

Dance band on the Titanic: on loss, hope and music

## Description



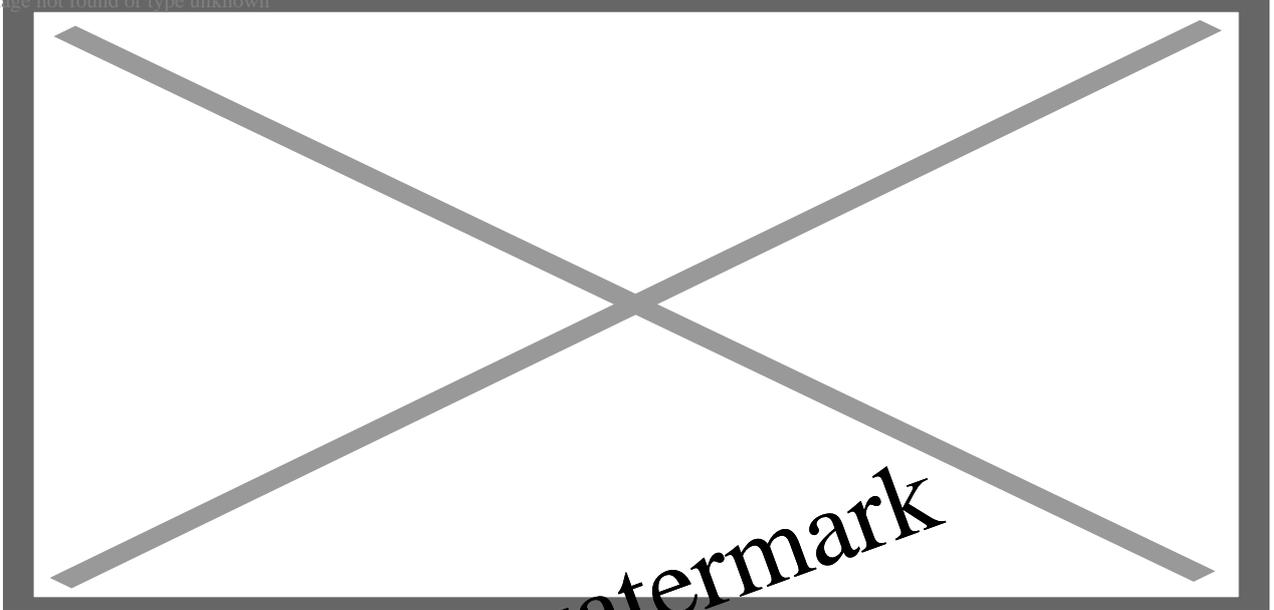
*The Titanic setting off on its maiden voyage. Source: [Spotify](#)*

*This post wasn't on the schedule, but sometimes you just have to write about what's in front of you. Three of Australia's musical icons died recently, and the world news is awash with stories of extreme climatic events. Plenty to reflect on and ponder about loss and hope in times of climate crisis. I wrote this mostly to work through my own feelings about all this stuff, but hope that it might resonate with some readers too. Towards the end, it also considers humanity's relationship with nature and the role of music as an agent of change.*

## Loss of Aussie icons

In the past few weeks, [Australia lost three of its music icons](#) – Judith Durham, Olivia-Newton John and Archie Roach.

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*Judith Durham, Archie Roach and Olivia Newton-John. Source: [ABC](#)*

The news of their deaths engendered mixed emotions of sadness and fond memories of their music. As a teenager in the 1960s in Scotland, I listened to Judith Durham's amazing voice on the radio as she sang such hits as "Georgy Girl" and "The Carnival is Over". And then along came Olivia Newton-John in the 1970s – who couldn't fall in love with her as she sang and spoke in her Aussie accent and appeared as Sandy in the Movie "Grease". Both women were trailblazers and had a huge and lasting influence on music worldwide.

