



Oxford Word of the Month – December: John Farnham

noun: used allusively of a comeback or reappearance, especially after a final performance or retirement.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

John Farnham ('Johnny' in his early days) is a hugely successful Australian contemporary pop singer. His professional career spans fifty years from the 1960s until the present, and his 1986 album *Whispering Jack* remains the highest-selling album in Australia. With 'The Last Time' tour (2002–2003) he announced his intention to stop touring nationally, but he has made several comeback tours since then. Indeed, his love of touring has made his name a byword for an inability to remain in retirement:

She said she wouldn't but Suzi Quatro has done a John Farnham, booking an encore tour two years after her farewell tour of Australia. The leather-clad legend ... gets the joke when asked if she was 'doing a Farnsie'. (Townsville Bulletin, 28 September 2016)

The Farnham habit is not restricted to the music business:

Some call it persistence and tenacity. My daughter describes it as a Johnny Farnham comeback. I call it standing up and fighting for what you believe in, and not allowing the bastards to grind you down. (Pauline Hanson on her return to political life, maiden speech to the Senate, 14 September 2016)

And there are a number of variations on the theme. You can find evidence for do a Farnham, pull a Farnham, chuck a Farnsie, and have more comebacks (or farewells) than John Farnham. The Johnny Farnham comeback tour is the name of a cycle ride on a social network site for athletes (*Strava*, 23 April 2017), and the phrase was also used to describe a Question Time tactic in the Australian parliament:

By yesterday, awkward segues to Dastyari were looking a little tired; today they felt like a John Farnham comeback tour. (The Monthly, 14 September 2016)

The use of Farnham's name in this way harks back to another Australian singer renowned for comebacks: Dame Nellie Melba, the world-famous operatic soprano. She staged a number of 'farewell' concerts in the 1920s, with her last in 1930, the

year before she died. Her name lives on in phrases that date from the 1940s and are still in use today: to **do a Melba** and **more farewells than Melba**. However, in the comeback context, **John Farnham** is now giving Dame Nellie a run for her money.

The allusive use of **John Farnham** and variants on the name will be considered for future inclusion in the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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