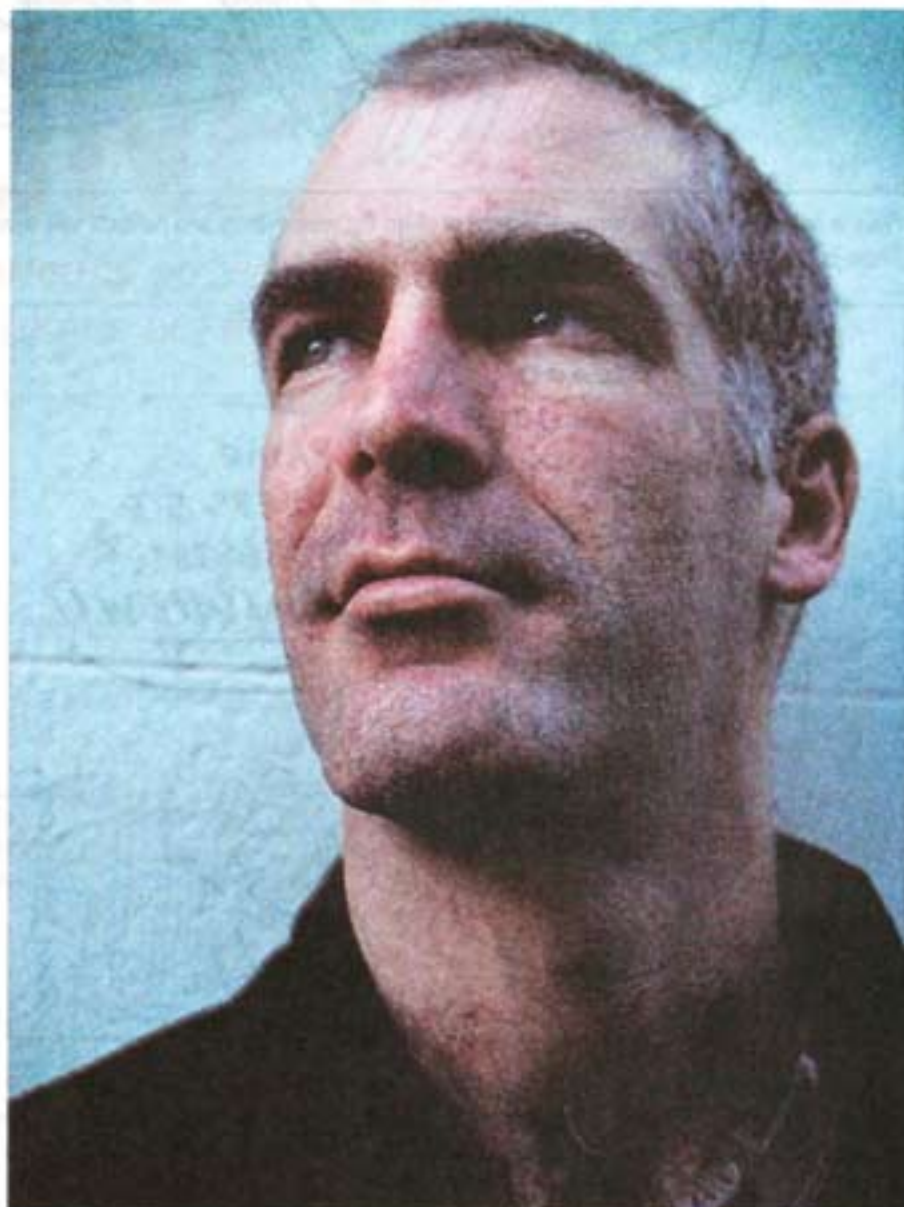


Two of Brisbane's homeless locals (top, and above)



Composer Stephen Stanfield

018 A HOME FOR HYMN

*A powerful new multimedia show, set in a Brisbane church, will give homeless people a voice.
By Matt Thrower. Photos by Andrew Merry.*

On a wall in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley, there is a mural depicting homeless and marginalised people in various scenarios. In one panel, a homeless person asks a passer-by for a cigarette, and the passer-by replies, 'Sure, I know what it's like to not be able to afford cigarettes.' But this response has been scribbled out with a permanent marker and replaced with: 'No, get a job and buy your own.'

