

Bill Thorpe

Twist and Stomp, Thelonious Monk, and Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band: Recollections of Rock, Pop, and Jazz in Sydney 1959-1967

Bill Thorpe

This article puts forward an interpretation of popular music and its impact in Sydney, in the late 1950s through to the mid-to-late 1960s. This period covers what rock critic, Nik Cohn, has called the decline of 'classic rock',¹ to the ascendancy of mainly British bands — most spectacularly the Beatles. I chose this title to convey a sense of certain features in the diverse popular cultural history of that time: one which encompassed Australian versions of surf music; the impact of particular, mainly overseas, musicians and singers; and the always ambiguous and tenuous relationship between jazz and rock music that came apart almost completely in the mid-1960s. What follows draws mainly on my experiences during my teens and early twenties. While a good deal of this article relies on personal memory, I have also used evidence from the entertainment sections of contemporary Sydney newspapers; and more recent accounts of popular music in Australia, to assemble a history about these years.

There are two reasons for adopting this combination of reminiscence, reportage and analysis. The first is to argue that these various and variable sources and texts complement and contradict each other, thus offering a contested and arguably more interesting story. For example, I point out that the performers and musicians, I, my friends and acquaintances responded to were sometimes quite different to what a columnist like 'Downbeat', or disc jockeys like Bob Rogers or John Laws regarded as popular, musically interesting and noteworthy. Similarly, rock music critics like Nik Cohn, who disparaged the undoubtedly blander style of pop music dubbed 'Highschool'² that came after 1950s 'Classic' or 'Southern' rock — epitomised in Elvis Presley's earliest recordings and in other entertainers like Little Richard — did not register why 'Highschool' appealed to so many. On the other hand, when the Beatles toured Australia in 1964, there was common agreement that this group was an unprecedented pop music phenomenon.³ My own recollections, while still sharp and important as evidence, are not always accurate, have occasionally let me down, or have failed altogether. For instance it surprised me to discover that 1961 was 'the year of Col Joye'.⁴ While he was undoubtedly successful, he was not on my list of popular singers that year. There is room for debate here obviously but the truth is that I failed to acknowledge, for whatever reason, Col Joye's contribution to Australian popular culture.

Secondly, there is the related point about the closely connected contexts — historical, cultural, social — that generate ways of seeing at hand in any stage of lived experience. In this case, it is about an attempt to record the necessary discrepancies between my past and my present; and the 'process of interpretation

that usually takes place within particular social surroundings' and which includes the 'particular "tone"' in which such events are recalled.⁵ Here there is added justification for invoking the power of memory (and other contemporary sources as well) because they subvert any tendencies to render the past unhistorical. For example, during most of the period I am discussing, a more or less strident anti-communism pervaded the political culture ('Reds' was the usual term of abuse)⁶ while in Sydney itself, moral panics of varying intensity surfaced, for instance over gate-crashers at North Shore parties;⁷ fights between 'rockers' and 'surfies';⁸ young people listening to transistor radios on trains;⁹ and the Beatles 'massive' hairdos.¹⁰

The series of episodes and stories that comprise this essay derive from elements in my biography that situated me in certain relationships to the lifeworlds I inhabited. I was neither a 'rocker', a 'surfie' nor a 'sharpie'; although I have vivid recollections of encounters with each of these social types, and I enjoyed doing the Stomp at 'Surf City' in Kings Cross. I came close to being a 'Mod' (complete with duffle-coat and motor scooter), a 'jazzier', a 'swinging conservative',¹¹ and a Beatle look-alike, complete with jacket and Cuban-heeled boots. The apogee of my popular culture sense of style manifested itself from the mid-1960s when I emulated London's Carnaby Street look, and the Italian origins in young men's clothing that came into fashion in Sydney by that date.¹² Crucially, a shifting of my identity occurred over these years, occupationally and culturally, from somewhere in the working class to somewhere in the middle class when, in musical terms, I relinquished much of my attraction to rock 'n' roll and took on a modern jazz persona. Taken together, these elements suggest at least one answer to a question that Lawrence Zion posed, namely, 'Who plays and listens to what sort of music and why?'¹³