*The Seekers The Carnival Is Over (1967)*

*Olivia Newton-John ~ Hopelessly Devoted to You (1978)*

I didn't know about Archie Roach until later, after I'd moved to Australia. Archie rose to fame with his 1988 song "Took the Children Away", and that and all his other music have been part of the musical fabric here in Australia ever since. I never got to see Judith Durham or Olivia Newton-John live in concert, but I saw Archie many times in all sorts of settings. News of his death was like losing a relative or old friend.

*Archie Roach – Took The Children Away (1988)*

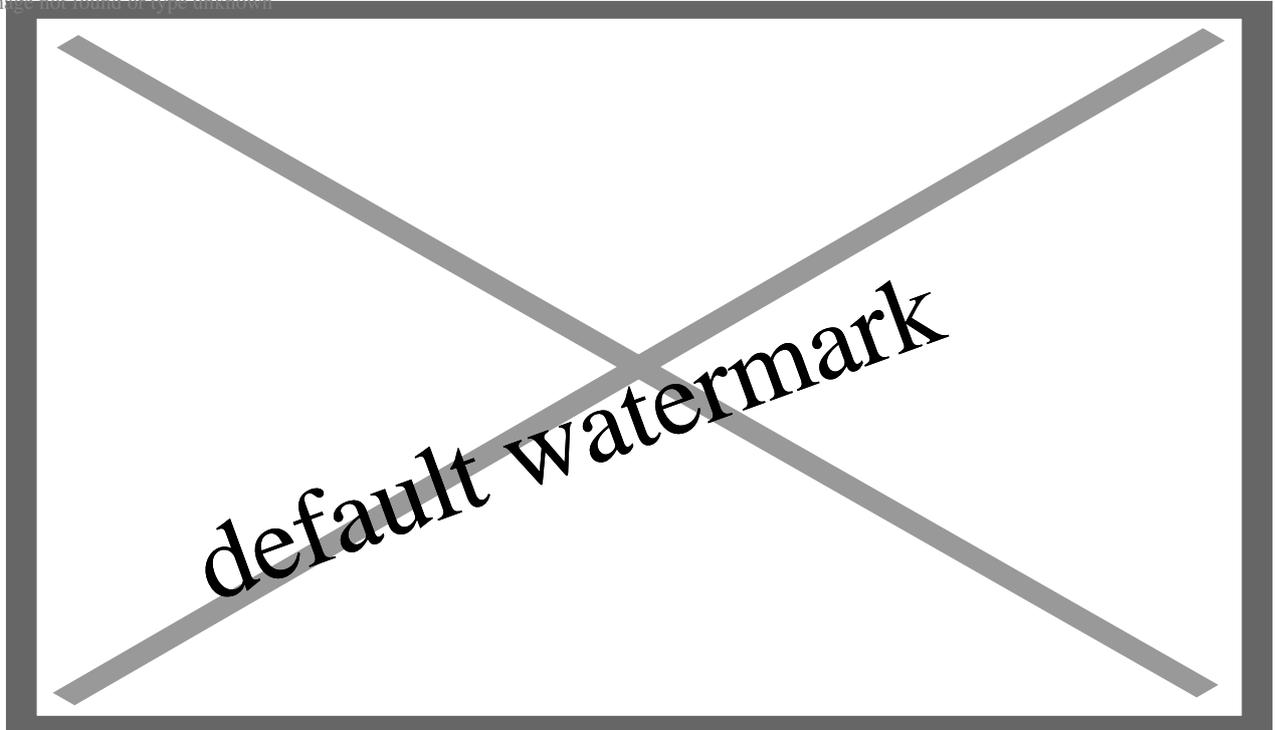
## Loss writ large

Many of us are also experiencing a sense of loss on a much bigger scale. Life has changed for many over the past couple of years. We've experienced a long and traumatic pandemic, the outbreak of war by an expansionist Russia trying to subjugate the Ukraine, and increased sabre rattling in other parts of the world. But in addition, we are observing an avalanche of environmental crises that are engulfing many parts of the world and threatening both human and natural environments.

