

Interview with Alan Bamford (Little Bands Scene)

Tell me about the Alan Bamford Musical Experience (ABME) and who was playing what.

It was basically John Murphy's band because he used to like writing funny little songs about this person and this person, it was a total piss take and satirical.

I was on Bass, Ollie Olsen couldn't play the drums, I could not really play the bass, John played left-handed guitar in a kind of **Sonic Youth** style, this was before Sonic Youth, but then I used the name twice more at Little Band gigs to do more arty, experimental things. Unfortunately, there's no recordings of this stuff but it was very funny

So, you used to work at 3RRR Radio Station

I used to announce with a guy called Mark Ryan and another lady, whose name I have forgotten.

I started off, like everybody, doing 2am to 6am and then graduated to midnight to 2am and I think it was Saturday night and I used to play a lot of loud rock and all the latest punk rock singles. But when there were Little Bands nights or when **Whirlywird** or the **Primitive Calculators** played I would often record it and then take it straight back to the station and just whack it out. A few other bands I recorded also, like the **Laughing Clowns** really early on, and I just played the tape on my show. I never recorded the **Birthday Party**.

Have any of the Little Bands been officially recorded?

What happened was, Max Robenstone who owned the Climax record shop in Gertrude st...fronted up for the **Primitive Calculators** single and the Little Bands 4 track EP, which I have probably got here somewhere, and he paid for that completely. That was put out as commercial release and then I had a live recording with the Calculators which wasn't too bad, which we mastered on the **Boys Next Door** sound system with a really great guy who did it for free and I took it up to Sydney and got it cut and that came out with the unsold copies of their single slipped in for free. It didn't sell very many and I had several dozens of them for quite a long time and a few years ago I just sold them.

Note by Punk Journey - In 1979 a local record shop owner, Max Robenstone of Climax Records in Gertrude st Fitzroy, paid for the recording of the 'Little Bands' EP, featuring The Take, Ronnie and the Rhythm Boys, Morpions and Too Fat to Fit Through the Door, as well as a Primitive Calculators single.

A **Primitive Calculators** record came out recently again, exactly as is on Chapter Music and then there was another compilation that Chapter did, I think that was released maybe 8 months ago that had some little band recordings on them, I had nothing to do with that, they were sourced from Dave Blight who used to be in the Calculators.

Note by Punk Journey – The Primitive Calculators were technically not a 'Little Band' but many of the band members were part of the Little Bands scene.

There were two phases of the Little Bands. There was the first phase and the second phase, and it was the first phase was what was meant to come out on a Little Bands record. I've got all that digitised now, but it never came out because I blew the money on drugs. But if a record ever comes out it'll be more representing the first phase which went from 1979 to 1980, basically a little bit earlier than '79 and then into 1980.

It was very concentrated around **Whirlywird** and the **Primitive Calculators** and their very close friends who lived in two houses next to each other in two conjoined terraces in Nicholson St. They were shop front houses that had rehearsal spaces downstairs and so the instruments that everyone used just sat in the front of these two shared houses and were kind of available for people to use whenever it was convenient and after a while this became a kind of 24-hour thing, people were just constantly rehearsing in Little Bands. That period lasted from about the mid to late 1979 to 1980.

A great many of the Calculators circle were employed at the Wool Sheds, and there was a wool strike on, and a lot of those people lost their savings. Others who didn't suffer from that got themselves overseas and Ollie and Scott and John Murphy went to London, which failed miserably because they had no support, and you just had to have some support, so they formed other bands over there and Ollie made a band called **Hugo Klang** which he brought back here and did a different version of it with me, but the second period of the Little Bands thing went from probably the day that they left from most of 1980 and a dribble of 1981.

Those two houses that I mentioned before eventually broke up, because everyone moved out. Half of them went overseas, but there were two other groups centered around a rehearsal space in Langridge St, and some people who called themselves **Use No Hooks**, who were very different, older, more accomplished musicians, a couple of them being conceptual artists, including Peter Tyndall who's an Australian painter, was in one of those bands.

