

ROGER DAVIES, ARTIST MANAGER

Interviewed by Connections editor, Julius Grafton.

Who is the most successful Australian in the global music business? It may come as a surprise to some, but a 42 year old Australian working out of L.A. and London is personal manager to Janet Jackson, Tina Turner, Joe Cocker, Tony Joe White and Sade.

I had a chance meeting with the charismatic manager backstage at a Janet Jackson show. I'd been hauled before him to clarify my purpose in being there, a journalist free zone. As a trade magazine writer doing a story on the video I was viewed as a benign threat, but still, the rules were, no insight on Janet, no questions about the Jackson family, no speculation. In a room full of Janet's people, Roger Davies exuded quiet authority. "I'd like to interview you" I said, "people are curious". He looks up deadpan, "I don't do interviews".

Two days later he calls out of the blue, "I'm being pursued by all kinds of media wanting stories. I've checked you out, and I'll talk to you". A hasty trip into the city, the valet sniffs at the unwashed Nissan as I throw him a buck to park it. Janet Jackson fans sit in the deep chairs in the foyer, trying to look incognito with their Janet caps on. School girls walk hesitatingly to reception to lodge bunches of flowers for Janet.

On the 17th level Roger is at home in a suite where the phone rings non-stop and messages are shoved under the door. He calls a halt to the phone, and we sit facing each other in the afternoon light. His manner is charming and his physical presence relaxed. It's clear before we even start that personal style is a big factor in his success.

"With Sherbet I was like the sixth member of the band. I loved the image thing, everything was stylised". Before managing this landmark Australian band, Roger was a frustrated bass player, road manager, then office boy for Chuggie and Gudinski at Consolidated Rock. This is around 1972.

Sherbet broke all the conventions and pioneered much that is great today. They were first to use stage lighting, toured places rock and pop had never been before, started their own record company, and dominated the music industry through the 1970's. Then they went overseas.

"We went overseas in '76, and were lucky to have a hit with 'Howzat' - but it never quite happened. We'd have to keep coming back home to make money, it got to New Years Eve '79 and we sat down and decided to have a break. I thought I'd have a shot at going overseas, I had no idea what I would do, I packed everything, and took my secretary to Los Angeles. I figured I had enough money to last a

year, I was 26, I didn't want to wait".

Talking about it now, there is a notion that perhaps Roger was afraid he would fail in the eyes of some in Australia. "When I left I never thought I'd come back. When I first went overseas and would come back I'd feel some animosity, maybe some managers thought I was going to rip off their acts and take them overseas.... steal them!"

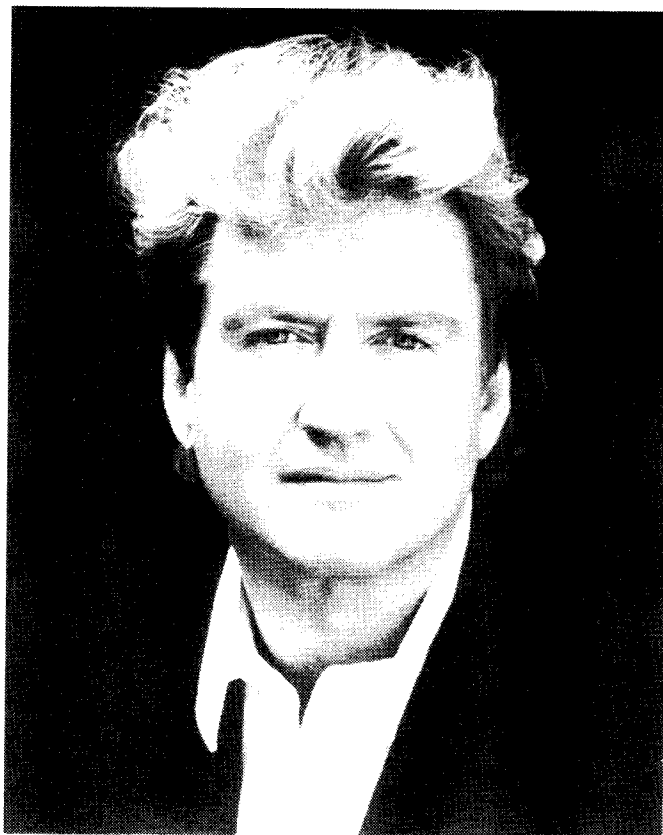
Far from it, because after a slow start managing Steve Kipner and still trying to break Sherbet in the USA -now named 'Highway'- Roger got a call from Lee Cramer, who managed Olivia Newton-John. He was also her boyfriend at the time, "he said they'd like me to come and work for them. I was working out of the front room of my

flat with my girlfriend making clothes to support us! I didn't have a green card but Lee said I could have an office and a secretary and I could keep trying to get my projects going too. He said they couldn't pay me any money! But they would petition for my green card."

