

## **A biography of the original Punk band**

**Written by Michael Coomber with Gavin Quinn, 2000**

PUNK NEVER HAPPENED ???

Reader, some people will tell you punk never happened in Australia.

Some will tell you that this country in the seventies was not the sort of place that could hatch or sustain such a movement.

*They're wrong!*

### **Origins**

Circumstances, especially those that give rise to grassroots, sub-cultural activity, were different here, but equally suitable. There was much to stand against; the apathy and bland idiocy that prevails in our cities. Rampant conformity and boredom on the political front, we were more than ever a satellite of the USA and the country was, as always under a two-party system owned and run by bastards and fools.

The dismissal of the Whitlam (Labour) government loomed large in many people's minds. The new straw boss, Malcolm Fraser, aroused constant hate and indignation in much of the population over his eight years in office. Inflation and unemployment rocketed. Culturally, we were eating the same shit as the rest of the world, and no one was sparing the horses to knock out home grown versions of americano mass entertainment. Thus, Australian rock'n'roll was blindly serving up poor fare to its audience. 'Middle of the road' records by the tonne.

Local versions of the Eagles. A growing deluge of local Disco/Funk product. The alternative? little more than relic hippy bands, playing overblown, pointless 'Progressive rock'. Not a pretty picture; especially if you knew it wasn't good enough, but didn't know where to turn. Something had to give; and for one group of people, here's how it did. In 1974/75, three teenagers attending Melbourne's Swinburne Community School became close friends with a common interest in music. Soon, the three put together a band which other friends passed through. The three were: Gavin Quinn, from a working-class/Trade Union family; Julie Jordan; and Jarryl Wirth, of the famous Wirth's Circus family.

Also attending Swinburne was Bruce Milne. Bruce, via an acquaintanceship with Jarryl, also contributed some ideas to the band. Having left school early, Gavin and Julie moved to Adelaide. They returned late 1975 and hooked up with Jarryl again. They revived the band and, in the process, it became clear that all three were keen on music from bands like Status Quo, MC5, and the New York Dolls, At this stage, Jarryl played guitar, Julie was being taught Bass, and Gavin was Drumming. They were working on original songs and picking up some (very) small time work.

## **Fallen Angels**

Fallen Angels, as they were known, had a New York Dolls style image -furs and leather. Very glam, bam thank-you ma'am. Musically, the Dolls' influence took a hold through 1976. As Fallen Angels favoured raw and loud songs, in their small world of small bands, existed individuals who within six months would be constituting the Melbourne punk scene. One important elder statesman of the tendency was Keith Glass (ex-Rising Sons, Compact, etc). Fallen Angels met him at a party they were playing for David Pepperell; one of the last gigs under that name.

For Quinn & Co, the world turned near the end of 1976. They became reacquainted with Bruce Milne, who was then given to throwing parties featuring ad hoc bands. One of them, Antennae & the TV kids (Bruce's name), played 60's pop material. They were Bruce Milne (Bass), Gavin Quinn (Drums), Jarryl (Guitar), and Graham Pitt (Guitar). Antennae & the TV kids played a few parties and at one of these, Bruce played Gavin and Jarryl their first Ramones L.P. They were heartily impressed and set about absorbing this new influence into what they were doing. "The big changeover was when we heard the Ramones, we incorporated that style into what we were already doing; stopped using 5/4 feels, which we'd been experimenting with, we'd been kidding ourselves (it wasn't necessarily more expressive or musical); and we didn't want it to be as undynamic as the Ramones; if you look at their music through a level-meter you'll find it's flat we wanted more dynamics. We actively made sure there were no spaces in the music; that was one of the definitions; no space" [Gavin Quinn].

Gavin and Jarryl, the instigators of the band, felt new purpose and began making changes that would give the reborn Fallen Angels some presence in Melbourne. At another Milne festivity, Jarryl met Jeff Rule, then a practicing Rock journo. He was invited to hear Fallen Angels rehearse at their house in Faraday St; Carlton. Liking what he heard, Rule took up the managerial reins.

## **Sydney**

Educational institutions were still coming through with a few dates, but they were almost the only work available. Jeff Rule, in the process of spreading the word, sent a tape to George Kringas, then managing Radio Birdman in Sydney. The response was highly enthusiastic. Babeez were invited up to Sydney (for one gig) in June. Sydney of course, was experiencing the punk ferment itself on a slightly wider scale than was being felt in Melbourne.