He was an absolute genius musician and was in one of those bands and then there was another group completely the opposite whose main group name was the **Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed up Zombies** who came from I think Springvale, which ironically is where the Calculators came from, but they didn't know each other. They moved into an ex-brothel across from The Tote Hotel in Johnston St and they rehearsed there then they moved to a house in Grey St, St Kilda which had this amazing cellar that was soundproof, and they rehearsed there. So, those two kinds of social groupings continued to do Little Bands stuff and what have you during 1980. It was supported really well by a lady, Dolores San Miguel, yeh, she was really kind and put these nights on all the way up until when she did nights at something called the **475 club** in Spencer St which I actually never went to, but she put them on at the Ballroom monthly pretty much and then it petered out for lots of different reasons at the beginning of 1981.

So, the first incarnation of the Little Bands was very much focused on the Champion Hotel in Fitzroy, and then the second incarnation sort of spread out a bit more to venues like the Ballroom and the 475 Club?

Yeah, Dolores would put us on and the guy who ran the Champion Hotel was also kind and he put the Little Bands on at the Champion and the Calculators played a few shows at the Champion and there may have been a Little Bands night at the Exford Hotel, though I can't recall.

So, what was it about the punk scene that you found exciting?

Well, and this is just a personal note, I fled Bjelke-Petersen's rule. I'm from QLD, and I got involved in the Left in Brisbane during the time when the Right to March period was about to be set up by the police and friends of mine had been in jail and it would have killed my parents.

I basically was gutless and decided "I'm out of here" and I actually came down here to live with a lady who was coming to Melbourne to be with her boyfriend who was doing his PHD. That lasted no time at all because they split up and she went back and I found myself unemployed, living in Melbourne, friendless and so I went to 3RRR because I actually got one of the DJ's at Z4ZZ to write me a reference.

And so I went to 3RRR and I met the then program director and got the slots I mentioned before and then I can't remember how I met Mark Ryan, but Mark Ryan's pivotal to this because...

Who is Mark Ryan?

Mark Ryan is an anarchist, heroin addict and world traveler who I haven't seen for years; a remarkable character, really remarkable character of whom I have no photographs of and who knew everybody and had the best music taste in the world! An encyclopedic knowledge with things like general electronics and who was in the last version of **Alternative TV** or something like that, he was amazing, he introduced me to Ollie and John when Ollie would be in Gipps St and they rehearsed upstairs there and I became instant very close friends with John Murphy, he was the drummer in **Whirlyworld**. John Murphy had a radio show and I helped him out on his radio show. Eventually John got fed up with his radio show and that's how I became to do it more permanently on 3RRR.

And he just kind of got tired of it, but he sort of helped me, he introduced me and then the program director there had some idea for me and Mark Ryan and this other lady, whose name I can't remember, who was a friend of Philip Brophy's, to do a show which had a kinda concept and was entertaining. But it was far too big and dark at that stage, so that didn't work out, and that's when I stopped doing it, but the period that I did it intensely was during 1980 and just before when I would go into 3RRR's newsroom. As soon as I had my money, I'd go into the newsroom and act like I was doing something journalistic for them and bulk erase a half dozen scores of tape and just walk out and that's what I used for the show and never told them about it.

They were for bulk erase, you know they were in the "you can bulk erase this lot" pile, but I didn't own them and I didn't get permission...so that's how I used to afford the tape.

How pissed off were people that you blew the Little Bands record money on drugs?

Ah not at all... like everyone had a drug problem then and if it was just alcohol you were lucky and a lot of people were cynical about the worthiness of what they were doing in terms of art and history on a public level. Privately they would sit around in their little peer groups and discuss that last performance for hours, often on speed, taking it very seriously. The whole punk thing of course had to do with, "we're not worth anything" and "history doesn't matter" "civilisation is over" it's year zero and all those general mentalities, those general sort of nihilistic mentalities... made it hard for people to say "yeh we're actually worth something and doing something quite unique and it might not amount to much but it is unique and it does come from somewhere unique." Very few people involved went on to become working creative artists, but over time over time some of them became very important people...

These people go through their phases. I've always been really the same, I'll talk to anyone about it because it was the most exciting time in my life and I don't have very many negative feelings about it at all, including stupidity, but a lot of those people go through really big curves about whether they'll talk about it.