Many parts of Europe are experiencing [unprecedented heat waves](#). The Mediterranean Sea [is warming up](#)

dramatically. At the same time, [epochal drought](#) is [drying up major rivers](#) and threatening crop production and [energy supplies](#). [Wildfires](#) sweep across parched landscapes. [Glaciers in Switzerland](#) are melting at accelerating rates – to the extent that once-continuous ice on high ridges now has bare ground exposed.

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*The almost dry bed of the Po at Castel San Giovanni, near Piacenza, in June 2022. Photograph: Pierpaolo Ferreri/EPA Source: [The Guardian](#)*

Wherever you look, things are amiss. Antarctica's ice is [melting faster](#) than ever before, with the prospect of rapid ice loss and ocean rise. [China's Yangtze Basin](#) is experiencing extreme heat and drought. Severe fires are sweeping [Bolivia](#) and continue to haunt the [American west](#), with fires threatening both human settlements and some of the biggest trees in the world. California's Giant Sequoias are being [covered in fire-blankets](#) at the base of their huge trunks in an effort to prevent them catching fire.



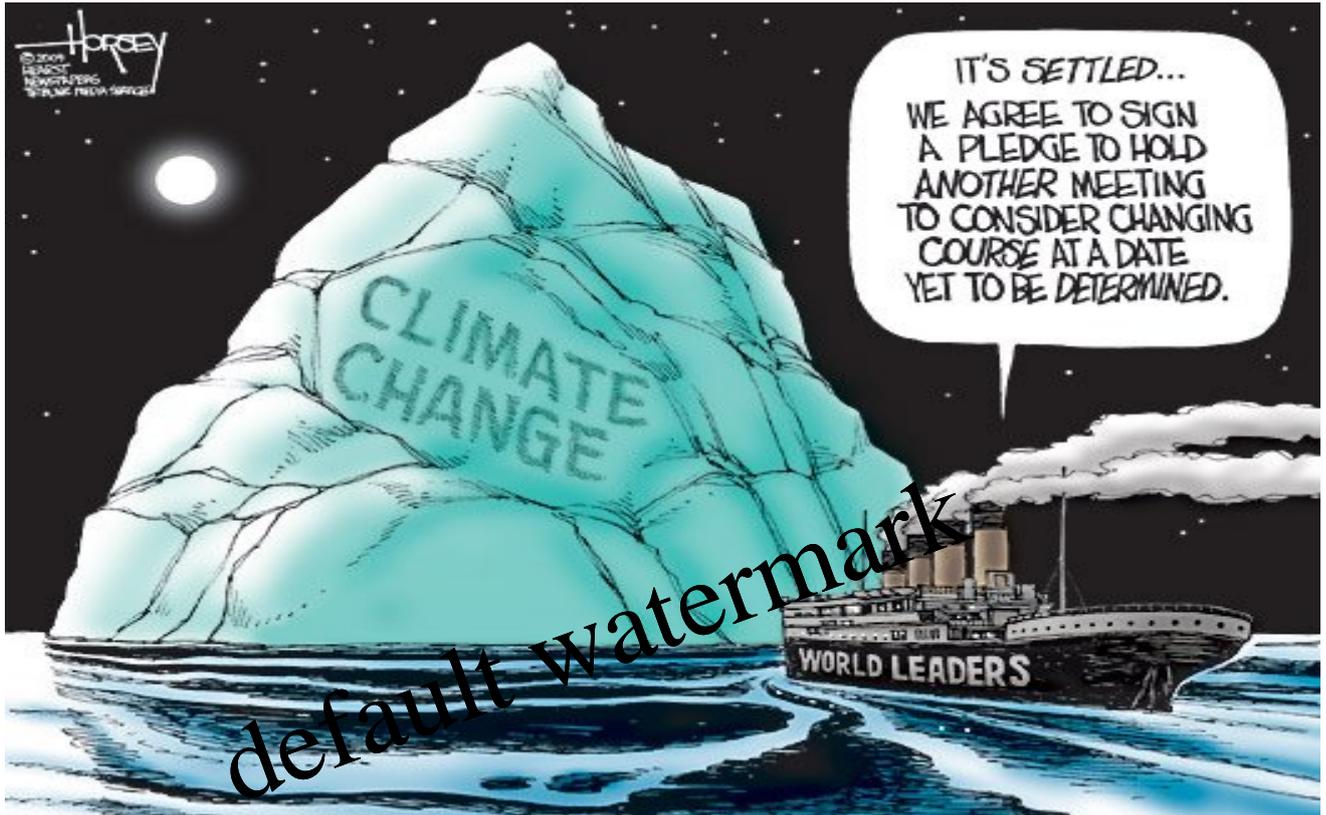
*Firefighters wrapped foil around the base of the General Sherman tree to protect the gigantic sequoia from an intense wildfire. Photo: Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. Source: [NPR](#)*

