

PERFORMER INTERVIEW

'Killing Jeff Buckley': An Interview with iOTA

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iOTA is a unique brand of Australian popular musician. 'Discovered' in the mid 1990s by Triple J and promoted as Australia's answer to Jeff Buckley, iOTA has enjoyed relative failure since the release of his first recording, *The Hip Bone Connection*, in 1999. However, he has continued to write and record, actively challenging his audience and himself by releasing two more full length albums and an EP. Although recorded with other musicians, all these recordings bear his name, which was legally changed to iOTA (lower case i, upper case OTA) in 1998. Despite slow record sales to date, iOTA's live performances have become increasingly popular and he has achieved multiple sell-out shows around Australia, as well as playing solo and band-based supports to international acts as diverse as Live and The Doors.

I don't remember when I first heard of iOTA, but his name was one that I recognised from various street press and telegraph pole posters since about 2000. I finally saw him in a unique performance, supporting Tim Finn at Sydney's Metro theatre in 2002. Audience members sat on the floor, a practice that is not unusual while musicians are preparing for a performance. However, the audience remained seated on the floor as iOTA and his band took the stage. It soon became clear that this was not a mark of apathy but respect: many in the audience felt that iOTA's music and performance should be quietly enjoyed rather than accompanied by the usual bad dancing and constant hum of pre-headline-act chatter. The other half of the audience appeared to disagree, loudly participating by singing along, screaming requests and dominating the available space. After a forty-five minute set of acoustic folk-rock delivered with a strikingly powerful vocal, iOTA concluded with a falsetto rendition of Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi'—a choice of song and performance style so unusual that it seemed to demand the audience's attention. Even stranger was the fact that after iOTA left the stage, the audience very noticeably halved. Although the main attraction, Tim Finn, was an internationally recognised singer/songwriter with more than two decades of successful material behind him, iOTA seemed to have upstaged him. In this way, the gentle but vital art of the support act was demonstrated.

During the last three years I have been lucky to see iOTA numerous times, both as a support and headline act, and as a solo musician and band frontman. During this time he has played a variety of venues, from seated theatres to nightclubs to pubs and entertainment centres, each time modifying his material and approach to suit the audience and occasion. His performances polarise audiences: some urge others at the bar to be quiet, while others argue amongst themselves about how the gig should be enjoyed. Sitting in a bar close to his Sydney home, iOTA spoke of his career so far, and his love of making bad career choices.

What was your first musical experience?

You mean, like first band? The first band was a band called 'The Skiddley Bobbleys,' which was totally ridiculous. When I was probably 19, we did a gig at somebody's twenty-first. We were doing covers; we were just a covers band—just covers—and that was probably the only gig we ever did. At the time I was 19 and the guitarist was in his thirties, and that was really old. He was a bit of a legend around town because he could play, so I hooked up with him, got to know him and we became friends. He tried to teach me music theory, but I just couldn't get it. I was playing guitar and singing, but I always just wanted to be the singer; I didn't want to play the guitar, but ended up doing it. He encouraged me to do it, which is a really good thing now, because I can actually play guitar OK. Yeah, so we did The Skiddley Bobbleys. Then we decided to form another band, Loose Goose, and that was another covers band as well. We played pubs; did three sets a night. We were doing ZZ Top covers, and The Doors, and Led Zeppelin; we were way cool. We were recognised as being one of the better cover bands around.

So why did you make the transition from covers artist to original material?

Well, because I started writing songs. I mean, I wrote a song when I was 14, about being a musketeer or something highly embarrassing, but when I started writing songs and we started adding songs to the set that I'd written, I don't know, we just ended up just saying 'let's start writing our own songs and be a real band.' It was really hard because people just wanted to hear the cover songs, and it was weird because we'd drive into Perth—being from Mandurah [south of Perth], driving into the city was a big thing—but we started driving into Perth and getting gigs there. But we just couldn't get many gigs; it was really tough.

Was that because of a lack of venues?

Yeah, venues weren't there, and it was such a covers scene in Perth. There was a band in Perth at the time [the early '90s] called The Jets, not The Screaming Jets, but just The Jets, and they were massive. They were, like, driving around in Porsches. For me, that was the first big band I ever saw, and they were just playing other people's songs; it was bizarre. That's why we came over here [Sydney]. There was no work in Perth so we thought 'Fuck it, let's just pick up everything and drive to Sydney and get famous.'

How old were you then?

I was probably 23, so that would be early '90s, yeah.

So when did you start to perform as iOTA?

Well, Loose Goose happened, and we did a few gigs and an EP, but we'd just been together for so long, and we all lived together; it was just a nightmare. We ended up hating each other, and

things got a bit sour. I ended up meeting other people, and I played with another band called Thong. I played with them and just started having more fun with them ... it was just, well, it was just more fun, so I left Loose Goose and played with Thong for a while. Then, I was at a party, and there were a couple of guys there and a guitar; I ended up playing a song, and one of the guys was in a band that was playing in a pub in Ultimo, and he said 'Will you come and do a support for us, just you and your guitar?' So I said, 'Yeah, alright.' That was after leaving Loose Goose. I had a whole year of just being a civilian. I got a job and I had weekends and worked all week, had money, didn't go to pubs anymore. It was really nice actually. It's one of those times I remember and look back on really fondly.