What about People with Chairs up their Noses? Did you see them with Jim White?

Yes, that's right the politics come into this. I don't have a recording or anything like that...we were all very snobbish at the time, there was another great band called the Klue, it's with a K I think, they came out of nowhere with really expensive synthesizers and who did this fantastic prequel weekend in Warsaw which sounded like later on could be made by **Magazine** or something like that and a lot of us just turned our backs on them you know, argh musicians, that whole punk thing.

Was it too professional?

They had really expensive synthesizers that you could sequence, you know what's that all about? The Calculators had these old roller things, that today you would pay a fortune for, but were back then really cheesy and unreliable and monophonic, so there was a lot of us and them about St Kilda and the North Fitzroy Beat which was all very artificial, but Stuart Grant loved to foster it for fun. The Boys Next Door gave the Little Bands their first go, I mean I can't remember who it was, it was probably **Too Fat To Fit Through The Door** who played upstairs in the Ballroom one time so there was a lot of that kind of, you

know, young 20's stuff that can go wrong and after it became a Scene with a capital S, that we all thought was ours, even though we had this open door policy, if people didn't look quite right we could be very snobbish and **People With Chairs Up Their Noses** was a band that got some of that, I never knew Jim White.

Cause I was going to ask you about the hierarchy that went on. You know people say there was an open-door policy and anyone could get up and play but at the same time, my understanding of it is that there was a sort of hierarchy in place.

Well, yeh there was, and the hierarchy didn't compromise the open door policy but although you could have people whose music, a lot of people would say is just appalling, such as the Creatures.

Did you think their music was appalling?

Mostly. Yeh occasionally when Jim Buck was a central part of whatever they were doing it was just totally inspired but often it was really bad, unlistenable bad, you had to be drunk and be there to get anything out of it, but occasionally when Jim sings and his poetry is in it or when Kath sings and they're right up the front and there's that triangle of instrumentation they could be wonderful and some of their recording are really really listenable today but often it was very pointless angst in a way, thinking of Terry in particular, but I loved all of them they were all really really nice people, but yeh it depended on what they were doing on the night, um you know but the way they operated they had no musicians/inhibitions about them whatsoever although Paul Doogood was a genius guitar player but they just didn't wear it like that, and when people came in wearing it like that well God help them having a reputation somewhere else as people could be very cruel and dismissive.

And what about that whole St Kilda or Fitzroy division that was going on?

People on the northside took a lot more Speed than Heroin and people in St Kilda took a lot more Heroin than Speed, although they all took a lot but in terms of how the scenes were characterised, you could say they were characterised a little bit like that, and you know there were a million exceptions to that incredible generalisation. There were some people in the Little Bands, **Calculators/Whirlyworld** scene who had very strong personal animosities towards people in the St Kilda scene, some of them had been in bands before, others of them saw a lot of the people from the St Kilda scene as posers, really artificial, I mean I wouldn't say this of **Nick Cave** but his clothing style changed you know sort of on a weekly basis and a lot of people saw something like that as a kind of affectation, it wasn't acceptable, and in particular a lot of the Boys Next Door's close fans people like Pier had all these sorts of feelings about it and all this is so juvenile but it was really intensely felt at the time and it did drive divisions.

Stuart would always accept a support gig with the **Boys Next Door** and openly declare he loathed them whilst they were within earshot, he was a very provocative personality...

I guess I'm trying to get to what was the crux of the division was... was it just different people making different kinds of art?

Yeah, you could say that because **The Calculators and Whirlyworld** weren't particularly bookish, whereas the capital L literary side of things was emphasised much more way down South. They were into their thing with obvious influences that were more recent. Now this was amusing, because although they were a more bookish lot and you might be cruel today and look at their lyrics and say that the pretentiousness in a lot of those lyrics sort of reflects their attempts to be Oscar Wilde, which is a phase everyone goes through. You can't punish someone for that, but at the same time Ollie and Stuart and Arnie, the guitar player knew a great deal about 20th century academic music and Arnie the guitar player in **Whirlyworld** was a faux realist painter whose knowledge of art history was perfect, so there were these differences about them, but on a musical level as far as I know from just listening and reading interviews,

because I've only ever had one conversation with one of them, their musical interest were much more recent - much more white and much more English.

