

## **Countdown and cult music television programmes: an Australian case study**

Liz Giuffre

### **Abstract**

Music television programs, programs that focus on music for their core content, have been produced all over the world for all types of markets. However there remains little sustained work on them beyond studies of key production periods, franchise waves or biography-like narratives. This article shows that theories of Cult TV can be applied to music television programs to help explore this neglected form, as well as helping to expand Cult TV's theoretical reach beyond its traditional fare of narrative driven, fiction series. This article offers 1970s and '80s Australian music television program *Countdown* as a prime example of Cult TV, first in the context of its initial production and consumption in 1970s and '80s Australia, and also in terms of its subsequent influence on contemporary audiences from a historical perspective. The Cult TV frame extends to the program itself in its original incarnation, as well as additional recontextualisations in new music television programs, and the continued work of its former host, Ian 'Molly' Meldrum.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Music television is an unusual type of programming. It provides both regular entertainment that is watched intensely while on air, and produces key moments that survive well in audience collective memory. 'Live' music performance and interview series *Countdown* remains an icon of the Australian television and music industries.<sup>2</sup> Created by the national public service broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC),<sup>3</sup> the show was broadcast from 1974 to 1987 on Sunday evenings and was highly influential with television audiences and the broader music industry.<sup>4</sup> *Countdown* provided opportunities for music artists and audiences to engage with each other in a way that had not previously been possible. The show facilitated significant changes in the local media and music landscapes, including attracting audiences to advances in television technology (notably colour television), changing audience perceptions of the relationship between broadcasting and the music industry, and changing ideas of national and international musical cultures. The programme was also an important stepping stone into pre-music video culture for live artists wanting to explore 'clips' of their performance, providing an invaluable platform for local talent who have since had significant Australian and international success including AC/DC, INXS and Split Enz.

Since 1987 *Countdown* has remained an influential piece of programming for Australian television and music audiences, with the nature of this influence evolving over time. In the 1970s and 80s the show appeared both edgy and mainstream, while in retrospect audiences have also come to acknowledge the relative amateurism displayed in its production (as artists and the programme's host often appeared on air apparently ill prepared or even intoxicated). This 'roughness' has come to be celebrated as part of a youthful playfulness and naivety present in the industry (and its audience) at the time. McKee argues that for audiences of *Countdown* 'watching the program is only half of the ritual; gathering to share its contents was another' (2001: 136). This water cooler (or school yard) pattern of dual consumption characterised the way audiences engaged with the show during the 1970s and '80s, and has continued as the show has continued to be fondly remembered by fans and commentators since the 1987 end of production. As McKee maintains, '[*Countdown*] has passed into Australia's public archive of television's well-remembered programs' (2001: 136).

*Countdown's* cultural significance has been reconfirmed through various re-broadcasts of key clips and shows on free-to-air television and its post-broadcast neighbour, YouTube, as well as the republishing of material on ABC online (which I will discuss later in the article). The success of the now internationally renowned bands the program helped launch (such as AC/DC), and the continued enthusiasm for new music still displayed by *Countdown* producer, booker, and host, 'Molly' Meldrum, has also maintained interest in the show. Meldrum has rarely been absent from the Australian music media (including on television, on radio and in print) since *Countdown's* demise, and while his position as tastemaker has shifted as he has aged and occupied different media spaces, industry and audience affection for him has remained. This goodwill was shown particularly strongly when Meldrum had a life-threatening accident just shy of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2011, an event that saw tributes from local and international musicians, fans, politicians and other iconic figures flood local airwaves.

## Finding and defining music television

Discussions of music television tend to appear in concentrated clusters. For example, there was a rush of scholarship about the MTV franchise in the 1980s and '90s (climaxing with Kaplan 1987 and Goodwin 1992), while more recently historical accounts of the beginnings of music television like Forman (2012) and Austen (2005) have emerged as a way to acknowledge music and television relationships developed as part of variety or tonight show formats. Relatively isolated but highly important studies of new theoretical approaches to music in (and for) television have also been developed (Donnelly and Hayward 2013; Deville 2011; Tagg and Clarida 2003), and format-based case studies including those focused on popular music (Inglis 2010) and advertising (Klein 2010). There have been biographies of key programs like the UK's *Top of the Pops* (Simpson 2002; Gittens 2007), *Soul Train* (Lehman 2008), and the *Pop Idol* franchise (Zwaan and De Bruin 2012), as well as annual music television event, *Eurovision* (O'Connor 2010; Raykoff and Tobin 2007); all allowing music and television to be considered as broader cultural histories rather than specific television or audience centred studies. *Countdown* has also been the focus of two popular biographies (Wilmoth 1993; Warner 2006), which this article will build on in order to move beyond mere historical narrative towards critically examining the program's audience and industry influence over time.