So when you did this one gig, the support as iOTA rather than with a band, what did you play? Did you have enough songs for a set?

I only had to play for half an hour, and I had songs: I'd been writing songs. I only needed about seven, so I just turned up, had a little seat, lit some candles and played. Then they asked if I could do it again next week, and I ended up getting a residency there with them, playing there every Friday. I got paid in red wine, so just got completely trashed. The guy who was actually working the bar was an awful speed freak [amphetamines user]; he was up all night, so the bar was open all night, and so everyone was up all night. I probably did a month or two there, then I got approached by this girl I'd met before, a girl called Monique, and she just asked if I wanted a manager, and I went 'yeah, I'll have one of those.' I went to Bellingen [on the NSW north coast] and did a gig out at the markets there. I was doing a gig there and this guy just came up to me and said 'Hi, my name's Robert Scott. I work at Triple J, and am starting my own record company.' So he asked if I had a manager, and if I was interested in talking to them; and so we did—yadda yadda.

Was that Mammal Records, and your album *The Hip Bone Connection*?

Yeah. I had a tape and gave that to Robert. He took it back to his business partner, and then we had a meeting and spoke about it. They were just building their studio, and I ended up signing with them and recording. That album, *Hip Bone*, actually did really well; that's done the best out of all of my albums.

Was that success because of the Triple J support?

Yeah; and it was just new and exciting, I think for Triple J, and, you know, I was kind of caught up on the [Jeff] Buckley wave as well. I never considered myself to be a complete Buckley clone, but there are certain songs that [sound like him], so I understand why people say it. But there are at least nine other songs on that first album that are nothing like Jeff Buckley, but yeah, everyone sort of focuses on that because that was the big thing at the time. So for a little while I was sort of 'Australia's answer to Jeff Buckley,' which was really boring.

There was an ARIA nomination for *Hip Bone* too, wasn't there?

Yep: 'Artist most likely to be like Jeff Buckley' [laughs]. I didn't win that one; spewing! iOTA was nominated for Best Independent Album and Number One Independent Album at the ARIA Awards in 2000.

So what happened next?

I got out of the deal with the record company, and met up with some other people from another record company. One of the guys, Sebastian Chase, was from Black Yak and Phantom and MGM, and we tried to get him to be the mediator between us and the record company, because the record company and the band weren't getting on so well. Anyway [to cut a] long story short, that all fizzled out. I kept talking with Seb, and I ended up splitting with my manager as well. But he just came in and helped me sort my life out, and my career and stuff, and eventually I signed to Black Yak, did my EP *Little Carlos* in 2000 and the rest from there.

Once you signed with Black Yak, how were you promoted from there?

Tim Freedman [singer/songwriter from Sydney-based band The Whitlams] is one of the three partners in the record company, so he gave us heaps of gigs, which was for his own benefit as well, to try and get things happening.

Was that as a band then, or just you?

As a band. Once I recorded albums, it was pretty much a band thing. I still did solo gigs—still do—but it was pretty much a band thing.

What's the main difference between the band and solo stuff?

It's just simpler. It's a lot easier when it's just one artist; just hire a car, and you and the tour manager/sound guy drive away and play gigs, guitar in the back. You only need one room.

Does it change the songs you play and the way you approach a room?

Yeah, you have to kind of ... well it's scarier on your own.

Why?

Because you just don't have anyone to turn around and laugh to when things aren't that cool. You know, someone yells 'fuck off!' or something, you can't just turn around and say 'Jeez, what a fuck wit' to your friends; it's just you, so it's really pretty hard.

So how do you deal with that?

Well, you just finish the gig. It's a lot like you just close your eyes and think of the Australian flag. You've just got to fake it, smile and say 'thanks, you've been a great audience,' and then just walk off and die, and beat yourself up about it.

What about when you're doing a support gig? Is there more negativity because it's someone else's crowd?

If you're a support act, oh yeah, no-one wants to see you. The people that are there are just there to see the headlining band. You know, the lights go down, everyone goes 'yeah!', and you walk on stage and you're not the headlining band, and they go 'oh.' And you hear it, and you walk on stage and now you have to go 'Hi!' and start playing songs and be confident.

At the Tim Finn gig, we got a great spot down the front to see Tim because it seemed like half the place left when you left. There were a lot of people there to see you that night.

Really, I hadn't seen that there. I have done gigs that are like that—you can really tell there are people there for you—and there are other gigs I've done when you just know that everyone

hates you. And you hear things up the front where people say things like ‘God, what’s the time?’ or ‘How long do we have to go through this for?’

Is that something you take really personally?

You take it so personally. It’s horrible. If I’m doing support gigs solo, the main emotion I feel before I walk on is fear.

Why do support gigs then?

Because apparently they’re good because *somebody* out there is going to like you, and support you. But it’s hard, and I don’t like doing it.

