

Banding together

With a caravan full of instruments, The Family Tree has travelled the country, making music.

STORY JUSTINE McCLYMONT PHOTO ELISE HASSEY

As he steps forward on stage with guitar in hand at Mataranka Homestead in the Northern Territory, Rob Imeson looks out at the crowd and says, "This is our parting gift to you". It's the last song of the night before it's time to pack up and head back to the caravan under the stars of the outback skies. "In the land of plenty of time," Rob sings as he strums the guitar. It's a gentle country folk song – the type that can only be found in the quiet spaces far away from the noise of busy life.

Next to Rob is his wife Amy with her tangle of long blonde hair and sparkle in her eyes. She sings a harmony to the song. "You'll be bound forever, to the Never Never, long will you remember her name." Their daughter Molly plays a tune on the violin and weaves her own music around the song her dad wrote, while her older brother Joel and younger sister Charlie watch on. In between the lyrics, there are moments of space and patience like those long-lost hours on the road between outback towns where the dusty haze shimmers in the distance.

Rob and Amy Imeson and their children Joel, 14, Molly, 12, and Charlie, 10, are The Family Tree, an alternate country folk band that has travelled all over Australia playing music as a family. While the big river country of the Clarence Valley on the New South Wales North Coast is the place they call home, they have spent a total of two-and-a-half years on the road on three different trips with their trusty instruments packed into a four-wheel-drive and caravan.

As a singer/songwriter in his own right and a lover of Australian storytellers such as Slim Dusty and Paul Kelly, Rob writes most of the songs. Amy sings and plays the flute, while their eldest, Joel, plays ukulele and percussion, and recites bush poetry when the occasion calls for it. Molly plays the violin, guitar and mandolin, and the youngest member of the band, Charlie, sings and plays piano.

The family has inherited a love of music from Amy's family where picking up an instrument is as natural as having a cup of tea. Rob remembers watching Amy play with her dad at a festival and going along to family gatherings in the couple's early days. "They would all get together at Christmas, maybe 20 or more cousins, and have a circle in the garage where they'd sing," Rob says. "Then every New Year's Eve they'd get the PA out and people would have a go."

Rob started playing local gigs with Amy's dad Paul and

before long the whole family was up on stage including Amy's mum Anne. "We started doing the odd gig at the Harwood Hotel and it just got busier and busier. It just grew from there," Rob says. "It was very amateur at the start, and still is amateur, because the kids are all at different stages and you don't want to push them. You don't want to say, 'Get up here and play this song,' if they don't want to do it," Rob says.

After saving for five years, Amy and Rob decided to take the kids out of school for a year in 2015 to hit the road as a family band. They had spent a year travelling around Australia back in 2008 with a bit of busking along the way, but had always dreamed of escaping again. So, they packed up their life into a caravan and played their tunes at 'happy hour' in caravan parks all across Australia in exchange for free campsites.

"We got to Cairns and the gigs had run out," Rob says. "So, we sent an email to Charters Towers and then all of a sudden the west just opened right up. We travelled out through Julia Creek and then we got an email from Mataranka asking us to come and play for a month."

While he was at Mataranka, Rob read Jeannie Gunn's iconic Australian book *We of the Never Never*, which is how his song 'The Never Never' unfolded. "One of the chapters was called 'The Land of Plenty of Time,'" Rob says. "I love that book, for all different reasons. Because we were there, but also because of the way she described the place." After returning home at the end of 2015, The Family Tree was invited back out to Mataranka Homestead to play for six months over the busy tourist season in 2016. They jumped at the chance.

Rob and Amy say their adventures have given the children a whole new experience of life and learning. The kids all completed distance education on their travels, but it's also the learning that comes with getting out of the ordinary routine that is most valuable. "They all just developed a love of reading," Rob says. "Honestly when they came back, they weren't behind. If anything, they're more mature in a lot of ways. They love learning. I'm pretty proud of them."

"We definitely get a bit of freedom on the road. That feeling of waking up and not having any pressure the next day or knowing that you've got until Thursday to get to the next show. It's not like you're going to be living like a king, but it's a beautiful thing where you channel all your energy into doing what you love. You can just have time together. That's the most important thing."



The Family Tree – Rob, Molly, Charlie, Amy and Joel Imeson.