And low rainfall coupled with decades of over-use are changing water bodies like [Lake Powell](#) from lakes into dry areas littered with now useless boats.

All of these things have happened before, of course. But what's different is that now they are happening *all at the same time*.

And all this is happening in what appears for all intents and purposes to be a governance vacuum. Many jurisdictions have either been asleep at the wheel or openly antagonistic to the idea that some sort of response is required to the mounting evidence of radical human-caused climate disruption. Progress is glacial and the issue is quickly knocked off the headlines by other stuff.

In the UK, the focus is on the follies of Brexit and the freakshow of the Tory leadership debate. In the US, the current administration is at least making a show of trying to do something, but the popular focus is on the ongoing tragi-comedy of Trump and the fallout from his follies and falsehoods. Putin wants to squash the Ukraine. China wants to frighten everyone. The world is increasingly a confusing and worrying mess. Not reassuring in terms of the likelihood of sensible and effective policy responses to environmental nightmares.



Cartoon by David Horsey. Source: [RCL Blog](#)

## Documenting change and decline

It's easy to feel a sense of hopelessness and despair in the face of this litany of disasters. The sense of loss around the changes underway across the planet can be just as real as for the loss of a loved one. For people working in the fields of ecology, conservation, climate science and the like, there's also a sense that what they've been warning about for decades is now actually biting in a big way.

We've known the likely consequences of continuing and ever-expanding "business as usual" for most of my lifetime. Many of my colleagues in the fields relating to how we manage the planet have both documented change and decline and pointed out what's needed to slow and reverse those changes. Some have devoted their entire careers to the endeavour of accumulating data and evidence of what's happening and/or thinking about the causal factors and how to steer things in better directions, both at local and global levels.

The global level is crucial, but devilishly difficult to understand or tackle meaningfully. The scientist [James Lovelock](#) (who also recently died) developed the "Gaia hypothesis" in the 1970s that the Earth is essentially a giant organism that can self-regulate itself. He warned that human activities were severely denting that ability to self-regulate. Radical at the time, his ideas now form the basis for Earth System Science, which examines planetary processes. Lovelock wrote a book in 2007 titled "[The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back and How We Can Still Save Humanity](#)" in which he warned that severe climate disruption would become the norm in the 2020s. That doesn't seem too far off the mark now.



*James Lovelock's predictions about Earths' response to humanity's actions appear to be happening. Source: [All News Press](#)*

The evidence has mounted, and strategies and approaches have evolved. But, by and large, the evidence has been ignored or brushed aside – and the strategies and approaches adopted in a tokenistic way at best or completely subsumed as other causes-du-jour consumed the available social and political bandwidth.

## Grief, despair and hope

Many people do, in fact, experience feelings of grief, despair and burnout in the face of all this. Those who experience losses in floods, wildfires and other disasters are obviously directly affected in ways that can alter their lives entirely. People who are tasked with managing the species and ecosystems affected by the many symptoms of systemic environmental change are face to face with the realities of our changing world on a daily basis. As are [scientists](#) studying the impacts.

