



# Fanning & Co soar in cathedral of Cossack

Aussie stars lend talent to ghost-town project, writes  
**Simon Collins**

**T**he two best Bernard Fanning songs since 2005's chart-topping *Tea and Sympathy* can be found on *Vast*, an album recorded in the Pilbara ghost town of Cossack.

The first, *Everything*, was written with Broome legend Alan Pigram and Ngarluma man Tyson Mowarin, the indigenous musicians prompting the former Powderfinger frontman to reflect on their relationship with the natural environment.

"These are my cathedrals, these are my city squares," Fanning sings in his unmistakable voice.

The other, *Ashes and Dust*, Fanning wrote with Oh Mercy frontman Alex Gow on the morning they first met in Cossack.

Those songs appear on *Vast* alongside contributions from Paul Dempsey, Sally Seltmann, Augie March's Glenn Richards and Eskimo Joe frontman Kav Temperley.

The latter sounds surprisingly bluesy on *Sugarstone*, which he recorded alone in a makeshift studio in the tiny former schoolhouse with two large lizards and a nest of hawks for company.

The ARIA Award-adorned stars were among about 40 musicians who late last year descended on Cossack, a North West port deserted since 1881

when a cyclone sent the pearling industry packing to Broome.

The City of Karratha-funded project is the brainchild of Panics frontman Jae Laffer and Roebourne music teacher Qynn Beardman, who set up a creative retreat akin to the Heidelberg School in the pindan.

Laffer says there was "no agenda" — he just wanted to create an art school vibe, using the "mystery and beauty of Australia" to inspire

participants. "We gave a bit of WA desert to them," he says, "and then they did their thing."

Artists who heeded their call span multiple disciplines, including Perth artist Stormie Mills, sculptor Lis Johnson, designer Thalia Economo and comedian Paul McDermott, who drops his acerbic guard to contribute stirring ballad *Let Go*. Former Mambo artist Robert Moore, from Grafton in NSW, painted the impressionistic landscape on the cover.

Egos were put aside as collaborations proliferated.

Perth-based punk lifer Nick Sheppard even switched his electric guitar for an acoustic to help others finish their tune in the few days they rattled around the majestic stone buildings. His

strumming as he wandered into the former Galbraith's Store prompted local indigenous artist Josie Alec to invent the lyrics of poignant album closer *Vast*

Thoughts on the spot.

Sheppard also played a tasty guitar lick that drives *Ashes and Dust*, while a chorus sang backing vocals for Oh Mercy's *Have a Little Faith* late at night after a communal dinner and a few drinks.

The Healys, three Irish brothers used to playing folk covers at West Leederville pub J.B. O'Reilly's, served as the house band in the cavernous Customs House and Bond Store stoically overlooking Butcher Inlet.

The project's secret weapons harmonise on Tradition as a bird twitters in the rafters above.

Margaret River-raised indie folkie Rowena "R.O." Wise — daughter

of Luther Scott, who was also in Cossack making instruments — provides the swooning *Overgrow*. Another stand-out is Mowarin's honest acoustic pop-rocker *Best I Can*, while country star Adam Harvey's *Red Dirt Town* is perhaps too literal, even for an album clearly reflecting the environment in which it was born.

While there was no schedule and participants went on field trips to see rock art at the Burrup Peninsula, meet local elders and go fishing, not everyone found sonic

inspiration.

Olivia Bartley,  
who records  
stunning