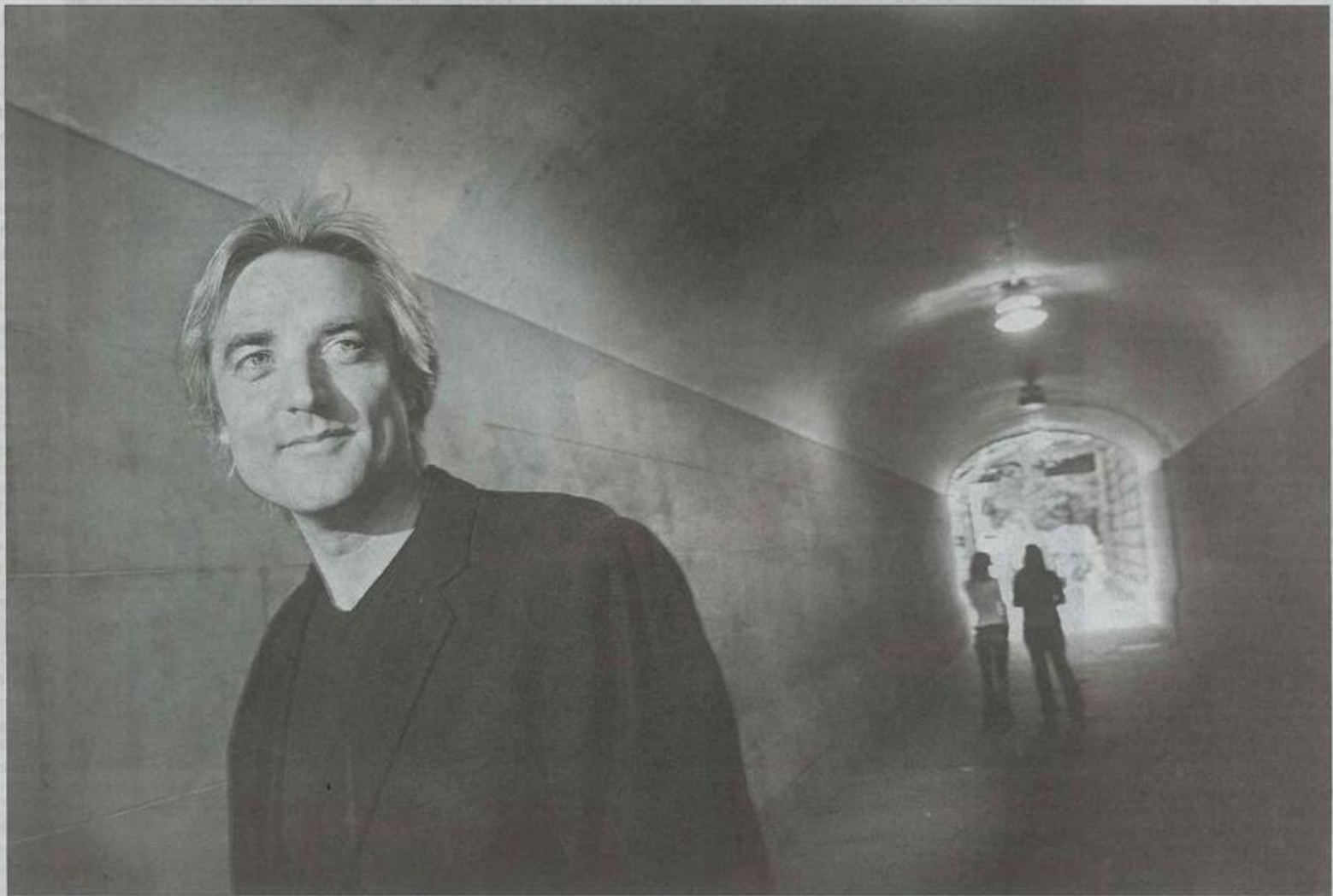


Songs of tragedy and triumph over autism



Message of hope: New Zealand singer Geoff Sewell, who hopes his new album will inspire other families with autistic children, in Sydney yesterday

Picture: Alan Pryke

Iain Shedden
Music writer

THERE have been a few pivotal moments in the life of Kiwi singer Geoff Sewell.

Eleven years ago, following the death of his older sister Julie, he quit his job as a chartered accountant to become a professional singer. Within five years he was part of one of the world's most successful pop opera acts, Amici Forever.

In 2006, however, Sewell quit the group when he and his wife, Simone Lanham, discovered their daughter Sienna had autism spectrum disorder.

The discovery led them to reassess their lives and concentrate on caring for their daughter.

Today that commitment has



Daughter: Sewell with Sienna

led Sewell to use his musical talent to help other families cope with and learn more about the illness.

"It's been a hell of a two years," the singer said in Sydney yesterday.

The classically trained Sewell is about to release a new solo album, *Believe*. The collection of what he calls "tragedy and triumph songs", such as *My Way* and *You'll Never Walk Alone*, he hopes will be inspirational in particular to other families with autistic children.

The album also includes the track *Sienna's Song*, with lyrics written by Lanham.

"The reason we're doing this album is to bring a message of hope," he said. "I didn't want doom-and-gloom songs on the album. We've had enough of that from people saying things like: 'You might want to institutionalise your child' and 'You'll be lucky if she gets married and has children because all autistic children are inept!'"

The London-based couple, who own a successful international talent and management company, Incognito Artists, have spent the past two years learning about autism and devising their own way of caring for Sienna, a process that has cost them about \$200,000. "That's beyond a lot of families, I know," Sewell said.

"But from the money we have spent we can offer people short-cuts, because unfortunately you have to spend some money in the wrong areas; it's trial and error."

There is no cure for the disorder, which affects the sufferer's social abilities, but there are several ways of controlling it.

Lanham did extensive research on the internet before the couple put Sienna on a diet free of gluten and dairy products. Since then

they have seen a marked improvement in her condition.

"We just had her fifth birthday party for her and all her friends and she played normal kids' games and, really, you couldn't distinguish her from any of the other kids," he said.

Sewell had no hesitation in quitting Amici Forever as soon as Sienna was diagnosed. "If something happens to your child, you are all over it like a rash," he said.

Now he's selective about being back on the road, but plans to tour Australia and New Zealand in February with some of the other acts he has on his company's books. Before that, he has the honour of singing the New Zealand anthem at the centenary Rugby League Test against Australia in Sydney on Friday.

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