The **Calculators** great influences at the time were American serious psychedelic music like **Roky Erickson** and the **Thirteenth Floor Elevators** and the Southern Texan scene, The **Strawberry Alarm Clock** and people like that, and these bands were really tough. the Southern Texan Psychedelic Punk Rock Scene of the sixties that you can find on 'Pebbles' and records like that, these were poor Mexican people, they wrote really tough "fuck you" songs, they didn't talk about the meaning of life, they didn't write angsty post Gen A existential tracks you know, like they didn't talk about committing suicide they fuckin did it you know, so very tough, much tougher, much harder much more less compromising and Ollie adored **David Bowie** and sounded like him most of the time but his lyrics were equally self-explorative and not self-indulgent and his musical interests were much more, if you listen to a lot of 20th century general electronic music, he was a massive fan of ...can't remember his name, argh that's appalling ... he wanted to go and study - one of his ambitions was to go and study with a German composers, I have a problem with recalling names in general, **Stockhausen**, and that stuff really moved him you know.

There was a bit of a division between the **Calculators** and us lot on that, because we liked to listen to this posthaste academic sort of stuff, me and other friends became, Arnie Hannah in particular, became very interested in middle 20th century middle sixties minimalism, and we used to have to put these records away because we'd get yelled at for not towing the party line and that sort of thing, people could be very narrow minded, and at the same time when James Brown's record, his disco record came out, Stuart played it until the needle went through the groove and it was the best thing on earth whereas in St Kilda disco was death you know so there were a lot of differences, but I would say the main differences are the interests, the music that they listened to when they were still in Springvale they listened to a lot of country music, a lot of white trash country music, Merle Haggard and stuff like that and I don't think St Kilda knew those people existed and so the sorts of music that they listened to, I guess at the end of the day it was tougher and it was more rigorous and so there was a bit of a snobbish thing about that you know cause it was really only with I think to be honest it was only with Rowland S. Howard that people could have a really good discussion about music on a really arcane level, with Nick of course books were everything, both great guys I really liked both of them at the time, but the rivalries because you know Rowland had been in a band with Ollie, it didn't go too well.

Ollie's not a band person, his character has always flourished better when he was doing it himself, all his bands ended destructively and immediately cast to the back and never to be talked of again, 90% of the interviews you'll read with Ollie his career starts with **NO**, which he can't really avoid because it was when he was in **NO** that did the music for ...that film and um put out a record with that stuff on it and went to a lot of Hollywood things when the film was released, got a lot of money and started **NO** so he's kind of got to go back that far, but he probably wouldn't want to if you asked him to, there's 5 bands before that, that he never talks about.

I want to know about the North Fitzroy Beat Zine

Ok, well I just did that off the top of my head and printed it. I interviewed **Whirlyworld** and that's just a straight transcript of the interview which I did with them ... you see what I did I just experimented with a few things, and I printed up a lot of screen prints of Whirlyworld once and just left them in a pile in their single records for people to take every time they bought their record. Most of them went into the fire and what I eventually settled on was making cassette tapes of the music. it was kind of mail art thing, and I was buying magazines back then so I would find these little magazines that would be imported into the punk rock shops and there'd be mail art addresses and I would just send this stuff out. I'd get really weird stuff back and it was just that whole mail art exchange free, you post it, they post it thing that was very big in the sixties and seventies.

Why did you call it the Fitzroy Beat though? Clearly because you were in North Fitzroy

Yeh I can't remember and I'm pretty sure I didn't make it up, ah and if I had to guess I'd say Stuart made it up.

Did you call yourself Slow Drama Production?

Yeah, I've still got the stamp.

Did you see much violence back in those days?

