



CUTTING edge . . . Helen Russell and Leah Cotterell.

Bare to the bass

words Noel Mengel

WHAT'S the connection between Dido's *Thank You*, the Ray Charles hit *Lonely Avenue*, Abba's *Money Money Money* and cowboy standard *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*?

At first glance, perhaps there's not a lot.

But Leah Cotterell and Helen Russell find the common ground in their genre-defying duo and on their new album, *Foolish Things*.

Cotterell, husky-voiced jazz singer turned country and pop crooner, and Russell, bass player and musical director for many musical projects in Brisbane, have made music together for years in various guises.

They first worked together in Cotterell's jazz quartet, as well as being veterans of the Women In Voice cabaret series and Leah's fun covers collective 18 Wheels.

Then Cotterell went for a drive in the countryside ...

"The thought just popped into my head, 'Why don't we just play something together, just my voice and Helen's bass?'"

"When I put it to her she said she found the idea strangely appealing. She wasn't sure if it was sensible but it was certainly appealing!"

The combination of voice and bass has been tried by adventurous souls before, but usually as part of a jazz gig, not, as far as is known, for an entire performance and a career flourishing through two albums so far.

The project has taken on a life far greater than they expected, with performances at Women In Voice, Arts Council country tours and the support of ABC's Radio National.

Cotterell and Russell always have shown a knack for mix-and-matching songs from different eras, and an 18 Wheels gig has been known to range through the songbooks of Mahalia Jackson, The Monkees and Buffy Saint-Marie in the course of a Sunday afternoon.

With Cotterell and Russell laying themselves bare – musically speaking – on stage, the combination of material is even more crucial.

"The surprise of the repertoire is the best card we have to play," Cotterell chuckles. "Sometimes it's the only card when we go out on tour and we're playing two sets to a group of bewildered people. Your ear does have to work harder, so we have searched to find things that would work for us and that people would know."

While the two make the bass-voice combination sound as easy as if they'd been doing it all their lives, achieving it is no simple task.

Russell says: "It's hard work for both of us, especially when I have to sing harmonies and speak to the audience between songs! I'm

the bass player and I've never had to do that before, so in the middle of a song I can find myself thinking about what I'm going to say. It's quite a brain strain."

As anyone who has tried to stay in tune when singing along with a bass guitar knows, Cotterell's role is just as difficult.

"You can take it for granted I'm always going to put a lot of expression into a performance but this requires extreme accuracy, made even more difficult if there is any problem with the acoustics of the space," Cotterell says.

"The trick is to be precise and yet warm enough and loose enough to tell the story of the songs. That takes a while to master and even after three years we can feel that's still developing."

The duo's first album, *Duets*, is possibly the first in history to include tunes by Joe Jackson (*Fools in Love*) and Irving Berlin (*What'll I Do*).

Their latest, *Foolish Things*, raises the standard even higher, with its avant-pop interpretations ranging from traditional folk and hymns to Tin Pan Alley and show tunes, mixed with smash hits from the 1960s (*Wichita Lineman*), 1970s (John Lennon's *Imagine*) and the new millennium (Dido's *Thank You*).

Then there is Cole Porter's *Love for Sale* – banned in its early days because of the subject matter – which segues into Lou Reed's *Walk on the Wild Side*.

The album also reveals Russell's qualities as a strong harmony singer on such tracks as *Thank You* and *Wanting Memories*.

Russell was born to her profession. Her mother was a well-known Toowoomba piano player and choral arranger and Helen was performing with her from a young age. Now she is in demand as a musical director, arranger, and tutor at the Conservatorium of Music as well as performer, but finds this duo one of her most fascinating assignments.

"It's always interesting trying to come up with the required amount of harmony and rhythm to support a melody," Russell says.

"But we know by now there are certain features that make a tune suitable for us. There is no point in us trying something that relies solely on groove, for instance. Songs that are just a few notes aren't going to work; it has to be something with real melodic interest."

As can be heard on *Foolish Things*, they've investigated far and wide to find 14 of those.

Leah Cotterell and Helen Russell launch *Foolish Things* at The Zoo, Fortitude Valley on Wednesday, supported by OK Chorale and a solo set by Jamie Clark.

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