

Climate change is “the ultimate wake-up call” says Peter Garrett — and he should know, having sounded quite a few alarms in his time. As the whirling dervish lead singer of the aggressive hard rock/punk band Midnight Oil he helped shake up the music industry. As an environmental and human rights activist he has long campaigned on issues ranging from uranium mining to indigenous people’s rights, from homeless young people to tropical rainforests. And now, as a politician, he is devoting much of his time to global warming.

Born 54 years ago in Wahroonga, on the outskirts of Sydney, he grew up playing in, and exploring, the bush around his home — and beat asthma partly by taking up surfing. He told *Our Planet*: “I think these experiences awakened in me a love of the natural environment.”

In his late teens he helped form a progressive rock group, which evolved into Midnight Oil in 1976. Originally closely associated with the Sydney surfing community — and described by *Rolling Stone Magazine* as “one of the most significant bands ever to come out of Australia” — it became as noted for its fiercely independent stance and campaigning as for its sound. “We were always interested in what was unfolding around us,” he says, “and as writers and musicians we travelled a lot and came to see that deterioration of the environment was happening all around us.”

Their songs and albums picked up their campaigning themes, but they became particularly

known for protest and benefit shows. In 1990 they performed on a truck in front of the Exxon building in New York under a banner reading “Midnight Oil makes you dance, Exxon Oil makes us sick” in protest at the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. They staged similar protests at the Jubiluka uranium mine in Arnhem Land; at Clayquot, on Canada’s Vancouver Island, scene of an epic battle over the future of temperate rainforest; and against air pollution in São Paulo, Brazil.

Garrett points out that many other artists took up environmental causes, but acknowledges: “I think we were part of the change in attitudes to the environment that came to the fore in the early 90s, so maybe in some ways our music simply became a soundtrack for that period.”

But perhaps Midnight Oil’s most effective coup came at the closing ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics when the band walked onstage in clothes bearing the word “Sorry”, in apology to the ‘stolen generation’ of aboriginal children taken from their parents by Government agencies and religious missions in the first seven decades of the 20th century. As he points out: “There is a very important linkage between the state of the environment and the capacity of indigenous people to have productive livelihoods and a strong say over what happens in their community.”

He served two terms as President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, during which it grew strongly in capacity and influence, built partnerships with other conservation groups, farmers and business — and won important campaigns, not least over protecting Antarctica and conserving Queensland rainforest. In 1984 he ran for the Australian Senate as a candidate of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, which he helped to found, but finally entered parliament in 2004 as a Labour member. He is now Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Heritage and Shadow Minister for the Arts.

“Climate change, with its pervasive scope and likely consequences, has arrived as the ultimate wake up call for us all,” he says. “It is a once in a generation opportunity to harness our human endeavours, and build a low carbon economy where the prospects for future generations are good.”



Peter Garrett