With much anticipation, Babeez began preparing for the event, converting an old bread van to a band wagon for transport. When they left Melbourne, there was still only one gig, but that was no deterrent. The show was at the Paris Theatre, then being run on an Arts' Factory type basis by Johnny Allen, ex-Nimbin festival organizer who had spent some time around Lenny Kaye and Patti Smith. The Paris was regularly playing punk bands and was a prime punk haunt there and then.

### **Babeez were to open the show**

Babeez were to open the show, followed by the Survivors (from Brisbane) and local heroes Johnny Kannis & the Hitmen. Babeez actually hit Sydney a few days prior to the event to do interviews and (hopefully) talk to EMI "It seems things got off on the wrong foot"; as a reviewer in Sydney's 1978 fanzine Self Abuse put it: Babeez didn't impress me or many other people by starting with a Boogie the way Status Quo would, backs to the audience and all. They got into something more like what we'd gone to hear later, but it was too late, the damage was done". A few songs into the set, abuse and missiles were flying thick and fast, and things became hotter. Gavin tells it best: "They had some idea that throwing beer cans was better than dancing! Meatheads! Jarryl is a type of Hemophiliac and somebody threw something at him.

### **This rain of beer cans**

Julie, who was his lover at the time, was furious. She put her Bass down (Jarryl and I kept playing) walked to the side of the stage, grabbed her mike stand and threw it at this guy! It floored him, then there was this rain of beer cans. I thought some kind of macho display was in order, so I leapt off the stage and landed three rows into the audience on top of the mob of cowards. They were too shocked to attack me thankfully there were more of them! Then the bouncers came hurtling down the aisle. There was a huge punch up, then two bouncers threw me back onto the stage in time to finish the song. It was the highlight of the gig"! And as Gavin explains, "The Survivors got pretty much the same reception. It all settled down for Johnny & The Hitmen". Especially with hindsight, it may be seen that although Babeez and The Survivors were exhibiting pre-Punk influences, the response to them on this occasion was the result of a parochial view of what constitutes a punk band held by some Sydney audiences. In the Babeez ranks however, the trip was not counted as a failure as they had won some support, against the odds. On top of that, they hadn't lost any money but showed a staggering profit of \$2.00!

### **Back in Melbourne**

Back in Melbourne, the drummer they had taken to Sydney quit and much of July/August 1977 was spent auditioning several incompatible thumpers. Many were little more than curious, being drawn by Gavin's adverts for a drummer to play 'Luxury Punk'. Something had to be done especially as the band and Jeff Rule were keen on recording and releasing an independent record.

Relief came in the person of one Greg Pirhana, somehow acquainted with a few Babeez. A heavy schedule of rehearsal continued in preparation to record. The selection was narrowed down to three Quinn/Wirth compositions. On the eve of the sessions, Babeez received a standard 'no thank you' letter from EMI (Sydney). This ignorance from the rock establishment was of little matter to our heroes, their independent operations well underway and bolstered by ideology that would serve them well in future dealings with another dodgy record company ... more of this later!

## City Square

Looking for work away from usual sources, News excelled themselves at their next gig ... in the first week of March, they played a lunchtime set in the City Square! They had no permission and partly for this reason, publicity was nonexistent. The main point was that the gig was possible; Gavin, while walking through town, had noticed a power point in a wall near Swanston St. On the day, News played through one amplifier and collected a good crowd around them. I saw most of the show and it was a damn curious sight ... a hot day, with hundreds passing by while scores of clerks and shoppers watched News and stuffed takeaway food down themselves. They all seemed more bemused than anything, but there was at least scattered applause after each song. It didn't last much more than five songs before the equipment started packing up. That's what I saw. According to a report the show generated in the Truth, a council bylaws officer suggested News drop the volume "about 50%", but there was no other interference. The one amp soon died completely forcing a retreat. While it was all good fun at the time, this show typified the approach News had to spreading their message. More day gigs at campuses turned up and News were also about to record.

## Flexidisc

Bruce Milne had decided to put a two track Flexidisc by News into Pulp Fanzine as a giveaway. The recording took place (again) at Faraday St, using the same gear used for the Babeez EP, again, it was all one take, straight down. The songs were two Quinn/Wirth originals, 'Sweet Dancer a Gogo' and 'Tell me why'. The tape was then despatched to Sydney for pressing.