I've experienced this personally too, and have touched on the topic in [past posts](#). In my capacity as an ecology professor, I [wrote](#) a while ago about how grieving for environmental loss affects how we approach the present realities and plan for uncertain futures, and this resonated with many people I encountered. When I retired from my university position, I deliberately withdrew from involvement in many current issues and activities in order to re-equilibrate and de-stress. Instead of FOMO (fear of missing out), I figured I was experiencing FOBI (fear of being involved) – although a colleague helpfully pointed out that this could be more positively cast as JOMO (joy of missing out).

The literature on grief and grieving builds on original work by [Elizabeth Kubler-Ross](#), who outlined a framework of [stages of the grieving process](#), including denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. It's easy to simply ignore or deny the problems, but much harder to accept them. It's easy to get angry. It's also easy to get completely overwhelmed, anxious and stressed. It's harder to retain hope for the future. But without hope, there's not much likelihood that things can change.

## Dance Band on the Titanic?

OK, so all this might seem a bit heavy. And off topic for this site. I haven't mentioned a guitar once so far. Does music matter much in the face of mounting global issues? Harry Chapin's song "Dance Band on the Titanic" popped into my head as I was thinking about this.

*Harry Chapin sings DANCE BAND on the TITANIC Live 1977*

*"Dance band on the Titanic  
Sing "Nearer, my God, to Thee"  
The iceberg's on the starboard bow  
Won't you dance with me*

*Jesus Christ can walk on the water  
But a music man will drown  
They say that Nero fiddled while Rome burned up  
Well, I was strummin' as the ship go down"*

The song is about the 8 musicians that formed the band on the Titanic. The British passenger liner [RMS Titanic](#) was launched with great fanfare in 1912 as the largest ship afloat at that time. In a foretaste of the technological hubris that abounds today, the ship was said to be unsinkable. Then, as now, Nature had other ideas. The ship hit an iceberg in the north Atlantic on its maiden voyage in April 1912 and sank, with the resulting loss of about 1500 passengers and crew.

One of the many stories to emerge from the disaster focused on how the 8 musicians continued to play as passengers were loaded into the limited number of lifeboats and as the boat slowly took on water, tipped and sank.

A book has been written about the musicians – "[The Band that Played On: The Extraordinary Story of the 8 Musicians Who Went Down with the Titanic](#)", by Steve Turner, and [recollections of surviving passengers](#) provided some details of their activities during the dying hours of the Titanic. But mostly, the story is sketchy at best.

The musicians are generally cast as heroes, gallantly playing on to reassure and distract passengers. Were they courageous or scared out of their wits – or both? Did they continue to play for the passengers' sakes or for their own? Did continuing to play keep their minds occupied as they observed the fate of the ship – and hence their own fates – being sealed? Of course, we'll never know the answers to these questions. But the Titanic band sealed its place in history.

## **Strummin' as the ship go down**

So, I got to thinking whether all this stuff I write about guitars here is just "*strummin' as the ship go down*" in the context of today's environmental crises? Are we all just musicians in the dance band on the Titanic?

Well, maybe. But hopefully there's more to it than that. At the very least, playing and listening to music can "soothe the soul" and help get us through hard times – as well as celebrate the good times.

But more than that, music has an important part to play in helping us find a way through the current

challenges. I'm a trained scientist, and as a researcher I firmly believe in acquiring, interpreting and acting on good evidence. However, it's clear that science and evidence will not, on their own, lead to a better future. Stan Grant has [recently argued](#) that we need more than this, and particularly a renewed appreciation for – and veneration of – nature and our place in it.