These discussions above provide useful groundwork, but it nevertheless remains hard to find a definition of what 'music television' actually is and what it does for the medium and music industry. As part of a broader television studies narrative, Allan argues for the need to consider music television as 'a general term used to refer to a system through which [music oriented] programming is delivered' (2002: 219), while later Donnelly argues the importance of distinguishing music on television from the larger (more dominant) umbrella of screen sound as film sound (2002: 332-3). Building on Allan's definition this article distinguishes between music television generally, and music television programming specifically (that is, programmes centred on music). Music television programmes have been produced by a variety of international markets over the history of television production; yet they have usually only been mentioned in passing by specialist television commentators. For example,

there is a notable absence (or only brief acknowledgement) of music television in compendiums of television studies like that by Bignell (2004), Hartley (1992), and Gray (2008), as well as local Australian television histories like *The Australian Film and TV Companion* (Harrison 2005), *The Historical Dictionary of Australian Radio and Television* (Moran and Keating 2007), and *Remembering Television* (Darian-Smith and Turnbull 2012).

The absence of music television programming in broader television studies discourse can be attributed to key characteristics of the form. Music television is typically live-to-air (or recorded live with minimal editing), relatively cheap to produce, subject to fashion and quick changes in style, and often made in quite large quantities but for short amounts of time. As such, music television tends to be sidelined, or simply not written about at all, an example of what Bonner calls 'ordinary television' (2003), or Hills describes as 'invisible television' (2010a: 97) as far as the academy is concerned. What analysis of music television there is generally tends to centre on small segments or profile pieces of hosts or VJs, or around franchises like MTV (which tends to be a stream of content and a dedicated channel, rather than individual programs or segments). Music television that is constructed around guest programmers or playlists only can be left out of these discussions completely.<sup>5</sup>

Iconic pieces of music television like *Countdown* deserve to be discussed more often and with clear attention to their continued impact. Given its continued influence on audiences and industry, this article suggests that models of cult television are a good place to start the conversation. For example, the now familiar notion of cult television as that which 'attracts loyal fans in fewer numbers than the more highly rated shows that constitute the mainstream' (Pearson 2010: 9) helps explain how *Countdown* has remained culturally significant since the 1970s; while Hills' description of Cult TV as a way to consider 'a range of texts ... which share qualities such as creating detailed, expansive diegetic worlds (or even universes), as well as displaying "endlessly deferred narrative"' (2005: 190) provides a method to understand how *Countdown* has found a place for younger and new media audiences. As will be shown in detail in the sections following, *Countdown* was developed during a specific point in Australian musical and broadcasting history (a detailed and expansive diegetic world which engaged both industries and their expectations), and could be defined by its

influence on audiences of the time (an 'expansive diegetic world'). *Countdown*'s meaning has also changed with various recontextualisations (an 'endlessly deferred narrative'), a point which is especially important as the place of music television has been broadly questioned in the post-broadcast era, with some commentators arguing that it is now second to online delivery (Sibilla 2010).

*Countdown* can also be understood as part of the 'mainstream cult' as Hills describes, where "'cult" can be defined against something that it is not' (2010b: 68). As will be shown in this article, *Countdown*'s difference to commercial music television, like the local version of *Bandstand*, as well as to international forms like MTV, contributes to how it continues to be valued by Australian broadcast audiences who remember it when it first aired, as well as those who discover it elsewhere. Cult TV scholarship also provides a way to consider music and its delivery more broadly, with Halfyard outlining a growing understanding of Cult TV as a place where music has a specific role, 'Cult TV explores musical areas generally avoided by the mainstream ... [with a] clear and continual process of innovation' (Halfyard 2010: 127). Certainly *Countdown* remains revered as a place of innovation, lead by host Meldrum's continued enthusiasm during the show's production, and for subsequent decades. In particular, his continued participation in the music industry as he ages and it develops sets him apart from an otherwise surface-based, youth oriented, popular music landscape.