Another disappointment was presented as News were mysteriously dropped from a Movement Against Uranium Mining (MAUM) spectacular in the Flagstaff gardens. No satisfactory explanation was ever tendered. News members believed then and now, that their exclusion was pushed by old hippies from MAUM that didn't want their cause associated with punk rock. March did see more work in though, including a benefit to assist the establishment of 3RRR FM, a student station doing limited broadcasts from RMIT. Even a few pub gigs came through: headlining at the Kingston (4th) and the 10th saw News and XRayZ [ex Adelaide] opening 'Paradise'. A short-lived new wave venue behind a restaurant in Lygon street.

## Those things

Although these gigs were exceptional, it was not for lack of trying....News usually didn't get work at pubs because they wouldn't play the game. "We wouldn't build up confidence at a pub by getting to know the publican and pretending we liked him. We wouldn't do any of those things and it went against us very strongly". (Gavin). There were also many venues around Melbourne that would not touch Punk bands. As Gavin told The Age back then: "We have a lot of trouble getting gigs, because once it's known we're a Punk band, we are immediately excluded" (17.2.78). One answer was to run a venue themselves, which would provide. which would lend strength to their autonomy and help out other bands that didn't get breaks. The search for the right place began. March 19th saw another benefit (for 3CR) at Collingwood Town Hall, supporting Red Hot Peppers and Dave Warner from the Suburbs. News were also disallowed by South Melbourne beach. However, with the aid of an acquaintance working for ABC radio, they did make an audition for 'Quest 78'. But News didn't have what the judges were after - they weren't invited back.

## **Bernhardt's**

More significantly, News had found a venue that would give them one night a week to run bands. It was a mixed homosexual venue called Bernhardt's, at 50 Little Latrobe street in the city. The location was previously significant as the Thumping Tum, which opened as Melbourne's first discotheque in '65. News would run Tuesday nights. Charging a paltry \$2.00 for two or more bands. Bands that were ignored, independent, or just starting out all from the growing 'New Wave' in Melbourne.

The first night at Bernhart's was March 28th, featuring News (natch!) and Two Way Garden. Two Way Garden were a highly individualistic bunch especially musically. One of them, Phillip Riley, had been to Swinburne with Gavin, Julie and Jarryl, and even passed through school bands with them. The event was well attended. Giving News much encouragement to keep it rolling. Which they did. The only break being for another raid on Sydney early next month.

## **Monash University**

Before March was over, News played one of the heaviest gigs in human history. It was on the 30th, at Monash University. For foreigners; that's in Clayton, an outer suburb of Melbourne. I have related the extent and depth of opposition to Malcom Fraser and his Liberal/ National Country party government. On this day, Fraser was due to appear at Monash on a speaking engagement. Via connections with Student Unions and the SWP, News were asked to play at a campus demonstration against Fraser and the Police presence required to protect him. It had been a long-standing convention that police in any state of Australia would not do any business on campuses. Fraser himself was enough excuse for a large and angry demo; his administration was bent on reintroducing fees, reversing decades of hard won social and educational policy maintained by post war Australian governments.

Early afternoon saw News set up on the back of a truck where hundreds of students were gathering to protest. As the numbers swelled to thousands, cops ringed the truck. Not quite knowing what to expect, over 170 uniformed cops, including Mounties, were on the job. News were informed that if they kept on playing, their truck would be towed away. Undaunted, our heroes played on. An audience that size was not to be flaked out on! Shortly, a senior cop approached the truck and told the band that their generator would be towed away. This didn't work either, but he was soon back with a trump card: stop playing or your instruments get smashed! News charged through a few more politically charged numbers and called it a day.

There were slots at Hearts still going for the band, but gigs everywhere were dogged by the eternal frustration of substandard equipment. By now all instruments were patched directly through the PA system, with patchy results. The usual outcome was bottom heavy to say the least: "It was never terribly successful; I'd be the first to agree" [Gavin]. This was always aggravated by the fact that News rarely had a mixer on side, especially one that could be counted on to make the most of their dates. Nobody was comfortable with this situation, but it was Gavin's solution, and it fell to him to defend the idea. Presaging future conflict, John had begun to voice some frustration over the scenario, especially as News were beginning to gather some bad reputation on the basis of their live sound.