Concurrently, implicated in my emerging stance about such matters were ill-defined, ambiguous and mildly antagonistic relations to parental and public authority. Like other young adults of my generation and others before and since, music, especially popular music, met any number of emotions and needs. Arguably, the newness of the rock music and modern jazz of this era had no precedent in urban Australia. What is commonplace, dated and or mainstream today was anything but in the 1950s and 1960s. As my more famous namesake, rock singer Billy Thorpe, pointed out, in late 1963, 'there seemed to be an electricity to everything. No connection to past or future, just the inescapable, unpredictable excitement of the new now'.¹⁴

More specifically, my reactions to popular music came to the fore when I was in late primary school in solidly working-class Mayfield East, a suburb not far from the BHP steelworks of Newcastle, the predominantly industrial regional city where I was born. My father had always been a Dixieland jazz enthusiast, particularly for one of Australia's foremost musicians of that style, Graeme Bell. Constant exposure to this laid the foundation for me to ultimately embrace jazz wholeheartedly by the time one of the key innovators of bebop, Thelonious Monk, came to Sydney in 1964.¹⁵ But neither I nor my mother cared much for Dixieland or 'trad jazz', so Dad was mainly left to play his beloved records to himself. As far as rock 'n' roll was concerned, like many parents of teenagers, both Mum and Dad were alarmed when it came over the airwaves. My most memorable initial experience though — hearing Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti' — coincided with an unsettling sexual awareness that other boys in the school playground accentuated by substituting the lyric, 'Tutti Frutti, au ruttie', with 'Tutti Frutti, I want a rootie'.¹⁶ Such ebullient, boyish sexual playfulness

propelled me towards this energetic and often raw sound. At the same time, I was hardly a teenage rebel; I loved both my parents, especially my father, who felt obliged to combat what he regarded as a degenerate, dangerous American cultural import. As it happened, a school debate on the pros and cons of rock 'n' roll took place and my father pressed me to take a stand against it, providing me with the evocative metaphor, 'attenuated fire tongs', to describe the narrow, tapering trousers that Bodgies wore. I cannot remember, however, whether this phrase swung the debate in our team's favour but it did impress the teacher. Full marks to Dad.

When I was 13 years of age, in 1956, my parents decided to return to Sydney to live. My father had never liked Newcastle very much and had decided to leave for reasons quite unrelated to Bill Haley's first visit to Australia (to Newcastle) in January 1957.¹⁷ At the beginning of 1959, when I was 15 years old, I started my first paid job as a 'cadet artist' in a commercial art studio in Pitt Street, not far from Circular Quay. For the first six months, my main tasks were to sweep out the studio first thing in the morning and, for the rest of the day, run messages. In between times the other, more senior artists taught me aspects of the business: assembly work, lettering, layout, illustration, and marking up type.

One of the women artists, Nerida, had a portable radio which we listened to while we were working. A number of us would 'phone a radio station and ask for requests. Our studio also employed a photographer, Noel, who had a small office in another building. He also had a radio, and some of us would sneak over there, to listen to what he'd asked for. Noel's favourites were Buddy Holly's 'Rave On', Cliff Richard's 'Please Don't Tease', and Elvis Presley's 'Hard Headed Woman' and 'Don't Be Cruel'. In the studio itself, I remember hits like the Big Bopper's 'Chantilly Lace'; Eddie Cochrane's 'Summertime Blues'; and when Elvis returned from army service in 1962, 'It's Now or Never'. Nerida was big on this phase of Elvis and especially 'Return to Sender'.

Perhaps like many teenage boys, at least in those days, I was impressionable, a bit 'square' (to use an Americanism of the time) and unconfident with teenage and older women. I was still very much a Newcastle boy and found Sydney huge, exciting and full of possibilities. Some of the people I met in this first job, especially Noel but also Mike, seemed sophisticated, mature, wordly-wise, witty, talented, and in control of their lives — at least compared to me. But I have to remember that all of them were older in years and experience than I was; and I have to remember that I was still only 19 when I left this job. While I clearly liked all of the songs I've just described, the people around me had a most profound influence.