Sadly, there are many people in the community who are not only unsympathetic to the plight of people living in poverty or on the streets, but are openly hostile towards them. It's a matter that clearly concerns Brisbane-based composer Stephen Stanfield, who has created *Critical Mass* as part of the Queensland Biennial Festival of Music. The show is a series of compositions, vocal recitations, pre-recorded audio and visual projections looking at the issue of homelessness. What makes *Critical Mass* notable is its choice of venue – St Mary's Church in South Brisbane – and the context in which it will be performed.

'*Critical Mass*, as the name suggests, takes the form of a contemporary Mass,' Stanfield explains. 'It will include a liturgy especially written by Fathers Peter Kennedy and Terry Fitzpatrick.'

Stanfield clearly believes in the

power of music to make a point: 'I'm hoping people will be a little bit more knowledgeable about the issue of homelessness in Brisbane when they leave *Critical Mass*,' he says. 'I hope they'll have enjoyed themselves at the same time as feeling emotionally touched. I think the imagery and the combination of music and recorded audio will have quite an impact.'

For Stanfield, putting the event together has been an eye-opener. Working in collaboration with Robyn Bolden, community access and support service coordinator at St Mary's outreach centre, Stephen met and spoke with the homeless people who often sit outside St Mary's. Excerpts from these conversations form part of the audio element of the show.

'I certainly wasn't aware of how serious this issue is,' says Stanfield. 'Speaking with the homeless people, their stories touched me straight away. It was astounding to find out how long they'd been living this lifestyle.'

For Bolden, *Critical Mass* gives a voice to the city's homeless and marginalised. 'When you actually give these people a voice, it becomes much more meaningful than just giving them an anonymous label like "homeless",' she says. 'I find the term "homelessness" such a de-personalised label. That's got a lot to

do with why society is so intolerant of these people: they get stigmatised and actually blamed for their plight.'

'But these people are in these situations as a result of long-term poverty, unemployment, lack of education, major life traumas, various illnesses and the lack of funding in a colossal range of services.'

Critical Mass marks the first time Stanfield has worked on what he calls 'functional' music, or music that forms a backdrop for other elements.

'This time over, I have to put myself in the back seat and realise that this is music with a definite purpose. It's very functional, instead of the attitude of "You are the audience, I am the performer, that is the stage, here is my music,"' he explains. 'I think the bulk of the audience will be people who don't normally go to a new music concert. So there's that aspect of writing new music and putting it into a different performance context to reach out to a wider community.'

Critical Mass will feature the work of seven-piece ensemble Symbitronic and the Queensland University of Technology Academy of Arts Choir. And despite its weighty subject, Stanfield is determined that the show will be far from downbeat.

'There are four choir pieces I've been arranging and even though they are lyrically dark, musically they are

joyous,' he says. 'To have a melancholy theme and back it up with melancholy music would be a bit too depressing. I've been looking for drama and tension rather than depression – for strength in the music rather than casting a gloom over the audience.'

He is also impressed with St Mary's, both as a venue and as an organisation: 'St Mary's does vital work in Brisbane with all social issues, whether it's homelessness, youth issues or domestic violence,' he says.

According to Bolden, St Mary's concentrates a large amount of energy on helping people who either reside or spend a great deal of time in public spaces.

'These public spaces are used for communal drinking by some, and they are home for others,' she says. 'The work we do includes gathering empty bottles, cleaning broken glass and syringes and helping people find accommodation or detoxification services. We also help with banking, and especially during this time of year, we help provide blankets.' □

Critical Mass will take place on Friday 27 July and Saturday 28 July at 6.30 p.m. and on Sunday 29 July at 5 p.m. Entry is by donation.