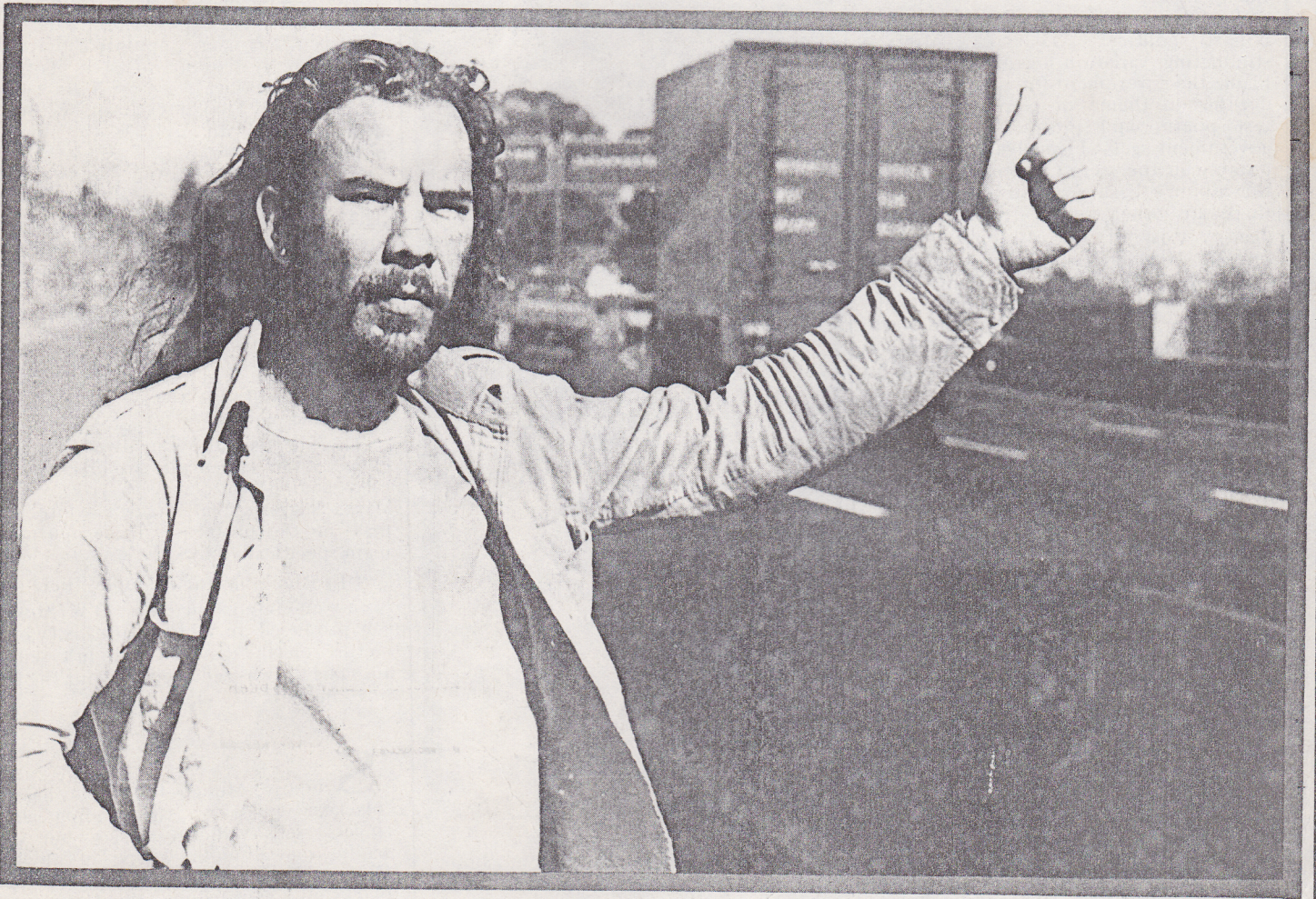


## ROGER LUCEY

# He may be our best rock singer, but The words he sings are wrong



**T**HE chances are high that if Roger Lucey scrapped around 95 per cent of the words in his songs and replaced them with tum-te-tum-te-tums, he'd be top of the hit parade.

As it is, he is the next thing to unknown.

Which is ironic, especially in a country which by consensus is short of good, imaginative, indigenous music.

Lucey has a lot running for him. He is a local boy, for a start. He has a rough, tough voice which matches or beats the quality of a good many of the internationally famous names. He writes, and sings, throbbing, vibrant music which is virtually guaranteed to inject enthusiasm

into any gathering from a two-year old's birthday party an undertaker's convention.

But the words he sings are wrong. So eight months after its release his first album, *The Road Is Much Longer*, has sold 200 copies. "All to Roger's friends," says his producer, Dave Marks. And he has enjoyed a sum total of something like 15 minutes air time over the SABC.

Lucey sings about South Africa, and he covers a broad selection of its many aspects. Cross-country hitchhiking, deaths in detention, a cafe customer fighting for the deposit on his cold-drink bottle, resettlement, big-city alienation, liberal affluence . . .

And whereas you don't need to be a teeny-bopper for Lucey's music to get your toes tapping, neither do you need to be a bleeding-heart for his lyrics to send shivers down your spine.