Mike was a graphic designer and illustrator who joined the studio about a year after I'd started there. By that time I was no longer running messages or sweeping the floor but sat at a desk for most of the day. Mike had his desk next to mine. Chafing at the authoritarian way the studio was run myself, Mike's running commentary and generally subversive mentality caught my imagination. Mike also was our best layout artist and I started to imitate him — in his manner, in his musical tastes, and his facility to turn out layouts with such flair.

Unlike just about everyone else in the place, Mike was a jazz buff. He particularly liked Dave Brubeck's 'controversial' efforts to bridge jazz and classical music¹⁸ and Brubeck's innovations in using different time signatures. Mike barely tolerated the requests we listened to and, in retaliation, managed to get one of his own played: the satirical recording Stan Freberg made about 'a totally talentless kid who wants

to be a rock 'n' roller', as Nik Cohn put it.¹⁹ In Freberg's ditty, the promotion manager prodded 'Clyde Ankle' (a pointed allusion to Paul Anka) with a stick during recording sessions to make Clyde's voice rise sharply: '... High School Oo-oo ...' (hence Cohn's use of this term).²⁰ Mike thought this hilarious and beamed across at me whenever Freberg's record was played. He also derided Fats Domino as a jazzman who had 'sold out' by turning to pop. All this put me in a quandary and I felt rent between people who liked pop music and Mike, who thought the only really good popular singer was Frank Sinatra (Sinatra, of course, had attacked rock 'n' roll in 1957).²¹

While all this was happening I was also going to art school once a week in the evenings at East Sydney Technical College. Here I met other art students and I started hanging out with them after classes. Usually we'd go to a pub in Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, not far from the College. On the first floor was the Lounge with a huge jukebox in one corner facing a small dance floor. We mostly drank spirits: straight vodka being the usual, occasionally triples if we wanted to get drunk, but usually took them with bitter lemon and danced to the various hit records we liked. The big voice for me at this stage was Roy Orbison and I went through a Roy Orbison phase (complete with dark glasses) for the next few years. Orbison's moody falsetto, particularly on songs like 'Only The Lonely', seemed exactly right for how I was feeling about life and relationships, especially in my usually unsuccessful relationships with women — 'a flop with chicks' as The Clovers' 1959 hit, 'Love Potion Number Nine', expressed it.

So far I have highlighted how important certain overseas recording artists and performers were. But what was happening on the local scene, that is, in Sydney itself? More generally, who and what was popular in the Orbison Era (1960-1963) — apart from Orbison? Certainly Elvis was; but the 'King' was not the 'King' for me. Michael Sturma observes how local, mainly Sydney-based rock stars like Johnny Devlin, Jay Justin, and Johnny Rebb figured prominently and notes in passing the edgy presence of that troubling colossus of Australian rock, Johnny O'Keefe.²² There is little doubt that O'Keefe, whom one writer in 1959 dubbed 'Australia's Elvis',²³ had a great following but he was only a small part of my musical consciousness and the people I was associating with. Overwhelmingly, such figures were American: Chubby Checker, Brenda Lee, Connie Francis, Connie Stevens and Crash Craddock — until Australian variations of the surf music craze took off in 1962-63 and until the Beatles started to sweep all before them in 1963-64. This supports Sturma's contention that the Australian media was more receptive to American trends, and that the rock 'n' roll of this period had become 'toned down'.²⁴ Indeed, rock critics like Cohn regard the early 1960s, with few exceptions, as pretty bad. '1960', Cohn wrote, 'was probably the worst year that pop had gone through'. 1961 wasn't any better.²⁵ According to him, the problem was the continuation of 'Highschool', or 'Northern Rock', as noted above, a watered down form of pop music. Highschool was based on performers like Bobby Vee, Ricky Nelson and particularly Paul Anka, who had two monumental hits, 'Diana' (1957) and 'Lonely Boy' (1959). And then came Chubby Checker and the Twist, in 1962.