I can't say I did, there was a lot of pretend violence down the front of **The Birthday Party** but in terms of sort of on the street violence, not amongst us..... I had eggs thrown at me once (*laughs*) where I walked along my street in my grey industrial clothes outside of the house the Calculators lived in and ah we were attacked once at the party, out the front of a party by a car full of ethnic kids but I wouldn't say in a sense .. you couldn't draw any parallels between how the Punks and the Skins were divided in England, that just didn't happen at all, our scene was too small and the kids who wouldn't have liked us didn't go ...there weren't going to venues in inner city Melbourne, they were going to the Beer Barns and they would go and see Kevin Borich and those kind of rock bands in a different location.

And there wasn't the presence on the streets until New Punk came along and all the hair started to happen, that's when you began to notice the presence but you wouldn't have noticed a presence during 75 to 81 or 82, it was after you know New Wave happened and a lot of those harder pop bands became quite commercial that a lot of shops started selling jackets and tartan and stuff like that, but in our time... no, I have no sense of that at all.

And what about the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre...Because I was talking to David Chesworth about this the other week and he said the Little Bands and the Clifton Hill Crew just basically were poles apart, they didn't even really like each other, they didn't like each other's music and that sort of thing

The Little Bands played once at the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre that I can remember but I didn't go. There was a lot of animosity ...ok hang on start from scratch... those people were much more secure in themselves doing what they were doing and coming from where they were coming, Philip Brophy in particular, than we were... we used to call them tic tac toe to irritate him. (*laughs*)

They (**Tsk Tsk Tsk**) were an art band with a very strong conceptual upfrontness and their music by general in comparison with things around it was wimpy. I don't hold that view anymore, I think they were really really clever.

I never really liked **Essendon Airport**, they were just too wimpy, but there was animosity, I mean ... because they presented themselves very very confidently, they were organized, there was a strong narrative through all their symbols, they evolved slowly. Philip Brophy is a graphic artist so there was a lot of talent, actually it was more of his partner at the time, there was a lot of talent and a lot of strong sense of what their project was, and to be honest I am pretty sure that intimidated people, it might not have intimidated Stuart but it certainly intimidated Ollie who was very very insecure and very competitive. He didn't talk socially with Philip Brophy and John Murphy didn't either. Although to be honest, I don't think Murph felt quite as badly about them. But, no I'm sure there was one occasion where some Little Bands, I'm pretty sure Jim Buck played at the Clifton Hill Music Centre, but there was very cross pollination of gigs that I can remember, I saw Tic Tac Toe a few times and there were different versions of them that I liked more or less and there was a couple I really liked but I didn't say so because you would just get rubbished for it.

I went up to Phil Brophy's house one night and this was a big wake up call to me cause I'd read a lot of politics ...and I went up to his house one night to interview him to do a version of that thing, which I never

did because I was totally out of my depth because they were coming from a conceptual art point... you know they were art students.. and much later on I realised that they were the sorts of people who could have a good discussion with **Cabaret Voltaire** or people like that, who were doing things at the same time in England, and although I was completely well read ...there was this conversation where I was just totally lost... His partner's name was Maria Kozic, I knew I was gone because the second I walked in, because she said first we have to take your photograph and ...fuck off... you know... and they had a wall of their kitchen completely covered in polaroids of every person who ever visited them and instead you had to do that before you could sit down for tea, and this to me was just a very weird idea that put me off balance and I don't know, it might of been designed to do that, but that taught me a lot about them and I don't think very many other people who I hung out with ever visited them or shared a social moment.

So, it's kind of interesting that you came down from Brisbane but you became entrenched in the Little Bands scene

Well, the punk rock scene and the left in Brisbane were totally intertwined, there was the punks who went to all the demos and most of the people who came to the punk shows were lefties and it was a very very small place where there wasn't enough protection in numbers to have the street scenes... have you heard of a band called **Razar**?

Razar came late onto the punk scene, very angry young boys who played incredibly generic punk music, marketed themselves really well, I would put them and **La Femme** in a very similar box.

They were a little bit too late to be real for people who were like 6 months older than them for Godsake and they were disrespected as a result. John Murphy loved **JAB**, and **The Reals** which I don't think were recorded, but Rowland was their guitar player and Geoff Wegener who was in **The Laughing Clowns** drummed for the **Reals**... Ollie Olsen was also in them before he joined Rowland in the **Young Charlatans**.

