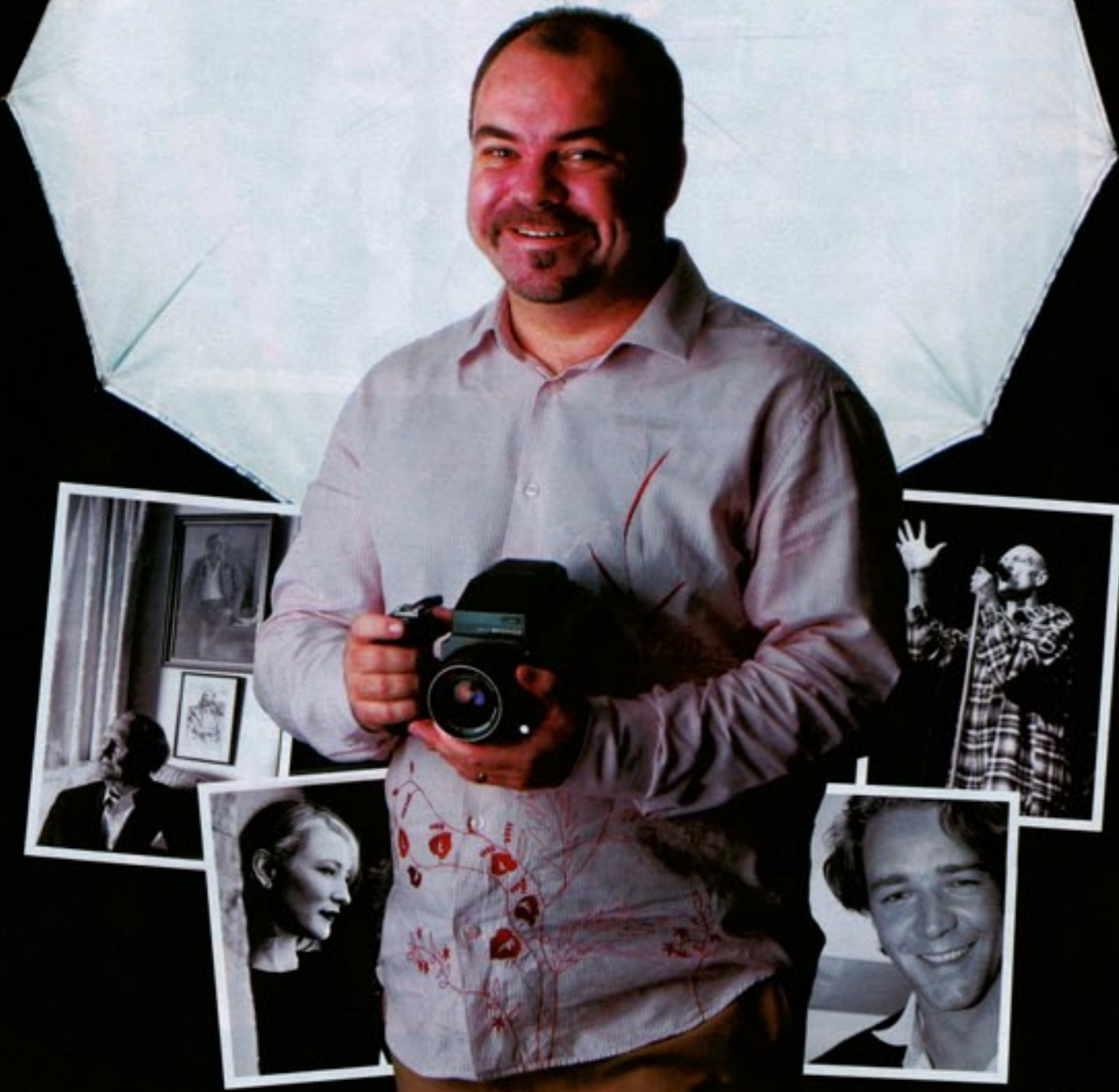


The world of celebrity has become a distant memory for Nathan Kelly, writes **Joeleen Bettini**

Brazen charm



As a fearless teenager Nathan Kelly made a spontaneous decision that would seal his future as one of the county's most prolific celebrity photographers, albeit for a short time.

"It was a time when the world was a little bit freer for people. I ended up just walking into the sound check at the Horton Pavilion (in Sydney) and Nick Cave (with his band The Bad Seeds) was basically doing a whole set," Nathan says.

"I just sat there watching and talking to his manager who asked who I was and what I did. I just said: 'I'm Nathan, I'm a photographer'. Nobody asked me what I was doing, there was no security and I ended up meeting Nick Cave."

The pair hit it off and soon Nathan was joining Nick and his crew on tour photographing the band. This relationship, as Nathan explains, opened a multitude of doors to the celebrity world.