There are two problems with such judgements. Firstly, the critic is generalising about his or her taste and secondly, in doing this, tends to overlook the experiences and views of those who were responding to the music of the time. Then, few of us thought about whether Fabian, or Crash Craddock, to take two fairly typical examples

of this genre, were no-talent, one-hit wonders; the thing was to enjoy the performers, the sounds, the moods they conveyed — and the dances that came with them. Moreover, few of us took much notice of what the self-appointed pundits of popular music were writing in the newspapers.²⁶ Rather we took our cue from late night disc jockeys like Mad Mel.²⁷

And what sounds, experiences and dances they were! First, there was the twist, then the stomp — liberating for those of us like me who had either just missed the classic rock period or who couldn't jive properly. Jiving is a fast, flashy, yet highly co-ordinated, even synchronised form of dancing. The twist was simplicity itself: pivoting on the balls of the feet and twisting the body from side to side, over and over. There were variations such as the 'peppermint twist', but all twisted from the same foundation. What is more, we could twist to most rock 'n' roll rhythms. The Stomp, which was either invented in California or Hawaii, was even more basic.²⁸ It was ideal for dancing on beaches — whence its origins. Dancers stamped each foot alternately to an insistent, steady to fast, horizontal beat. It was so simple a small child could do it as well as, or even better, than an adult.

Besides, in 1963, 'Surf City' opened for business as a consequence of the surf music craze,²⁹ which Australian performers like Little Pattie (Patricia Thompson), the Atlantics, the Delltones, and Col Joye, among others, added their interpretations. The venue, previously the King's Cross cinema, may have taken its title from Jan and Dean's hit of the same name. To me, these Australian performers — Little Pattie, with her 'Maroubra Stomp' and 'He's My Blond-Headed Stompie Wompie Real Gone Surfer Boy', the Delltones, and the Atlantics with their great instrumental, 'Bombora' — had a greater impact, however briefly, than Jay Justin or Johnny Rebb. And, even more thrilling was the fact that I *knew* one of the Atlantics — Jimmy Skiathetis. Jimmy and I had been classmates at Randwick Boys' High School in third year. We sat together and Jimmy — a rather big, overweight, yet gentle and genial Greek boy — taught me some wrestling manoeuvres so that I could handle myself a bit better in fights with some of the tough kids in the playground. I had no idea Jimmy had this secret life: a dream of becoming a pop musician, and I was delighted to see him one night at Surf City. But I was either too shy or too overawed to talk to him. In any case, I had 'just met a girl' there who was at the magic age of sixteen from Westmead, in Sydney's middle west, who had been trying to avoid being picked up by sailors,³⁰ and who wanted me to take her home that night.

My art school friends and I were still seeing each other. On Saturday nights we would usually go to one of the small dance clubs in the city — there was one in a basement in Rowe Street arcade. This had some pretty rough live bands and a ridiculously small dance floor which meant that you bumped into the band from time to time. One night, I saw Billy Thorpe put his head in the door there but I don't remember him ever playing at the place. After that, we'd go to King's Cross, to the Chevron Hotel, which had a bigger dance floor, till about midnight then, to round the night off, head for the El Rocco, Sydney's most *avant garde* jazz club at the time. There I remember Serge Ermoll, a pianist who, when I saw him, wore an overcoat while he played and who, I discovered much later, was one of the major Australian jazz innovators around, along with saxophonist, Bernie McGann.³¹

Possibly because of the unresolved tensions I was carrying around about the people I liked who were into pop *and* jazz — I saw no contradictions between

enjoying both and indeed the more esoteric branches of modern jazz that were emerging. By 1963 I had moved up the commercial art status hierarchy by joining an advertising agency and becoming a layout artist, and stayed here until late 1965. In this new job, and ones in advertising subsequently, I was undergoing a transformation. My immediate supervisor, the 'art director', and the managing director, both lived in the more prestigious suburbs of Sydney's North Shore. I realised gradually that I had just entered one, bizarre part of the middle class business world with its attendant rituals. One of these, played out after the days' work from time to time, were mock Rugby games between the executives and other senior men in the managing director's office, which was large enough to pack an eight-man scrum. Another was the flirting that went on between the executives and the women secretaries. The musical culture here comprised serious classical music and modern, mainstream jazz. Anything pop was frowned on.