I've recently read a couple of books that follow this theme, in entirely different ways. Karen Armstrong's book "[Sacred Nature: How we can recover our bond with the natural world](#)" (quoted in the Stan Grant article) argues that "if we want to avert environmental catastrophe, it is not enough to change our behaviour: we need to learn to think and feel differently about the natural world – to rekindle our spiritual bond with nature. Taking themes that have been central to the world's religious traditions – from gratitude and compassion to sacrifice and non-violence – Armstrong offers practical steps to help us develop a new mindset to reconnect with nature and rekindle our sense of the sacred."

The second book, "[Return of the Yggdrasil: A science fiction comedy](#)" by M.K. Nadall, tells a somewhat whimsical tale of photosynthetic aliens slowly colonising the earth and forcing humanity to reconsider its relationship with plants and the planet. Although labelled a comedy, the book nevertheless touches on many aspects of our current ecological crisis. One of my favourite quotes from the book is:

*"Oddly, science and its many comforts had so insulated some folks from the reality of nature that they'd rather lost contact with the nature of reality."* (p386)

## **If music be the food of change, play on...**

So, turning things around depends on a profound reconsideration of humanity's relationship with nature and the earth itself. If science and evidence often are not enough to change minds or spur action, what is? It appears that this often comes from other sources – including music, art and literature.

Music is an essential vehicle for social change, and there are many examples of mainstream artists writing songs about important social and environmental issues.

Melissa Etheridge's song "I need to wake up" provided a worthy anthem accompanying the 2006 film "[An Inconvenient Truth](#)" – one that is even more relevant today.

*Melissa Etheridge – I Need To Wake Up (2006).*

Going back to the musicians I mentioned at the start of this post, Archie Roach's music often had strong messages embedded in them. "[Took the Children Away](#)" was instrumental in shining a spotlight on the plight of Australia's [stolen generations](#) of Aboriginal people to be taken seriously. Ample information was available that the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their parents was commonplace up until the late 1960s, and awareness was slowly increasing in the 1980s – but Archie's song was an important catalyst for change.

And, of course, the songs live on, even if Archie himself is gone. Archie's songs provide windows into his life and often portray the challenges facing Aboriginal people living in Australia. But they also shine light on the more positive aspects of a developing atmosphere of reconciliation. In many cases, they provide rays of hope that things can turn around given time, respect and increased mutual understanding. *"Took the Children Away"* ends with the children coming back.

## **"Embrace fearlessly the burning world"**

In a [2021 article](#), Rebecca Solnit laid out ten ways to confront the climate crisis without losing hope. One of those was "Don't neglect beauty":

*"I believe we now need to tell stories about how beautiful, how rich, how harmonious the Earth we inherited was, how beautiful its patterns were, and in some times and places still are, and how much we can do to restore this and to protect what survives. To take that beauty as a sacred trust, and celebrate the memory of it. Otherwise we might forget why we are fighting."*

[Rebecca Solnit](#)

Similarly, in an essay published posthumously this year, Barry Lopez – the quintessential nature writer who gave the world such classics as "Of Wolves and Men" and "Arctic Dreams" – urged us "to embrace fearlessly the burning world". To still find wonder and rejoice in the world. To still believe in better futures. To start thinking and behaving differently.

Fortunately, even in amongst all the big problems and ongoing lack of integrated action to tackle them, there are still amazing places and beautiful and fascinating ecosystems and species in the world. And many good things are happening all over the world. Individuals, communities and organisations are trying new things, taking action on local and broader scales. Taking control. Supporting a turn of the tide either through their own actions or by supporting the actions of others.

Good news is often buried by the bad – but lots of good things are happening. And that's important. It's very easy to get overwhelmed and feel helpless. But it's still possible to find joy and meaning in life even when everything around seems to be going in the wrong direction. Rays of hope are everywhere around if you look for them. The carnival isn't over yet.

*"There is a powerful need for people to feel that gust of hope rise up again."*

[Yusaf islam/Cat Stevens](#)

With all its problems, it's still a wonderful world. Let's work at keeping it that way!

*Louis Armstrong – What A Wonderful World (1967)*

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