"I'm backstage and there's people like Roger Grierson, who was the head of Polygram BMG at the time," he says. "They've gone: 'Take a photo with me' and unlike most photographers I actually sent these people the photos. After that, if I wanted to go to a concert or photograph a band I could just call Roger."

Passing himself off as a professional photographer was a brazen move but Nathan says if anyone doubted him they never admitted it.

"When I met Roger Grierson I was taking photos, so obviously to him I was a photographer and I was backstage at Nick Cave's. So to him that all made sense and nobody will ever question that. So I ended up getting very good contacts in the music industry and from there the film industry and all of these kinds of things."

Following his auspicious introduction to the game, Nathan says he continued to snap away at every opportunity and eventually gained work for photographic agencies, bringing him in contact with hundreds of performers from U2 and INXS to Ray Charles.

Evidence of the multitude of national and international stars that have sat for him lies in a fading hardcover notebook filled with autographs.

"Very few people have ever actually seen this (book), I use it as an icebreaker when I photograph people," Nathan says. "Some people say no, amazingly. Three people, Patrick Stewart from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and 3PO (C-3PO of *Star Wars* fame) said no. Bruce Willis also said no. I've got the Dalai Lama's autograph in here and B.B. King. I always ask, I was a bit cheeky to ask the Dalai Lama, I don't think he gets asked that often. Bob Hawke was the last person that signed that book. I'm on my second one now."

Nathan's portfolio is impressive, but it wasn't always the glittering A-listers who captured the

young photographer's attention. Many of his earlier works were of promising talents, budding actors and relatively unknown politicians before they hit the big time.

"I think photography gets more interesting over time. So a photograph of people I might not look at twice, you give that 15 or 20 years and that becomes really much more interesting," he says.

"People who were just kicking around Sydney at that time are now very famous so that makes it even more interesting. For example, The National Library bought one of my pictures of Russell Crowe about three years ago. I met Russell when I was 16 or 17. He was working on the *Sun of Us*."

Russell's portrait wasn't the first of Nathan's pictures to be purchased for a major collection.

In 2002, at the age of 25, Nathan became the youngest photographer to be permanently exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery when his image of former Prime Minister Sir John Gorton, taken years earlier, was purchased for its collection.

At the time of taking the photo, Nathan was a student at Sydney College of the Arts. "I used to just go through the White Pages (looking for phone numbers of famous people) and John Gorton was in there. I just called him up and told him who I was and what I wanted to do," he says. "I think that's probably one of my favourite portraits that I've taken ... it was the

first photo I took when I walked in there."

Nathan's photograph of John Gorton is just one of many noteworthy politicians who comprise his collection of works. Among others are Midnight Oil's then frontman Peter Garrett and another former prime minister Bob Hawke.

"I used to go through the White Pages ... and John Gorton was in there."

As his repertoire of influential subjects began to expand, Nathan says the idea to bring them all together in a book, complete with interviews, arose.

Together with his brother Brett Kelly, Nathan published *Collective Wisdom*, a compilation of 34 interviews with some of the country's most superior minds. The book, published while Nathan was still in his early 20s, sold 18,000 copies and was described by media personality Andrew Denton as "scattering pearls for those prepared to search, offering reward for those prepared to work".

When asked how it felt to accomplish so many things so young, Nathan, now 32, working as an art teacher in Cairns and taking photographs in his spare time, says

the days of celebrity parties, chasing bands and rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous seem like another lifetime.

It was also one he grew weary of fast. After finishing his arts degree and publishing his book, Nathan says he packed his bags and took up work on cruise ships travelling to 68 countries in almost four years. The adventure provided ample inspiration for thousands of photographs, some of which have been published in Australia and abroad, but it also temporarily exhausted Nathan's passion for his trade. "When I came back I didn't pick up my camera for almost two years," he says. "I was a bit over it, if you can imagine that, a bit over taking photographs and all that jazz."

Fortunately, his time in Cairns with his wife, who he met while travelling, has restored his love for his craft and for the past couple of years Nathan has been working on an ongoing collection of works. The first instalment, *Cairns to the Cape: A Photographic Journey*, features several landscapes taken with a 50-year-old Zeiss Ikon camera and a colourful but intense portrait series of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers captured during his visit to the Laura Dance Festival.

Cairns to the Cape: A Photographic Journey is on at the Cairns Regional Gallery until August 31.



In focus ... main picture, Nathan Kelly and celebrity images of Sir John Gorton, Cate Blanchett, Russell Crowe and Peter Garrett. And images in his latest exhibition, from above left, Karl Roughsey Jr (Mornington Island), Peter Peemugna (Aurukun) Benjamin Creek (Coen) and Glenn Liddy (Coen).