At the more down-to-earth, production end of the agency's business, however, where layouts and finished art were transformed into blocks, type and proofs, another and more popular cultural style ruled, combined with the kind of anti-authoritarian stance I mentioned earlier. Young men in their early twenties and teens ran this section. My two best friends, Geoff and Malcolm, worked here. Geoff and I had latched onto the Beatles when their first major hits like 'Love Me Do' and 'I Saw Her Standing There' went to the top of the charts. The Beatles' persona conveyed an air of mild rebellion and anti-conventional attitudes that appealed to us, particularly when we'd come back late from one of our liquid lunches and ran into trouble from our immediate bosses. As Cohn writes, the Beatles of 1963 epitomised everything that was anti-pretension.³² Yet despite this, I never really liked the Beatles (in this period anyway) as much as I'd liked Roy Orbison or Brenda Lee.

Through John, who ran the production department and his girlfriend Gina, who was one of the secretaries, I met Gina's girlfriend, Jenny, who had just broken up with her boyfriend. We started dating and pretty soon I found myself hopelessly in love. Unlike my friends, even the art school ones and except Geoff who had a serious and sensitive side, Jenny was bohemian, intellectual and fond of foreign films with subtitles. This echoed some of my late father's tastes, although Dad was anything but bohemian. I noticed I'd stopped listening to popular music. I started to find my friends shallow, crude and unable to appreciate the finer things of life. I was turning into a cultural snob and part of this change manifested itself in listening to *avant garde* jazz.

In 1964 two momentous events happened. Jenny decided, on my 21st birthday, that she didn't want to see me anymore and Thelonious Monk came to Sydney. I cannot honestly remember which came first. Losing my girlfriend was shattering but the Thelonious Monk concert made a more lasting and positive impression. By then, modern American jazz had been revolutionised. Miles Davis, who was a part of it, had given birth to 'the cool'. Another genius, John Coltrane, had emerged, along with others, like Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman and Archie Shepp. Some of these musicians were developing an approach — so-called 'free jazz' — that seemed deliberately designed to reject everything that had gone before. Much later, in 1984, when I did a course on jazz appreciation in Adelaide,³³ I found out that the inventors of bebop — Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie — had made the breakthroughs that enabled the 1960s players to take the music further. Moreover, jazz, at least in these forms, had ceased to be the basis of popular dancing by the

1950s, at least in major cities. By the 1960s, audiences went to hear small group combos, or to concerts.

I went to Thelonious Monk's concert, persuading some people from work, including my friend, Malcolm, to go along. Australia's leading jazz impresario at the time, Adelaide's Kym Bonython, introduced Monk and his sidemen, who walked onto the stage and took up their instruments. They started immediately into their music, almost ignoring the audience. Monk wore a turban with a glistening spike on top and looked like a saracen in a suit. As he interrogated and stroked the keyboard, he grunted, his body heaved and his shoulders moved up and down. I could not take my eyes from him. Strange, off-key notes shot into the air, echoed by the saxophone player, Charlie Rouse — all held together with Ben Riley's crisp yet relaxed drum rhythms. For nearly two hours this sometimes discordant, intense, powerful yet always melodic music reverberated throughout the hall. From that night, all other music seemed dated, trite, superficial. But my companions, including Malcolm (who had smuggled in a hip flask filled with whisky and kept drinking from it), failed to see any virtues in what they were seeing and hearing.

In 1965 I started a new job at one of the biggest advertising agencies in Sydney, Lintas and stayed there for about two years. Again the culture was jazz-oriented and now I could talk to people with some understanding of what was going on. I bought tenor saxophonist, Archie Shepp's album, 'Fire Music' and played the first track over and over on Dad's old portable record player. It had a compelling beat driving through Shepp's agonised, angular playing style but the other tracks were too 'way out' for me. On one more memorable occasion, one of the other visualisers in our section asked me if I'd like to go to Melbourne with him to a jazz festival. This was in the summer of 1967 and I agreed to go partly because I wanted a break from seeing my mother in a mental hospital and spent most of that week getting drunk, refusing to have a bath and listening to jazz at hotels and at the concert (held in Kew Town Hall) that I didn't care much about. (It was mainly 'trad' jazz and dixieland, with some jug bands.) I also got into a fight with some 'sharpies' — working class youths who were the sworn enemies of the middle class 'jazzers'.³⁴