What about comparing that to other iOTA gigs where members of your crowd will ‘shoosh’ other members, and people sit on the floor in pubs to see you. It’s a weird and quite unique crowd dynamic that you’ve got. Your crowd is so very loyal too, like those gigs in Newtown [in inner city Sydney] where people were turned away three weeks in a row because they couldn’t get tickets. That was pretty amazing.

Yeah, but that’s when I’m a headliner, and when people pay money, you know they’ve paid money to come and see you. But yeah, it’s nowhere near as scary. I don’t want [my performance] to be disappointing. I know what it’s like to go and see someone and just be disappointed with what I’ve seen, so I like to go on and then come back and feel like it was really good.

More recently, you rearranged your existing material with a new, heavier rock band, The Lizard Men. What made you want to do that? Did you need to radically change your mindset?

I don’t think I had to have a radical mind change: I think the crowd had to. And you know, there’s part of me now, that almost makes me want to write a letter of apology to them, because it would have been really scary and disappointing, you know. It could be exciting too, but it just depends on the people. Not that I don’t care, I do care, but at the same time I had to do that to find out where I was going. After my previous band split up I had to do something different. I couldn’t bear to think that I’d just got two new guys and sit on a stool and it was just back to the same old grind. It was a good grind, but it just seemed crazy to do it again, it was a perfect opportunity to do something different. And I’ve always wanted to be a singer—just a singer—and I just wanted to be more physically expressive on stage. Also, part of me wanted, not to disappoint people, but wanted people to be a bit shocked, to give them something that they weren’t expecting. And there’s a naughty boy that just giggles away at people’s expressions when they saw us for the first time, you know? There’s also an artist that was kind of disappointed when everyone else didn’t kinda dig it.

I liked the fact that the same material could be taken and delivered in such a different way. In some ways it seemed like a really strange thing to do, but in other ways it seems really logical, rather than going away for 18 months, writing all new material and then putting all your eggs in one basket. Was any of that thinking behind it?

The main thing behind it was that I just wanted to blow off some steam, I think. Just because, you know, because of my personal relationships, and having finished the era of another band, I just wanted to jump around and scream, and that was the perfect environment for me to do it. Some people might say it wasn’t a good idea, but it was perfect; it had to happen. Because

now that I don't feel like that any more, I know that it wasn't exactly where I wanted to be. But now I know exactly where I want to be, because I did it. And the other interesting thing is that the record that I've just done has dictated what the new band will be. The new band and the style is where I wanted to be when I decided that I wanted something new, but I didn't know that. It was like jumping in the deep end and seeing if you can swim. I was just seeing what would happen really.

People still came to the shows. I can't remember there being a mass exit by crowds.

No, there was nothing like that. But I do remember someone yelling out 'bring the old band back,' and that sort of thing.

So was it hard to marry the two, the 'sit down' crowd and the 'real jump around' crowd?

Well, there was always that weirdness anyway. There were always the people who wanted to dance and the people who wanted to sit down; that was always a drama. Sometimes we'd be in the middle of a song and the crowd would be more interested in arguing with each other about whether they should sit down or stand up. Mid-song, people would be screaming at each other 'Sit down! Stand up!'

When did that all start?

I think people always sat down. When I first started, I'd be doing gigs at [venues] like The Hopetoun [in inner city Sydney], and people would just sit down and watch.

Do you think that was part of the Jeff Buckley connection at the time?

Yeah, I think so; a bit of that hippy, sit down and watch the acoustic guitar guy mindset. And they used to do that even with the band; but it was always a thing between the stand ups and sit downs. I was going to get two t-shirts: 'I choose to sit down at iOTA gigs' or 'I choose to stand up at iOTA gigs.'

How did that affect you? Did the audience arguments over how the performance should be enjoyed change the type of performance?

I don't know. I could understand both parties, so I don't know. I always thought if you want to dance, why don't you dance up the back so other people can still sit down, but I don't know; it's weird.

It seems your live performances have always been much more successful than the recorded material to date.

If you mean sales, *Hip Bone* [1999] was the best. *Big Grandfather* [2001] sold very averagely, which isn't surprising, and after that *La Caravana* [2003] didn't do so well because of *Big Grandfather*: the momentum was lost. In a perfect world I should have released another *Hip Bone*, or another album that had poppy songs and verse-chorus-verse, but I didn't do that: I did quite the opposite.

What about *Little Carlos* [2000]? That was a great mix of the two, of pop and atmosphere and experimentation.

Yeah, *Little Carlos* was great. A lot of people think that's the best thing; a lot of people whom I talk to say that's their favourite. But I just wanted change; I just wanted to be arty, get all arty

and do weird things. It was really self indulgent but, fucking hell, I'm an artist! I should be allowed to do that; that's what art's about, self indulgence. So that album was all about not thinking about anybody other than me.

There must have been more to it than that, though. The fact that you recorded it and launched it and promoted it must have meant you wanted other people to hear it.

Yeah, I wanted people to like it and love it, but there was a part of me that knew that they wouldn't, and that was pleasing to the little boy inside, if you know what I mean ... and to try and kill Jeff Buckley as well!