



Dr Kennedy or: How I learned to stop worrying and love Fletch

Dr K. talks to Andrew Mickel about Liverpool, live music and livelier fans

There are many important doctors in history: Dolittle, Matt, Who. But one bestrides medical history like the colossus he is. Without Dr Karl Kennedy, the majority of people in southeastern Australia would be dead by now.

Of course, he's just a fictional character. Alan Fletcher is a man in his own right (apparently), and is currently finishing a tour of the nation's Walkabouts with his band the Waiting Room. "A lot of people are coming to these gigs to see Dr Karl," says Dr Karl—sorry, Fletch—"but at the end of it they're raving to us about the music."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Fletch seems tired. Having just come back from a sound check and with just a few hours until the Cardiff gig, the Waiting Room are on their second tour of the UK in a year. Not bad for a band that only formed a year and a half ago.

"Tommy Rando and Chris Hawker were playing at a restaurant that I was eating at one night, and they got me up to sing a few songs with them. Very quickly we realised we were getting on so well that we started writing together.

"I've been a singer all my life, and to me this is just a natural progression. It's an extension of acting. It's about entertainment, it's about telling stories, and describing life."

Fletch on life out of Neighbours

"Then people over here in the UK found out about us and wanted us to come over." It's good to know that we can beat the Australians at something. When it comes to fandom, we definitely whoop anyone from Down Under.

"In Australia I can't really leave Melbourne, it isn't really practical because of my *Neighbours* commitments. The night we play is primarily a night that UK fans come to. So the Waiting Room is really an untested band in Australia."

Anyone who was at the Walkabout gig will know how British the band's music is, although with an obvious Australian twist of ballsy sunshine. "[We play] primarily Brit rock. Party music, good time music, music that people like to sing along to. Our own music as well; we do two of our rockier tracks and then a ballad."

The frankly surreal sight of Fletch singing the Killers' *Somebody Told Me* can pay testament to the perhaps unusual musical choices for the band. "Our own music is quite eclectic, quite hard to describe, a bit like a lot of bands; it's hard to nail down what a Waiting Room style is."



PHOTO: James Perou

FLETCH: Better than you

But there's no denying that the music is what has finally sealed the deal in making him a legend, even if he hasn't realised that himself. "For me, I'm just a run of the mill guy. What's important for me is to try and meet as many fans as possible, so after the gigs we do spend an hour and a half, sometimes two hours taking photos with the band and punters." And being a sex symbol? "I don't know about that, but it's flattering..." says Fletch, who in the flesh looks a bit like your mate's Dad.

The music is all well and good, but everyone who knows who Alan Fletcher is does so purely off the back of *Neighbours*, the perennial sunny favourite of students and bored housewives everywhere. "There's a real gentle humour to the show. A lot of soaps and dramas that the audiences here love, like *Eastenders*, can be a bit heavy. Even the dark characters like Paul Robinson gets a lot of pleasure out of what he does. It's become quite a happy, easy show to watch."

"If everyone was at that gig who claims to be the venue would have fallen over. We also did it this tour as an encore at Liverpool and it took the roof off the building."

Fletch on playing *You'll Never Walk Alone* after Liverpool won the cup

Fletch has been a *Neighbours* star for 11 years now, but the one defining moment for any fan would still have to be Karl and Susan being split up. Of course if you're Fletch, then you may have your own favourites.

"There was a storyline where Karl was pinching gnomes which I used to love, mainly from Marlene Kratz. He'd steal the gnomes and then send her a postcard from the gnomes." Maybe he's been asked the big S question too much. In his own words, he's been asked whether they're getting back together 'somewhere between one and two million times'.

Well, I don't want to be the one who breaks the convention. "I can only say that Karl regrets leaving Susan, he knows he made a mistake. But Susan has a new boyfriend, and that becomes quite tempestuous. And Karl becomes involved in that story because of that boyfriend's health problems."

So the future may be uncertain for Karl, but it's certainly all good for Fletch. The Waiting Room have another tour coming up in the summer off the back of the massive success of this year's, and like vampire slayers, to each generation is born just one hero of such legendary proportions. So I guess we should all be grateful that the Waiting Room are touring again this summer.

Everybody needs good readers

The more disturbing questions sent in by *gair rhydd* readers and Xpress listeners

Playing a doctor, have you ever been asked for medical advice?

Yes. All the time. And I don't give it, because I could be sued if it's wrong.

Given the success of the Waiting Room, is there any chance of a resurrection of the Right Prescription?

Well, the whole idea of Karl with music was years and years ago and unrelated to my interests. Karl is rubbish as a performer. So it's quite nice to play someone who's rubbish, and then go out into the real world and be decent.

Do you ever have aggressive fans, or fans doing bizarre things?

No. The only time we had a fan doing something a little strange was when a girl flew from the United Kingdom to meet us, and she only had a one way ticket. And she wanted to live with the Kennedys. But the Grundys looked after her very well, and made sure she got home.

Are you concerned that you are the only medic in Erinsborough? Couldn't they just forgive Dr Darcy for the whole 'criminal record' thing?

(Laughs) Dr Darcy is not going to be allowed back. Well, he might come back, you never know with *Neighbours*. Karl is very stretched, there's no questions about that, but he likes to stay busy.

Whatever happened to Cassie the sheep?

Cassie is still sitting in the backyard of the Kennedys and I just did a scene with Cassie in it.

Growing up as a child, Karl and Susan were like parents to me. Splitting up caused me much emotional distress and I'm holding you personally responsible. What would your line of defence be in court?

(Laughs) The poor person I've offended should enter a plea of insanity and I'll enter a counter plea of insanity. I'm very sorry that we've upset that person, and any efforts I can make to comfort that person I'd be happy to give.