By the mid to late 1960s, as Sturma correctly observes, pop music and pop styles took on more political overtones.³⁵ More ominously, all around us were signs and expressions of war. The prime minister of the time, Harold Holt, had in 1966 pledged to go 'All the way with LBJ'. Some young men at the agency were being called up under the new conscription laws that first targetted those who were 21 years old or under. Fortunately for me, I was 22 at the time so I just missed this 'lottery', as it was called. By 1967, when I left Lintas to join a smaller agency as an 'Art Director', streets, workplaces and entertainment venues had become sites of intense political and cultural struggles. Conscripted and volunteer soldiers were out and about, confronting any young men, like me, who were either not in military uniforms or in uniforms of another kind — in my case a burgundy-coloured Napoleonic frock coat that I'd bought at the 'In Shop', a clothing store modelled on those in London's Carnaby Street.

In the new job, I met young men, again in the production department, whose musical heroes were the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Cream. One of these young men, Clive Shakespeare, who was a Londoner, had shoulder-length, jet-black hair and wore a striped, coloured coat with bell-bottomed trousers. Clive faced regular taunts and sometimes bashings because of his appearance but bravely

resurfaced — the occasional black eye a grim motif that, if anything, accentuated his sartorial elegance. It seemed that certain kinds of music and clothing threatened the dominant order; while all of us young men, including me, sometimes had blazing arguments about the pros and cons of the Vietnam war and the Australian government's decision to send troops to it. Clive, who played bass guitar, also became a founding member of the very successful Australian pop group, 'Sherbet', later fronted by another major Australian performer, Daryl Braithwaite.

Through Clive's influence, I listened more closely to what the English pop groups were doing. The Beatles, meanwhile, had decisively moved away from the 'Liverpool' or 'Mersey' sound that they had largely created and which dominated the pop charts from 1963 to early 1965. Most of Clive's musical conversation was about how good Eric Clapton (then with Cream) was. Then in 1967 the Beatles surprised everybody with 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'. Donald Clarke has stated that 'twenty years later people remembered where they were when they first heard the album'.³⁶ Over thirty years later, I can still remember. I was living in a flat near Bondi Junction. I had just bought the album. I had invited some people over whom I hardly knew, along with some I did, and played it over and over, pretty loudly. Some danced, or rather meandered dazedly about the flat and the record player (which was in the hall), or sat about smoking and drinking. There was a definite attitude, or mood, that came with it all and some of it was pretentious, even then.

One of the main themes of this has been the connections or otherwise between rock and jazz and, more broadly, the tensions around the ever-changing environment of popular music production, promotion and performance. As I've tried to show here, I moved in and between these musical genres, sometimes relatively smoothly and happily, at other times more unevenly and even painfully. While I was never a dedicated fan or concert goer, I did have some intense popular musical experiences. I probably knew as much as most other young people of my age and social locations about which musicians rated, who was worth listening to and, most importantly of all, who we liked and enjoyed most. This came mainly from the social relationships we had with each other, the *sound* of hit records when they appeared, and the experience of seeing, whether live or on film, particular performers. Occasionally we might listen to disc jockeys like John Laws, Tony Withers or Bob Rogers (indeed we had to otherwise we wouldn't necessarily hear a popular recording in the first place). Rarely, if ever, did we *read* columnists or music critics, although once I started to appreciate modern jazz I sometimes bought the American jazz magazine, *Downbeat*. My point is that it was quite possible to have musical opinions that did not rely on real or presumed experts and that such opinions can be deployed to examine the views promulgated about popular music in the mass media. Indeed at stake in the context of the moral panics and the profoundly conservative public political and social culture that I alluded to earlier, were a number of cultural wars — one of which became manifest in statements in the media about the merits or otherwise of various forms of popular music, notably rock and jazz.

