



INTERVIEW

BLUE DAZE

He may be singing the blues, but that doesn't mean he's going through a midlife crisis. Oscar-winning actor Tim Robbins takes to the stage in a role he was born to play and joins the Byron Bluesfest line-up for one of its biggest year's yet.

BY
SALLY BROWNE



Is your name Sally Browne?" asks the nice man on the phone from Los Angeles.

It sure is.

"Do you know there's a song about you? There's a great old sea shanty called *Sally Brown*."

The nice man on the phone begins to sing.

"Sally Brown, she's a nice young lady, way-hey, we roll and go . . . we roll all night and we roll all day. Spend our money along with Sally Brown."

If I needed proof that Tim Robbins, Oscar-winning actor, political activist and former partner of legendary actor Susan Sarandon, could sing, then that was it.

The 52-year-old has built his career as an actor's actor, starring in such films as *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Bull Durham* and *Mystic River*, and an actor's director, helming projects including *Bob Roberts*, *Dead Man Walking* and several plays. Now he is reinventing himself as a musician.

The New Yorker, who has been strumming a guitar privately for more than 30 years, has composed a self-titled album of folk-blues-infused songs and is coming out to Byron Bay's Bluesfest to perform them.

He'll be backed by his band of young and not-so-young scallywags called The Rogues Gallery Band.

And he'll be coming during a very good year because Bluesfest, which has been rocking the town for 20 years, has secured possibly its best line-up yet. Across six days, from Thursday to the following Tuesday, it will feature a list of names from BB King to ZZ Top to Bob Dylan. And they'll be kept company by the likes of Elvis Costello & The Imposters, Jethro Tull, Aaron Neville, John Legend, Mavis Staples, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Ben Harper, Michael Franti and Spearhead.

This list goes on. And on.

In fact, the line-up grew so big that director Peter Noble decided to push the event out to six days, making it one of the biggest festivals in the country, alongside the Woodford Folk Festival.

"Our town is very proud of Bluesfest," Noble says. "Very proud it's a home-grown event, and we've gone on to have worldwide success."

This year is the festival's second at its new permanent home of Tyagarah, just outside Byron, and the site is continuously being worked on and upgraded. So far they've sold almost 120,000 tickets, with only passes for the Thursday and Tuesday shows remaining.

Many of the guests are repeat performers who love the festival so much they return time and again.

Someone like Robbins, who naturally arouses the curiosity of a music-savvy audience, is an added drawcard.

"I needed to feel Tim Robbins was genuine," Noble says. "Then I did a bit of study of him and I realised he came from a musical background. His father was a professional musician.

"He's got this very long career of being politically involved, he's acted in some very good films, he's directed films like *Dead Man Walking*, and he's actually come out and said, 'Listen, I'm not coming out as a star, I'm willing to go and play in a bar with sticky carpet'."

Or muddy fields, as the case may be.

Robbins will back up his Bluesfest gig with club dates in Sydney and Melbourne. To be touring the world with a debut album at 52 might put him in the category of late bloomer, but, take note – this is by no means a midlife-crisis album.

Robbins made a joke on British radio recently about the possibility of the album being one of those male midlife rebellion deals. That was promptly taken out of context by a hungry press eager to cast him as the lovelorn 50-something, reliving his youth after an emotional split with his partner of 20 years, Sarandon.

Their relationship was held up as a rarity in Hollywood for the length of time it lasted without scandal, and the couple was widely admired for their work on humanitarian causes. They split in 2009.

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TIM ROBBINS

"No, I was making a joke, and it was an unfortunate joke because it became like an internet viral thing," Robbins says. "I was on *Desert Island Discs* and I made a joke. You can clearly hear it when you hear the recording of it, I'm laughing and the host is laughing. I said, 'Yeah, I was thinking of calling it the mid-life crisis album'."

"I can't imagine a less appealing subject matter for an album," he clarifies today, with more laughter.

"Do you want to buy an album by a guy who's going through a midlife crisis, really?"

So, why this album and why now?

"Why not?" is his response.

"I've been doing it all my life and I resisted the temptation before. I didn't feel I really had a complete thing to say on an album."

"There was an opportunity around 1992 when (political satire movie) *Bob Roberts* came out and I did all the music for that and there was some interest. I just didn't feel like I had something to say. But I kept writing, I kept doing music, I kept performing."

Between directing and acting stints, he kept his hand in playing at political events, club nights and opening up for Pearl Jam on stage.

It was producer Hal Willner who got him to finally put his talents on tape, hooking him up with The Rogues Gallery Band. (The band recorded the song *Sally Brown* on a compilation about sea shanties and pirate songs that came out in 2006, with such names as Sting, Bono, Nick Cave and Brian Ferry, and co-produced by Willner and Captain Jack Sparrow himself, Johnny Depp.)

Robbins says his album is a natural consequence of that experience.

"They're all songs about either experiences I've had or

things I've read in newspapers or people that I've met on the road," says Robbins. "I think eight out of nine of them were written in hotel rooms."

"I would always take a guitar with me when I went on location, and inevitably something would happen."

And while the blues direction might seem a bolt from the blue, it's a role he's been rehearsing for since he was a kid.

The album sleeve includes a photo of Robbins at the age of nine.

"It was backstage at the Gaslight Cafe, a very famous Greenwich Village club that my dad used to play at and work in. I'm holding a mandolin, which I did not know how to play, but I think I'm probably more of an actor there than a musician," he laughs.

Robbins' father, Gil, was a singer in a folk group called the Highwaymen, which had a US No. 1 hit with the song *Michael* in 1961. He died last week at the age of 80.

"I have to say that seeing your dad on stage when you're a kid is a pretty intoxicating thing," says Robbins.

"It opens up realms of possibility and imagination that I'm not sure every kid would get the opportunity to experience. So I'm deeply indebted to that."

"When you see your father leading an audience of 1000 people in song and then telling a joke and everyone laughing, it's something that makes an impression on a child. And I think everyone in the family in some way wanted to pursue that kind of joy."

But first to sway Robbins was his mother Mary's profession – acting. He made his name as one of the Actors' Gang in the 1980s, alongside the likes of John Cusack, and went on to win an Oscar for his role in the movie *Mystic River*, directed by Clint Eastwood.

Movie fans will get to see Robbins in *Green Lantern* (as Senator Hammond) and *Cinema Verite* later this year.

"This last year's been fantastic," he says.

"Just to give you a rough sketch, in January I did some concerts, in March I put up a play that I wrote and directed, April, May, I did a movie down in New Orleans, lived down there for 10 weeks and had a great time, then went back to LA and did a movie there, then remounted my play that I wrote and directed in August, then went on tour (with The Rogues Gallery Band) in September and October, of Europe, 20 dates, came back, directed a episode of HBO series called *Treme*."

"So I did all the disciplines this year, and it was a great full year of nice work and good encounters with interesting people."

But for the next few weeks, he's devoting all of his time to music. For a man who remembers seeing his dad on stage, what's it like to have his kids now seeing him up there? He has two sons, Jack and Miles, with Sarandon, and is stepdad to Sarandon's daughter, Eva. They're the audience he is the most keen to impress, he says.

"I remember the first time I did it on a large scale, my first show with Pearl Jam on tour in 2004. It was at the Fleet Centre in Boston and my daughter was at Brown University at the time and came to see me," he says.

"And I can say that my major objective that night was that my daughter not be mortified."

"And I achieved that goal, and I've gotten more confidence since then and better at what I do and they seem to be into it, so it's nice."

Tim Robbins performs at Bluesfest, Byron Bay, on Saturday and Monday. Details: www.bluesfest.com.au