

# Shannon NOLL



## On Music, *Aging Gracefully* and the Realities of the Drought

→ WORDS MICHELLE MEEHAN

When singer **Shannon Noll** headed home to Condobolin at Easter, there were parched, dry paddocks as far as the eye can see.

Drought continues to hold its vice-like grip on many parts of Australia including the central western region of New South Wales, with below average rainfall and record temperatures creating an arid, unforgiving landscape unable to sustain either crops or livestock easily.

For many farmers in these areas, their future on the land is uncertain – just as it was for Noll's own family in the early 2000's when personal tragedy and the crippling effects of drought forced them to walk away from a property they had farmed for generations.

The downward spiral began in 2001 when Noll's father Neil died following a shocking farming accident, with the sudden loss devastating Noll, his two brothers and their mother.

For the next two years, they tried desperately to maintain the farm, but with two failed crops, mounting debts and a drought that didn't look like it would be over any time soon, the family was eventually forced to concede defeat, ending their 98-year connection with the Condobolin property.

By this time Noll had begun to make a name for himself as a singer, finishing runner-up on the inaugural season of Australian Idol and winning legions of fans with his down-to-earth persona, raw vocal power and stirring rendition of the Moving Pictures classic *What About Me?*

But even his newfound fame and fortune wasn't enough to save the farm, with much of his post Idol earnings instead used to pay off creditors calling in their debts.

It's little wonder then, with his farming heritage, that Noll is so passionate about raising awareness of and money for the worst drought in living memory.

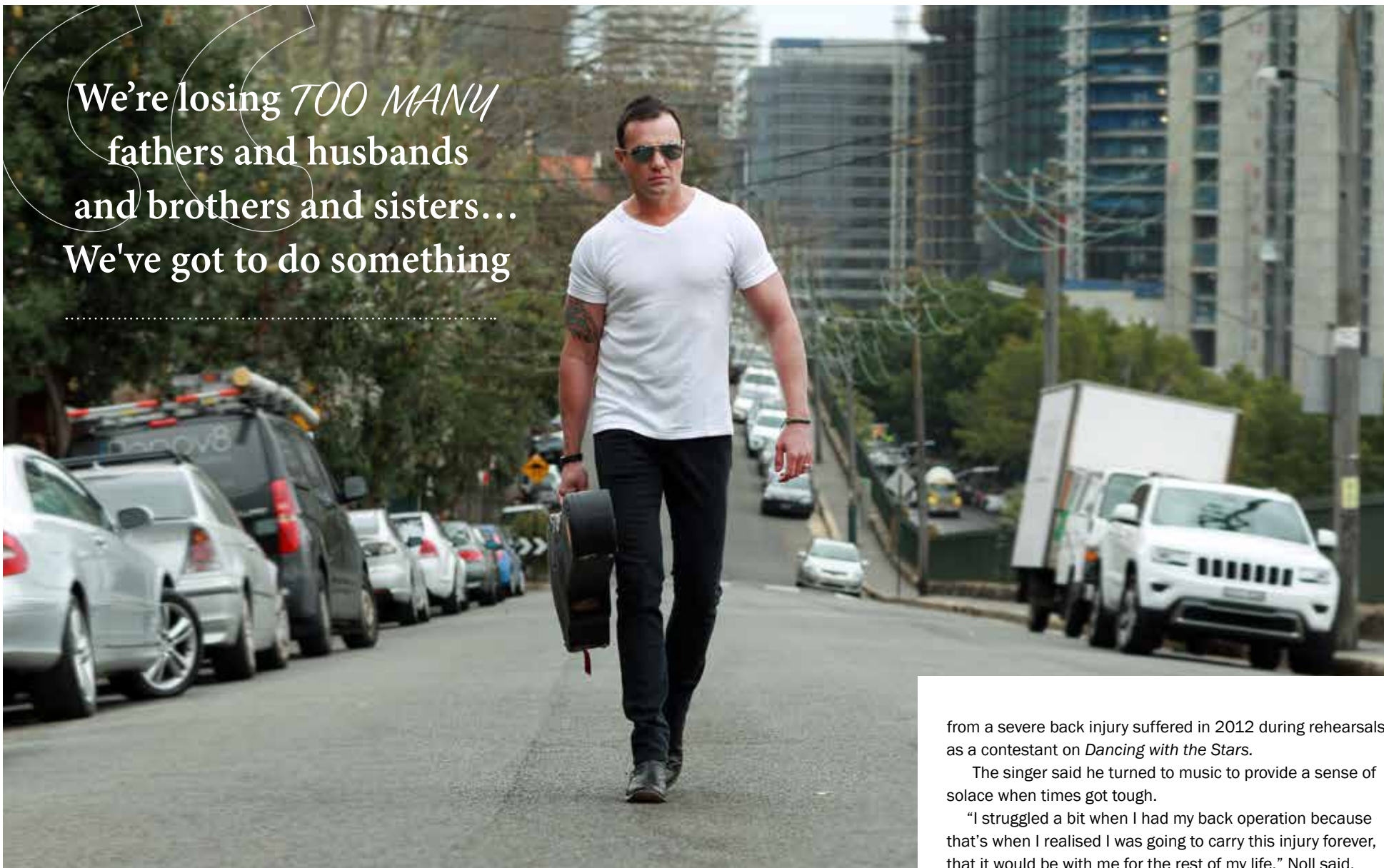
Aside from performing in drought relief concerts, Noll also wrote and released a single in September 2018 called *Lean On Me*, with 100 per cent of the proceeds donated to charity organisation, Drought Angels.