The first point to note is that it took until 1961 for mass-circulation newspapers like the Sydney *Sun-Herald* to set aside regular articles about rock 'n' roll, that is, six years after Bill Haley's smash hit, 'Rock Around The Clock' and five years after Elvis Presley recorded 'Heartbreak Hotel'.³⁷ Before then, only two 'voices' were heard — a music critic under the pseudonym, 'Downbeat' and the anonymous,

'What's New in Music'. Downbeat, almost without exception, made derogatory and/or patronising judgements about all rock 'n' roll artists. 'Downbeat' dismissed as the 'lowest common denominator' Elvis, who had sold fourteen million records by 1958.³⁸ 'Downbeat' was just as contemptuous about Elvis a year later.³⁹ On the unusual occasions when either columnist gave grudging acknowledgement to a rock or pop performer, such remarks came with the rider that the performer in question did the best they could. Thus Johnny O'Keefe's 'What Da Ya Know' (1959) was described as 'a sincere emotional statement within the limits of rock 'n' roll'.⁴⁰ Rock music's origins in rhythm and blues, among at least several other forms,⁴¹ was another means by which music critics attempted to diminish it with the unkindest cut of all that rock was *unoriginal*.⁴² Yet, at this very moment of popular music history in Sydney, rock 'n' roll (especially in its highschool mode) had never been so much in demand, at least until the Beatles tour in 1964.⁴³

To rework a well-worn phrase, one reminiscence does not make a history. However, some more remarks seem in order. To begin with, I have called into question Donald Clarke's statement that 'jazz remains at the root of twentieth century popular music'.⁴⁴ To be sure, this claim can be sustained in a number of cases, even for the 1960s, but my experiences indicate that jazz and pop inhabited different universes. At the same time, I saw no contradictions in enjoying elements of pop, rock and jazz, although the latter was to prove my favourite form of music from this time on. As I stated earlier, this also had to do with acquiring middle class cultural trappings and giving up, albeit fitfully, working class ones. In any case, my upbringing and background was always within the 'respectable' zone of working-class experience. Except for the occasional foray into Sydney's west, I kept well away from those dangerous youths who lived there and their uncompromising 'Trumpies' (British motorbikes). Thirdly, there was the overwhelming presence of American, then British popular music, that represented decisive moments in an increasingly globalising culture — an earlier, if rather more homogeneous and Anglo-American kind of 'world music'. Conversely, Australian-based performers, at least in my musical consciousness, struggled to be heard. It wasn't because any of them, least of all Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs (who was once likened to The Rolling Stones),⁴⁵ Little Pattie or The Atlantics were necessarily inferior to their overseas contemporaries.⁴⁶ Finally, over this period, especially by 1966 and 1967, some of us had started to push against the still narrow boundaries of what was considered masculine in the Australian urban context. Here British pop groups, from the Beatles to the Move,⁴⁷ the latter with their long hair, floral jackets and lacy shirts, changed the appearance of male pop, enabling a more flamboyant heterosexuality to flourish. But this is reading too much into the past. Clive Shakespeare, to recall him for a moment, hardly saw himself as a revolutionary — he just wanted to 'pull birds' and play like Eric Clapton.

Endnotes

- 1 Nik Cohn, *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: Pop From the Beginning*, London, 1996, pp 24-45.
- 2 *ibid.*, p 46.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp 126-27. In April 1964, advance orders for 'Can't Buy Me Love' in Sydney were nearly 50,000, 'unprecedented in local disc history'. See Bob Rogers, 'Bobbin' Around', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 19 April 1964.
- 4 See John Laws, 'Who Will Be Top in 1962?', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 28 January 1962.