So, it was the Reals then the Young Charlatans?

That's the one, yeah Geoff Wegener was the drummer in the **Young Charlatans** and the lady who played the bass, Janine Hall ended up playing in the second version of **The Saints**. **Young Charlatans** are pretty good, very television-ish. Rowland was in The Obsessions before he joined **Charlatans** and then the **Boys Next Door**.

They (Young Charlatans) didn't last long, did they? No, personality, ego and alcohol.

The **Young Charlatans** were apparently very powerful, they broke up before I came here but from what people who saw them said they were very powerful and Ollie played the guitar in that band which he didn't do in **Whirlyworld**, but he would rate bands from the group 'serious bands', 'the non-poser' bands, from the period just before that *Suicide* Record and **JAB**, was **JAB** the one Bohdan was in?

Yeah, **JAB** he loved **JAB** and **News** who also had a very strong kind of art politics... Pop kind of thing, but were absolutely intense loud, their drummer was John Murphy who called himself 'John Smith from the Suburbs'. John Murphy was a classically trained drummer in the Mitch Mitchell style, sort of mid-seventies, heavy rock songs, really really good, he toned it down for **Whirlyworld**.

But he learned solos off Jimi Hendrix records and that sort of thing, great drummer, so he was John Smith from the Suburbs and then just John Murphy in **Whirlyworld**. Then he went overseas, and he's had a career since then in a sort of goth ritual music type of thing.

Did you ever see Ron Rude perform?

Unfortunately, I mean, Ron was a great comedian and a really nice guy but his music was appalling. And we were all so narrow-minded, I mean the **Models** were a really good band until Ash Wednesday left. Even

though Andrew Duffield was really good friend of Ollie's, the second that Ash Wednesday left everybody went ..."ohh"... so that was the thinking at the time. As soon as there was some deviation from the original purity of something this mentality infected all of us and it was "oh it's over, why are they trying?" you know. They were a great pop band after Andrew Duffield joined. I really liked their stuff, but you couldn't say so.

But there was this thing about ok... once some germ of an idea has had its first little gasp and then someone tried to improve it that's the mistake you make - and this sort of thinking infested ..well.. I was completely full of that type of thinking but Ash Wednesday was another character he's a really lovely guy, I see him from time to time, who had a really strong sense of self, daggy as it might have been, a really strong image but took himself really seriously and people just didn't deal with that too well and he was pretty poorly regarded too, for different reasons than the singer of the Models was poorly regarded, because he was just a ponce.

Was that Sean Kelly?

Yeah, maybe not so much in St Kilda but certainly laughed at in the Northern Suburbs.

He just turned out to be a pop star you know, similar attitude to him was held by people who watched Billy Idol's career move from Generation X to solo, like from awesome to awful.

We were really stuck up! Very ideological and very insecure.

I don't have a problem with how stupid, irritating and fucked we were, and I mean it's all opinion, people may disagree and say I was the real wanker, never made any music just went and recorded bands.

Is there anything else you would like to say to add to this interview before we finish up?

A lot of the people who were part of the Little Bands were very seriously inspired by some of the radical political art ideas of the time, but they don't talk about it and they just won't admit it but it's true.

Have you heard of the painter Peter Tyndall? (Alan is asking me this)

Peter did the artwork for the Little Bands record which is here. Peter is an Australian painter so he produced this which everybody loathed, he does this post structural work about the artist looking at the painting looking at the artist or the watcher looking at the painting looking at the watcher and it's about all I can remember to say about it, but Peter used to do these incredible minimalist paintings that were basically drawings of frames on white canvases and he's a known catalogued Australian Painter, he was in some bands that were like the **Jean-Paul Sartre Experience**. He couldn't play an instrument he used to mimic playing the bass in **Use No Hooks**, he'd do his solo pieces, very conceptual art, he monotoned slogans with a straight cardboard cutout of some famous iconic figure of the 20th century playing noise on the guitar, all sorts of performances like that but if you know reviewers had come along they could have obviously drenched with meaning and written stuff about ...