While he was buoyed by last year's heightened focus on the plight of Australian farmers, his trip to Condobolin in April reinforced his concern that it does not become a case of "out of sight out of mind" now the media frenzy has died down.

"*Lean on Me* was mainly about trying to bring awareness to the situation, but the sad part (since then) is that not a lot has changed," Noll said.

"There's been a little bit of rain here and there, but there's still lots of places that are really struggling. A lot of people, from the city especially, those who drive out west, once they get out there

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and brothers and sisters...  
We've got to do something



they go 'oh bloody hell, it's dry out here'... I think it has become a little out of sight, out of mind.

"I went home at Easter, and it's really, *really* dry still, and this time of year it should be lush green, you know, with crops coming out of the ground and all that sort of stuff.

"People are just dry sowing now, just hoping that it might rain enough to get their crop up. I've also got friends out there who have lost up to 60 per cent of their flock, all their sheep, and that's hundreds and thousands of dollars.

"It was a six-year drought that ended our farming life. We had the farm in the family for 98 years, and we ended up trying to farm our way through the drought but eventually went backwards – we lost eighty grand a year trying to plant crops to then not have any rain to get it up. We were just going further and further in [to debt] till we decided we had to get rid of it otherwise we'd lose it all.

"It was another six years of drought after that so we would have eventually just ground ourselves into the ground and had nothing to show for it really.

"This drought has become a little bit out of sight out of mind now after everyone had a lot to say about it last year.

"But it's something that's not going away any time soon, and it's a bit scary as to what it's got in store really because a lot of people could have no other alternative but to walk off their properties."

The other alarming consequence of the drought – and one that needs more attention according to Noll – is the impact it is having on the mental health of those struggling to cope with the conditions or the reality of losing their farms.

"I think it's all terribly worrying, because as things get worse and worse, you know, there will be, I'd say, an increase in rural suicide," he said.

“It's been terrible out there for years. When I grew up, I knew **13 blokes** in surrounding towns, young men who **took their own lives**.”

"You're in such an isolated area, where the mentality of people is often that you just don't talk about it.

"We've got to break through that barrier because we're losing too many fathers and husbands and brothers and sisters... we've got to do something; we've got to address it.

"We've got to work out a way that we can communicate better, I think. And read the signs, because some people can look as happy as Larry on the outside but be in absolute turmoil on the inside.

"It's hard because people often don't know what to say in these situations, but it's not really about that, it's just being there for someone... and letting them know that no matter what they're going through, you'll go through it together."

Noll knows what it's like to feel that inner turmoil, and has spoken in the past about his struggles with depression in the wake of his father's death and during his recuperation

from a severe back injury suffered in 2012 during rehearsals as a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars*.

The singer said he turned to music to provide a sense of solace when times got tough.

"I struggled a bit when I had my back operation because that's when I realised I was going to carry this injury forever, that it would be with me for the rest of my life," Noll said.

"That was a bitter pill to swallow; I think that made me realise that I'm not young anymore and I'm not the bloke I believed I always was physically. You have a feeling of uselessness that you're not good enough for anything really.

"But no matter how desperate the plight was at different times, I just wanted to go out and tour because you come home and you feel like you've done something, you feel like you achieved something just by singing to people and seeing them having a good time.

"That really helped me through a dark patch; the fun and joy that came with performing for people, who were having a good time themselves. That's what helped me through it."

Noll's career has certainly given him plenty of reasons to feel good, becoming the only Australian male artist in national chart history to have ever achieved ten consecutive top 10 singles.

The chart-topping singer's first single, *What About Me?*, debuted at number one on the ARIA Singles Chart and spent four consecutive weeks at the top spot.

*What About Me?* went on to become the highest selling single of 2004 in Australia, and was certified four times platinum after selling 280,000 copies. It also gained positive international exposure for Noll, reaching number two in Ireland and number 10 in New Zealand.

Noll followed this up almost immediately with the release of his debut album, *That's What I'm Talking About*, again debuting at the top of the ARIA charts, with more than 131,000 copies sold in the first week alone.

(Continued next page) ►

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(Continued)

The album spent 14 weeks in the top 10, including four weeks at number one, and was certified five times platinum.

