of red wine or Worcestershire sauce for extra depth.
- Method: After removing the roast from the pan, place the pan over medium heat on the stovetop. Add the flour to the hot pan drippings and stir constantly with a wooden spoon, scraping up the browned bits from the bottom. This is where all the flavor lives. The flour and fat will form a paste, known as a roux. Cook for one to two minutes to remove the raw flour taste.
- The Liquid: Slowly pour in the stock or water, or a combination of both, while whisking continuously. This prevents lumps from forming. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer. As the song advises, add "a little bit of gravy from the pan" – meaning, use the juices that have run out of the meat during resting. This adds incredible richness.
- Finishing: Continue to simmer the gravy for three to five minutes, allowing it to thicken to your preferred consistency. Season generously with salt and freshly ground black pepper. If using wine, add it just before serving and let it cook off for a minute. Strain the gravy through a sieve for a silky-smooth result, or serve it as is for a more rustic texture.

This recipe is a testament to the song's authenticity. It is not a fanciful or complicated dish; it is the gravy that has been made in Australian kitchens for generations. Kelly's choice to center the song on such an everyday, homely task is what makes it so relatable.

Musical Composition and Performance

The music of "How To Make Gravy" is deceptively simple. It is built around a gentle, fingerpicked acoustic guitar pattern, with subtle bass and percussion supporting Kelly's vocal. The melody is conversational, rising and falling with the natural cadence of speech. This arrangement ensures that the lyrics remain the focus. There is no grand orchestration, no dramatic key change. The music stays out of its own way, creating an intimate atmosphere that feels like a private conversation.

Paul Kelly's live performances of the song are often moments of quiet connection with the audience. He frequently introduces the song by saying, "This is a Christmas song," to knowing laughter and applause. The audience often sings along on the chorus, a shared moment of collective emotion. The song has been covered by numerous artists, including Missy Higgins, Dan Sultan, and many others, each bringing their own interpretation, but none have matched the quiet power of Kelly's original.

Similar Songs in Paul Kelly's Catalog

Paul Kelly has a gift for writing character-driven stories in song. "How To Make Gravy" sits alongside other narrative gems in his catalog. For example, "To Her Door" tells the story of a couple's troubled relationship with a similarly observant, empathetic lens. "Dumb Things" explores regret and poor decisions with a wry sense of humor. "From St Kilda to Kings Cross" is a travelogue of longing and dislocation. These songs share a common thread: they treat ordinary people with extraordinary dignity, finding poetry in the mundane struggles of life.

The Song's Legacy: A Modern Australian Classic

In 2020, Paul Kelly released a new version of "How To Make Gravy" as a duet with the late Archie Roach, one of Australia's most revered Indigenous musicians. This version added another layer of meaning, connecting the theme of separation and longing to the history of the Stolen Generations and the ongoing suffering created by forced family separation. It was a powerful reinterpretation that showed the song's continued relevance and its capacity to speak to different forms of loss. The collaboration was widely praised, and it ensured the song remained in the public conversation.

The song has also been adapted into a book. In 2024, a collection of stories inspired by the song, "The Best of How to Make Gravy," was published, featuring contributions from prominent Australian writers and musicians. This project proved that the song's narrative still has the power to inspire new creative work decades after its release. The song continues to be taught in schools as an example of narrative writing, studied for its use of metaphor, structure, and character development.

Why the Song Endures

The enduring appeal of "How To Make Gravy" lies in its refusal to sentimentalize. Joe does not pretend that everything is fine. He does not ask for pity. He simply writes a letter, gives instructions, and expresses his love. The song is not about a prisoner; it is about anyone who has ever felt a pang of longing for home, for family, for a seat at the table. It is about the small rituals that anchor us, the recipes passed down, the jokes shared, the love that persists despite distance and time.

In a world that often feels increasingly fragmented, the song offers a quiet reminder of what truly matters. It suggests that even in the most difficult circumstances, we can reach out to those we love. We can teach them how to make the gravy. We can be with them in spirit. And perhaps, in doing so, we can create a small piece of grace in a difficult world.

Conclusion: A Toast to Joe and Dan

Paul Kelly's "How To Make Gravy" is more than a song; it is a cultural touchstone, a lesson in empathy, and a reminder of the power of simple human connection. Through the story of Joe and his letter, Kelly has given Australia a Christmas song that is not about snow or reindeer, but about family, regret, and the redeeming power of love. It is a song that makes you feel the warmth of a kitchen and the cold of a prison cell at the same time. It is a song that understands that sometimes the most profound thing you can say to someone is simply, "Here is how you make the gravy." And for that reason, it will be played, sung, and cherished for generations to come. Next time you sit down to a family meal, whether it is Christmas or any other day, remember Joe, remember Dan, and pass the gravy. It is the taste of home.

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