His mix is a heavy one, by any standards, but it works because his natural feel for rock music seduces the ears before the mind can organise an objection.

Which is what lifts Lucey above the realm of conventional protest art. He fits into a rare category — neither a politician trying to wrap a message into a forced musical package, nor a musician trying to latch on to any old words so long as they're hummable. It is impos-

PLEASE TURN OVER

## Our ideas are all imported

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sible to define which comes first in his mind — the music or the content.

Lucey himself objects strongly to being labelled a 'protest' singer. But as a review in *Music Maker* magazine has suggested, maybe it is not up to him to decide, since the mark of a real protest singer is not that he makes protest happen in his mouth but in his listener's head.

And that, says *Music Maker*, is what Lucey does.

Protest there is. Interestingly, it is not all 'political'. That is, it offers a stimulating variation on the traditional blame-the-government-for-everything-under-the-sun theme of conventional protest poetry and protest music. The government gets blamed for plenty — notably in the song *Crossroads*, possibly the album's best piece of music — but there are other targets too. Most indeed consist of the 'establishment' in one or other of its forms — from the cafe owner filching a two-cent bottle deposit to the more customary subjects like the complacency of the wealthy and the fear of standing up for beliefs: "You only need say nothing to have nothing at all to say."

**T**habane, a gentle, delicate piece, as firmly rooted in the folk tradition as some of the other cuts are solid rock, opens with a peaceful description of pastoral life — "a mountain range called Ubombo . . . the sound of open laughter . . ." It sounds like pure peace and harmony, everything's rosy in the garden. But within a couple of bars — all in the same soft 19th-century tone — the subject matter runs through rural poverty, death, the fear of officialdom, the spirit of defiance, and impending holocaust. It winds up with a heart-felt plea that by the time that Thabane — the child the singer is addressing — is old enough to be involved in the issues then the storm will be over.

On the first hearing, *Thabane* may be merely confusing. The contrast between the style and the content, together with the under-the-belt turnabout from rustic tranquility to visions of doom are difficult to come to terms with. By the third hearing, it would be a rare listener whose skin is not crawling.

*Crossroads* is in a different category. Shattering from the first bar. Melodramatic, sure. Sometimes overstated (How often do the bulldozers really flatten squatter houses with the family right there inside?) — and sometimes trite — (what attack on the hypocrisy of rich liberals is ever complete without some reference to nanny bringing in tea?) But the overall impact is, in more ways than one, a blast. And it does more to focus real feeling on the position of the



father of a family whose self-built home is about to get knocked down in front of his eyes than any number of newspaper articles.

To print the words of so integrated a song in the cold black-and-white of a silent page is to diminish them — without the sound they come across as mere ritual protest. But there are occasional lines which stand on the words alone:

*You've got one foot in the homelands,  
and one toe in town  
And as you pick yourself up and get off  
the floor you know they're coming again  
They're going to cut you down.*

**I**f Lucey's so good, then how come nobody's buying his album?

Dave Marks puts it down to lack of air time — pure and simple. "We've had rave newspaper reviews", he says, "but the only thing that sells records is air time. Unless people hear a record, they don't buy."

The newspaper reviews have certainly been favourable. Marks admits that initially Lucey's group had expected at least the conservative papers to pan his music, or to ignore it, on the grounds of its controversial themes. True, Lucey hardly enjoyed massive publicity, but what he did get was universally favourable. The subject matter didn't seem to matter much. *Beeld* announced that "he doesn't shy away from South African realities", *Die Transvaler* that he filled the troubador's eternal goal, of "forcing his listener to look anew at the things around him."

There are other possible factors. One entire cut has been amputated in accordance with legal opinion that it may contravene the Police Act. So has a section of another. That doesn't make for the best listening. In any case, the album is not consistently good — at least not to the tastes of any of the reviewers who have written on it so far. Many of the back-up musicians met for the first time on the day the album was recorded — in a 16-hour marathon — which makes for occasional jarring as well as for a fair amount of spontaneity and freshness.

Moreover, the album has attracted virtually no black attention — to the extent that it was not even accorded the standard small-type review in any of the black newspapers.

This surprised those involved, who had expected an easier ride in black circles than among white conservatives. Dave Marks suggests that Lucey's white skin may be the problem. Black music remain specifically black, he says.

"In Rhodesia, for example, there have been some interesting cases. B.W. Stevenson produced an album with his (white) picture on the cover. It didn't sell at all. Then it was re-issued without the picture, and sold like crazy.

**S**imilarly, Mungo Jerry, who has the 'blackest' voice of the leading white singers, sells well on singles, but very badly on albums, where his picture appears. We've even heard of cases where blacks who have 'white' albums are taunted for it — which is a lot like the situation we used to have in white circles, in reverse. Around 15 years ago, my mother in Witbank had a Miriam Makeba album. Her neighbours thought it was a disgrace.

"Now, about 85 per cent of the music played on the SABC's white channels is by blacks — mainly imported. The SABC won't play local black music unless it's in English. They play French, or German, or foreign black stuff readily. But they pretend local blacks don't exist. Ladysmith Black Mambazo have sold more records in South Africa than Elvis, Sinatra and the Beatles combined, but whites don't even know of their existence.