"I'd been there a month and Olivia and Lee split on a personal level, which meant he was still the manager but I became the meat in the sandwich - he'd tell me to tell her things, the messenger boy. I hardly knew her and a month later I'm sitting on a plane next to her going to Europe to record Xanadu with Jeff Lynn in Germany."

"During the first year with Olivia and Lee we were doing this TV show called Hollywood Nights, and Tina Turner made a cameo appearance. Lee was going out with one of Tina's dancers at the time, and she said 'you should meet Tina, she's looking for a manager' - she came in and Lee said OK, we will manage her."

These were awkward days, Lee and Olivia were not talking. One gets the impression Roger became a support system for Olivia. "I was almost controlling her life, it was so one-on-one Olivia would ring up and say 'what will I wear?'"



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But the tension between Olivia and Lee came to head one day and she fired Lee. "She asked me to manage her, which I'd virtually been doing". Roger took over Tina Turner too, paying

Lee an override for a couple of years. Did Lee threaten to break Roger's legs? "Not quite" he answers, the impression being RD manages situations as well as artists.

"At that stage Steve Kipner had written a song called 'Physical' which I wanted Tina to record but she didn't like it. I said to Olivia 'you should record this' and she said 'really?'"

"She cut her hair, it was a very daring and experimental time for her. We went to England and she was really freaked out on the plane. I felt convinced it was a great record, she said to me that if it didn't work and she got a lot of bad publicity she would never go back to America. It was the biggest record she ever had."

"We had a really good run for seven years." The business relationship came to an end. "Olivia got married and pregnant, and Tina's career took off - we did Private Dancer which

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sold 12 million. It was good timing, Olivia wasn't working too much and she got involved in Koala Blue, the clothing shops - which was something I had no expertise in. I think the clothing business is far more sleazy than the music business, and I wasn't involved."

"Tina had become so popular it was really demanding on me, and Olivia had really lost the desire to work, and I told her she didn't really need me anymore. It was a really sad parting because I really adore her and she's a great person."

"Tina and I were on this really big roll, we had 5 years where we didn't stop." Roger had taken Tina Turner from TV Game shows where she eked out a living after giving up everything in her messy divorce from Ike, back into the rock halls. They did Private Dancer together, it sold something like 12 million copies. Tina Turner as you know her now owes very much to Roger's direction.

By this time the cynics back here at home were prepared to concede that Roger, 'that Sherbet boy' as one called him, did in fact have a handle on his job. "I used to be very embarrassed by it, embarrassed that I was rich - because I started with nothing. I'd feel guilty I owned a house in the south of France and a house in England and a house in LA - and (then) I thought, 'I've worked really hard for all this, no-one gave it all to me.'"

It took a few years to settle into

the American way, "they don't want to upset you, because they may need you again, they won't say they hate something, rather they always have an excuse. I can't stand bullshit - don't give me song and dance, just tell me how it is! For a long time in America no one had heard of me, I was managing Olivia Newton-John but I didn't get into the Hollywood dinners thing just getting the job done. It worked in my favour because there was a certain mystique about me".

The Roger Davies magic works with an artist who is prepared to trust and listen to what is said. Mick Jagger doesn't fit this mould, Roger found this out himself.

"After a Live Aid performance in Philadelphia where Tina and Mick performed he asked to work for him on his solo album, which I did for a year. I really liked it, but it was frustrating because I was more a consultant".

I observe Mick Jagger has got an incredible grasp of business - "yes, the Rolling Stones are brilliant the way he does it, but he doesn't have a grasp on his solo career. I think now he and Keith are getting on a lot better than ever, it's better for Mick to concentrate on the Stones. Mick listens to a lot of people rather than one person, and in terms of his solo career became in-decisive".

Joe Cocker is another solo artist who's career has been improved by our Roger. "Joe had been special guest on a lot of Tina's outdoor festivals in Europe because he's very popular there, so I'd see him socially from time to time. I

went and saw him at the Greek Theatre in LA because three guys in Tina's band were playing with Joe while Tina was off the road".

"I really enjoyed the show, and two days later I got a call. Joe had been managed by Michael Laing for 15 years, I guess they hadn't got on. I always make it a point not to go after an act who already have a manager, though".

Janet Jackson is an interesting situation, because Roger had managed her earlier in her career - then they split, and now he's back in charge. Roger explains the turn of events - "The Control album had been very successful, the Rhythm Nation album hadn't been released, she hadn't really had management apart from her father. They needed someone to launch the album and as they hadn't toured, set up a tour. It was a two year project, the album

sold 8 million and the tour was hugely successful. Then I resigned. About four months ago she asked me to take her on again, so we're doing this tour through Asia, Europe and South Africa."

