



Thargomindah in south-west Queensland inspired the song *Hat Town*.

DRIVE OF MY LIFE

CLASSIC TRACKS

Popular Australian country music singer/songwriter and Toyota ambassador Lee Kernaghan reveals how travelling to rural communities inspires his songs.

Back in October 2002, I set off with a good mate of mine, George Knight, his brother-in-law, Rusty, and my record producer, Garth Porter — famous for co-writing the 1976 Aussie classic *Howzat*. We were in a convoy of Toyota LandCruisers, loaded up with swags, water, food and guitars.

Our mission for the road trip was to soak up outback Queensland and South Australia, and to write songs about it. We headed out west from Brisbane through Warwick to a place called Texas, right near the New South Wales and Queensland border.

After catching up with the friendly locals at the Stockman Hotel, we knew we had to write a song about the town. *Texas Qld 4385* went on to become a number-one hit.

We refuelled in Goondiwindi and then we took the Barwon Highway to Nindigully, where the pub is legendary. People say it's the oldest licensed pub in Australia. We hit the dirt just out of Thallon and cut through Dirranbandi on our way to Cunnamulla. I met a lot of really great people out there and their stories and the life they live are still an inspiration to me.

I sing about Thargomindah in my song *Hat Town*. The township is about 1000 kilometres west of Brisbane and we used the opportunity to pick up supplies before making our way to Noccundra. We camped at the waterhole, lit a campfire and watched the wild pigs coming down to drink as day faded into night. There's something almost spiritual about being out in the country. The further out you go, the more it seems to embrace you.

It was all dirt from Noccundra. We stopped at the 'dig tree' where explorers Burke and Wills had camped, then crossed into South Australia and onto the Innamincka Hotel, where we washed away the dust of the day drinking beers with the locals. We made our camp on the banks of Cooper Creek, dug a hole in the ground for the camp oven and wrote *The Way It Is*.

The dirt track up to Birdsville had been recently flooded. There was heavy corrugation and big washouts up through Cordillo Downs — pretty precarious driving conditions — but this is where the LandCruisers really come into their own. Slim Dusty once told me he would load up his LandCruiser with all his gear, leave the east coast of Australia behind and keep heading west, and the only thing that would stop him would be the Indian Ocean.

We took on the Big Red out the back of Birdsville before heading to the tiny town of Yaraka in Queensland — population of about 12 people. A few years prior, we'd staged a Pass the Hat Around fundraising concert with Toyota to help the local medical clinic buy a defibrillator. Almost 3000 people turned up, Yaraka had its first ever traffic jam and more than \$100,000 was raised.

The time had come to turn the LandCruisers for home, but sitting around the campfire that night in Yaraka really summed up why this was my favourite road trip of all time — special memories of some legendary people, a lot of good miles and soaking up everything remarkable about this great country of ours. **GP**

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