A second number one single from that album, a cover of British–Norwegian boy band A1's song *Learn to Fly*, two nominations at that year's ARIA Music Awards and a successful solo tour cemented Noll's rapid rise to fame in 2004. A rise that was capped off with a request by channel Nine to re-record classic Australian cricket anthem, *C'mon Aussie C'mon*, as a charity single with updated lyrics, with his version peaking at number two on the charts.

Countless tours, a myriad of hit singles and five more albums, including two compilations, followed in the next six years, with his second effort, *Lift*, also debuting at number one on the charts before spending nine weeks in the top 10 and being certified triple platinum.

During this time Noll branched out into the world of theatre, making his on-stage debut in 2007 in the Australian tour of the stage musical, *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds*. He revised his role two years later during the UK tour of the musical, and in 2012 was selected as a contestant for the 12th season of *Dancing with the Stars*. The back injury he sustained while performing a lift during rehearsals with dance partner Elena Samodanova forced Noll to withdraw from the competition, however it proved not to be his last foray into reality television, with the singer finishing runner-up in the fourth season of *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me out of Here*, in March 2018.

Noll's fifth studio album, *Unbroken*, was released in February 2018, while the singer was still in the jungle on *I'm a Celebrity*. The album was Noll's first release in seven years following a series of record label and management changes, and reflected a much more personal direction in his songwriting, taking a close look at his roots, his fame, his love of Australia and his family.

The trials of getting older were also the focus of one of the album's stand-out tracks, a slow-burning anthem titled *Invincible*.

"There's a lot more of me personally on that album, you know, and I think that comes from being a better songwriter

too because the more you write songs, the better you get at it," Noll said.

"I think I learnt too, how to have much more input in the lyrics and the storyline, and then obviously when you touch on things that are much closer to home you find that it's much easier to write.

"A song like *Invincible* is the perfect example, that was after I had a back operation and it was actually not about being invincible, but about realising when you're not invincible anymore, that when you hit the ground, you stay on the ground, instead of bouncing back up on your feet like a young person does.

“ That was a very personal story about me in that story, something I lived through and experienced, so I think to be able to tap into that personal space is really important [as a songwriter].”

While Noll spent much of last year touring to promote the album, it was a tumultuous 12 months for the singer, who also received his share of more unfavourable media attention for several incidents. This included the expletive-riddled on-stage barrage he delivered at a concert-goer after cans and bottles were repeatedly thrown at the stage, including a full can that narrowly missed hitting Noll in the head.

Last year also saw a remorseful Noll front Sutherland Local Court on a minor drug possession charge, which saw him placed on a 12-month good behaviour bond without conviction.

Determined to put his troubles in the past and move forward with his life, Noll ended 2018 on a much more positive note, welcoming son Colton Keith Noll into the world on December 30.

Noll and his wife of 14 years, Rochelle, now have four children together; Cody, who turned 18 last month, Blake, 15 and Sienna, 11.

"It's really, *really* great to be honest," Noll said.

"You know, we were at the point where we were watching home videos and things like that going 'They grow up so quick!'... but then all of a sudden we're re-living that again, ►

going through the whole thing again.

"It's an amazing feeling, although I feel a little like the grandparent this time. The grandparent sort of takes a bit more time and soaks it up a little more, I think, whereas the first time around, you know, as a parent you're hell-bent on trying to put food on the table and forge out a career, or an income or a support system for your family.

"Back then it was really difficult, you know, and I missed lots of things like birthdays sometimes and losing the first tooth, and just little things like that. I'd be in the States for eight weeks in a row, come home for a week and then, you know, go on a tour for two or three months; it made it really difficult.

"You don't get those times back, you know, and while I'm still trying to (tour and record), I'm also keen not miss out on anything if I can help it."

Noll took several months off after Colton's birth to soak up the newborn excitement, but the singer is back out on the road again now with *The Singles Tour*, a career highlights show full of stand-out hits and fan favourites.

There's certainly plenty of material for Noll to choose from, with a back catalogue of certified triple platinum sales, number one hits and five top 10 albums, as well as 17 platinum and three gold accreditations.

In between gigs, Noll is also working on his next album, which he assures fans

they won't have to wait another seven years to hear. While it is still early days in the songwriting development, Noll said he is keen to return to his rockier roots with this release.

"I'm keen to try and get something done a lot quicker this time, you know, I'd love to get something out early next year or the middle of next year or late this year even," he said.

"But you've also got to make sure that you put your best foot forward and you put out the best quality music that you can too because I think there's no point in just putting something out for the sake of putting it out.

"I'm going to try to change up the genre a little bit and go back to what I love to play, what I love to write, what I love to perform, go back to my roots a little bit with rock and roll songs.

"I'm sort of scratching at the surface at the moment with the writing sessions, so we'll see what comes and see what feels right when we find it. But I think at this stage of my career, wherever it's destined to go, I'd rather it be on my terms, playing the music that I really, really love."

Tickets are on sale now for Shannon Noll's **The Singles Tour**, with a performance at Wests Cardiff on **Friday, June 21**.

*Readers affected by this story can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. ■*

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