I'm curious about the expectation this time around. "It's a mutual option, I wasn't sure I would want to carry on afterwards. I said at the time I would set up the tour, so here we are. I've got Tina making an album in August then doing a very big tour next year so I'm keeping my options open".

Business is business, but dealing with creative people is an art form. "There's a knack to this, when you have to tell an artist some bad news you can't just go and say - 'Hey your record just died', you need to say 'we've sold out this concert here or done that and then break it to them gently.

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Mackie gives 'em the dog. Australian Mackie Distributor Dave Croxton is pictured holding a statue of the goddam pesky dog that seems to run Mackie in Seattle. It was awarded for twisted triumphance in marketing. Pic from left: George Mantoan, Greg Mackie, Croxton and Tony Waine of Australian Audio Supplies, Donna Mantoan, David Firestone.



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Otherwise they'll want to go and slash their wrists. I've seen other managers be too direct with their artists".

A big part of making an act a goer is "concentrating on my acts working in Europe and on a global level, whereas a lot of American businessmen don't realise the rest of the world exists. Although they're starting to now".

"I've got an office in LA and London, and four people working for me, two girls in each office. My form of management is much more personal management than some, there are some management companies that manage 20 acts. They're not personal managers. If all my acts worked at once I'd be in a lot of trouble, but I've got Sade (another artist managed by Roger) and Tina taking a year off, Janet and Joe Cocker are on the road. I can deal with both".

"I don't think there is any big secret in how to manage an act. The fundamentals are to keep it all together, keep them sane. At this stage I've got no interest in managing groups with four or five personalities - I'd rather deal with a solo artist and for some reason I've nearly always managed women. I only have women work for me too".

Roger lives in Sherman Oaks,

in LA. "I'm engaged. I've been going out with this girl for 18 months and I like to think this relationship is going somewhere. I want to have a family eventually."

"Some managers deal with their artists finances, I refuse to. It's much better for artists and creative people to have their own independent lawyers and accountants. I don't sign cheques, anyone could accuse me of ripping them off. If I see they're spending money like crazy I'll certainly tell them".

Do you think Australian music has had it's run internationally?

"I only get to come back once a year to see my mother in Melbourne. My observation is there seems to be a real rut and nothing's changing. The acts that were big from the '80's - INXS, Reyne, Midnight Oil, Barnsey - they're all starting to fade, and I don't see anything new coming up that will blow all of Europe away. The state of radio here does not encourage local talent".

Do you see the record companies overseas floating in a sea of back catalogue releases for CD profitability?

"Yes. The music industry is healthy overseas, although the back catalogue has been supporting them for five years. Still, acts come up like Pearl Jam and sell a

lot of records. Record sales are up from what I can gather".

How are the record companies to deal with today?

"The biggest nightmare for a record company is an act that doesn't have management. A lot of promoters can tell you a problem is that overseas an act can happen overnight, and their manager is a school buddy. He's had no experience...and he doesn't know what he's doing. So close to it he can't be objective, and when you don't know the common reaction is to say no. There are some giant acts now, I can't name them, they can't confirm anything. The best thing that helped me in the US was managing a big act here. It's the same there, just on a bigger scale. When I first went there I was in awe of American managers, I thought 'they must be so smart- geniuses' then I realised it was all experience. If I hadn't been a roadie, worked for Chuggie and Gudinski, done Sherbet, I couldn't have done it".

Where's the challenges now?

"Well I've HAD my midlife crisis, I went to England I wanted to settle down and have children immediately and was working too hard - it wasn't meant to happen".

How well do you sleep?

"I'd like to sleep more. I often lie in bed and worry".

What's next?

"There's another major act wants to talk to me about management, I've got to be careful, I only want to manage people I like, people I can invite into my home. My style only works if people listen to me".

What do you do for recreation?

"I play cricket every Saturday in LA when I'm there.

Will you ever come back to Australia to live?

Now I realise what a great country this is. And I will come back one day Coming here with Janet Jackson, they've fallen in love with the place. I say 'this is as good as it gets', because once the tour goes into Asia and then onto the busses in Europe, where it will be winter, it's downhill all the way!

This is the greatest place to start a tour in the world, we went to Brisbane, we rehearsed, the people were friendly - at a technical level everything is so well organised. The Big Picture (Video) Company are fantastic, Jands are a great company, they've got everything you need. The venues are organised.

Look, we had our harbour cruise last night, and Janet Jackson is sitting there looking at the sun setting over the harbour, and she sighs and says 'Yes, I could live here.....' •

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