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Robert Forster

The Candle And The Flame

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Great music and deep inspiration, can come at the most unexpected moments. At the most difficult times, and sometimes at the most contented ones, too.

In 2021 Robert Forster had a batch of songs written over a period of three years which he knew would be the basis of his next album. The songs felt strong, like they belonged together. They surprised him, too. They had different things to say, more openly personal about those closest to him.

He had the beginnings of one other song too, just music and a melody, no lyrics as yet. There was no rush to complete it, since he was also working on his first novel. It felt like the new songs could wait.

Life soon had other plans. In July of 2021, Robert's wife and sometimes musical partner Karin Bäumler was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and so began the intense emotional challenges of hospital, tests, chemotherapy, of hopes and fears.

As it had often been in their lives together for 32 years, music was like a rock, a place they could go.

"We started to strum songs at night to unwind after a big day, and Karin knew them because I had written them in the house," Robert says. "When you are concentrating on a song the rest of life goes away, and music became a beautiful escape hatch for us."

In July, Karin talked with Robert of the fight ahead. Soon after, with Karin resting in another room, Robert quietly played that new song he had set aside and whispered "She's a fighter, fighting for good". Those lines became the only lyrics needed for *She's A Fighter*, the extraordinary opening track and first single from the new Robert Forster album, *The Candle And The Flame*.

"I have always written from life, about things that are close, but what Karin was going through felt too big to write about," Robert says. "I thought if I did try to write about it the song would be 100 verses long. The only room I could see in this piece of music was for those two lines and that took me right down to the basics. I couldn't have done it any other way."

Life found a new rhythm. Karin and Robert's son Louis came to the family home in Brisbane most days, joining the music sessions. Friends dropped in with meals and one of them was Adele Pickvance, bassist with Robert on the final three albums by The Go-Betweens. She would join the music-making too.

"We weren't thinking of making a record. We decided to put our lounge room songs down on tape in a studio so that we would always have a recording of this thing we did."

Time was precious. The songs were recorded quickly at Brisbane studio Alchemix, without headphones, without overdubs, everyone in a studio room together, eye to eye.

"Listening back to the day's recordings, two of the songs in this raw form sounded complete to Karin and I. We wondered, could an album of songs be recorded in the same way?"

After a medical procedure in October that year, Karin continued recording when her health allowed, sometimes just a day or two in a month. The joy and respite the music gave them was priceless as Karin drove the album to completion, shortly after finishing her course of chemotherapy in March 2022.

Some will hear songs on the new album with titles such as *It's Only Poison* ("The body is a temple/The mind is a box/Your heart is like a river that no one can stop") and *Always* ("Time moves in one direction/And there's been a breakdown at the intersection out on Highway 5") and conclude these must have been written after Karin's diagnosis. They weren't.

Nor was *Tender Years*, one of the greatest love songs Robert has written in a career that now stretches across nine studio albums with The Go-Betweens and seven solo albums of original material.

The Roads is set in the countryside of Bavaria, Germany, where Karin and Robert met and lived for many years. *Go Free* is a song from lockdown, as is *There's A Reason To Live*, inspired by the discovery of an old concert ticket in a jacket pocket. All three are saying, better times can be up ahead.

I Don't Do Drugs I Do Time is a clear-eyed observation from a mature perspective ("I remember when we first met/Where you sat and what you said"), as is the album's closing statement, *When I Was a Young Man*.

Robert says: "That was triggered by a show on Radio National where guests were asked, 'What's the most important year of your life?' For me that was when I was 21, moved out of home, The Go-Betweens began, I started to write good songs."

What he did not know then was how far those songs would take him. Or that at 65, with the help of family and friends, in the most testing of times, he would deliver an album of songs as rich, as meaningful, as life-affirming, as true, as anything a younger person might dream.

Tracklisting

- 1) She's A Fighter
- 2) Tender Years
- 3) It's Only Poison
- 4) The Roads
- 5) I Don't Do Drugs I Do Time
- 6) Always
- 7) There's A Reason To Live
- 8) Go Free
- 9) When I Was A Young Man

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Promotion

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