- 5 Zerubavel, 'Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past', *Qualitative Sociology*, vol 19, no 3, 1996, pp 283-299; 285.
- 6 See front-page story, 'Reds Sink U.S. Warship in Saigon', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 3 May 1964; and on the reappearance of McCarthyism, "'McCarthyism" Rears Again In America', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 April 1960.
- 7 'Watch by Police on Parties', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 7 February 1960; 'Upsurge in Party Gate-Crashing Craze', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 16 February 1964.
- 8 'Beach Gangs Watched', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 10 March 1963. Throughout February that year, 'rockers' from Sydney's working-class western suburbs, notably Bankstown, 'invaded' the mainly middle-class beachside suburb of Manly to 'stamp out surfies'.
- 9 'Radio Menace: R 'n' R on the Trains', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 17 April 1960.
- 10 See AAP report on the Beatles in Miami, *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 16 February 1964.
- 11 'Fashion For Boys', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 19 March 1967.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Lawrence Zion, 'The Sound of "Australian" Music', in V Burgmann and J Lee (eds), *Constructing a Culture: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, Ringwood, 1988, p 211.
- 14 Billy Thorpe, *Sex and Thugs and Rock 'n' Roll: A Year in Kings Cross 1963-1964*, Sydney, 1996, p 187.
- 15 Thomas Fitterling, *Thelonius Monk: His Life and Music*, Berkeley, 1997, p 86 states that Monk came to Australia in 1965.
- 16 John Clare/Gail Brennan suggests that 'rock and roll was more explicitly lewd in Australia than it was in America. ... Root meant nothing in America, and shag was a dance'. *Bodgie Dada and the Cult of Cool*, Sydney, 1995, p 84. This was certainly my experience in the school playgrounds in Newcastle and Sydney.
- 17 Michael Sturma, 'The Politics of Dancing: When Rock 'n' Roll Came to Australia', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol 25 no 4, Spring 1992, p 126; Raymond Evans, "'To Try to Ruin": Rock 'n' Roll, Youth Culture and Law 'n' Order in Brisbane 1956-1957', in J Murphy and J Smart (eds), *The Forgotten Fifties: Aspects of Australian Society and Culture in the 1950s*, Melbourne, 1997, p 110.
- 18 'Downbeat', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 6 March 1960.
- 19 Cohn, *op. cit.*, p 46.
- 20 'The Old Payola Roll Blues', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 28 February 1960.
- 21 Donald Clarke, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, Harmondsworth, 1990, p 1073.
- 22 Sturma, *op. cit.*, p 135.
- 23 'What's New on Records', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 1 March 1959.
- 24 Sturma, *op. cit.*, p 132.
- 25 Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp 70-81.
- 26 For example, Tony Withers, Bob Rogers and John Laws.
- 27 Mad Mel was American with a programme on Sydney radio station 2SM from ten until midnight and had the occasional column in the Sunday papers.
- 28 'Young World' by Jock Veitch, *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 16 February 1963; 'The Stomp: "Good, Clean Fun" for Surfers', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 8 September 1963.
- 29 Bob Johnson, 'This is "The Cross"', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 21 September 1963.
- 30 Kings Cross has always attracted sailors from Australian and overseas navies and 'Surf City' was also a magnet. The management were attempting to enforce a policy of banning them (and possibly servicemen generally) from going there because of the fights that took place.
- 31 'Ermoll had figured at El Rocco as a distinctive bop pianist', Clare/Brennan, *op. cit.*, p 149; 55-73.
- 32 Cohn, *op. cit.*, p 128.
- 33 Run by Alex Demski for WEA in 1984.
- 34 Zion, *op. cit.*, p 220.
- 35 Sturma, *op. cit.*, p 138.
- 36 Clarke, *op. cit.*, p 85.
- 37 The first, at least in the *Sun-Herald*, Sydney's most popular weekend newspaper, was Tony Withers' 'Young World of Music, which appeared on 28 May 1961.
- 38 'Downbeat', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 2 November 1958.
- 39 'Downbeat', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 8 February 1959.
- 40 'What's New on Records', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 1 March 1959.

Bill Thorpe

41 Evans, op. cit. p 106.

42 'Rock 'n' roll has a respectable ancestor in rhythm and blues'. 'Downbeat', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 15 March 1959.

43 In 1960, the year that Nik Cohn called 'Rue Morgue', Sydney's leading pop music entrepreneur, Lee Gordon, had great success with his 'All American Rock Spectaculars' and 'Supershows' which featured entertainers like Tommy Sands, Crash Craddock, Bobby Rydell, Jimmy Clanton, Mark Dinning, Neil Sedaka, Marv Johnson, Johnny Preston, The Diamonds, The Everly Brothers and Duane Eddy. The *Sun-Herald* reported on 24 January that, 'because all shows were completely sold out' the promoters were 'forced to schedule one extra day to accommodate the thousands who were turned away'.

44 Clarke, op. cit., p 600.

45 'Bobbin' Around', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 10 May 1964.

46 For example, the top American surf group, The Beach Boys, after they toured Australia, promoted Little Pattie's hit, 'He's My Blonde-Headed Stompie Wompie Real Gone Surfer Boy' in America. John Laws, 'That's Music', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 16 February 1964.

47 *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 10 September 1967.