### **Getting ready to launch the *Countdown* - how it happened**

*Countdown* was an important precursor to the explosion of music video and specialist music television production that came via the 1980s launch of MTV. When *Countdown* began in 1974 it was initially considered a youth program rather than an arts/music program by the ABC, largely because of its focus on pop music and culture. Its predecessor, the short weekly evening 'magazine programme' *GTK* (Get to Know), was developed by the ABC's Children's section in 1969 and was aimed at 'introducing new teens and twenties to the world of trendsetting fashions, records, movies and events' (Bowden and Borchers 2006: 158). *Countdown* built on this format (although aiming at teens and above), producing longer episodes, with a

significantly bigger budget than GTK (Inglis 2006: 356).<sup>6</sup> As such, *Countdown* could be seen from the start as having been given more serious attention by the ABC than its precursors; more than mere 'filler' as some previous music programming had been thought of (Stockbridge 1992b: 69).

*Countdown* was made at a time when there was a renewed call for television to foster local talent. Australian television generally had been flooded with international content and influence for much of its history, and while music and variety programming had often featured local artists, often they were performing international compositions within an international programming style. The most obvious example of this was *Bandstand*, produced in Sydney by commercial station TCN 9 in the years prior to *Countdown* and clearly based on the American programme of the same name. On air from 1958 to 1972 on Saturday evenings, local musicians most often performed international compositions as part of Australian 'Bandstand Family'. This format allowed the local industries to capitalise on the popularity of the emerging international trend of rock'n'roll, but do so in a way that appeared local and safe, as 'Channel Nine's *Bandstand* broadened rock'n'roll's audience while playing an active role in sanitising the music' (Zion 1987: 172). *Bandstand*'s main competitor, *Six O'Clock Rock*, was broadcast on the ABC featuring local artists regularly performing their own compositions, and in their own style (including, famously, musician/host Johnny O'Keefe). Unfortunately the programme was relatively short lived.

When *Countdown* was finally launched in 1974 it was part of a renewed wave of investment in local artistic production. Following the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 (which also established initiatives such as the youth radio network Double J and the Australian Film Commission), *Countdown* finally provided a place for local musicians to engage with a national audience in a way that segmented (and conservative) radio networks had not allowed. As Breen describes,

The relationship between local music and global pressures was manifested in *Countdown* and the personality of Ian 'Molly' Meldrum ... *Countdown* defined the emerging process of popular music consumption, where it could be used and constrained within the terrain defined by the geography of the family home and technologies of radio and television (1997: 158).

Breen's emphasis on the uniqueness of the Australian condition during this time (specifically the still relatively isolated population and segmented music and marketing industries) explains how *Countdown* gained its cult status. Breen's isolation of Meldrum emphasizes the host's fundamental role as a mediator during the program's time on air, as well as a way for audiences to continue to engage with the program (and its memory) since its completion. As I will discuss towards the end of this article, Meldrum's audience rapport and appeal is central to the program's cult status.

During its time on air *Countdown* was used to help initiate key forms of music and media engagement. As previously mentioned, *Countdown* was used to demonstrate the potential of colour television in department stores selling the new product (Stockbridge 1992a: 139; Stockbridge 1992b: 73-4), a point that has since been offered as key history by ABC digital media editors who added a portion of that episode to the 'New on The ABC' YouTube channel in 13 June 2011.<sup>7</sup> *Countdown* was also a way to track changing ideas of how local audiences and artists could present themselves in the Australian music and media landscape. For example, Stratton (2006) argues that *Countdown* was instrumental in the 'construction and nationalizing of pop-rock' (2006: 246), suggesting that the program 'legitimated pop-rock and gave it an audience to love or hate, and [simply] react to it' (2006: 247). Further, he argues, 'in the decade 1975–1985 it was *Countdown* that constructed the mainstream of Australian popular music and became the driver for which songs would get into the [usually radio-determined] Top 40' (ibid). This last point also isolates the uniqueness of *Countdown* internationally, as with its national reach, this television program exercised more influence than radio on young audiences and provided more opportunities for local musicians.

### **The final *Countdown* - how it ended (the first time around)**

The various histories of *Countdown* present a mixture of theories about the show's demise, ranging from increased production costs (Stockbridge 1992a: 140; Place and Roberts 2006: 133) to a mere change in audience preferences which did not favour

the show's format and preference for pop anymore (Warner 2006: 140; Wilmoth 1993: 244). *Countdown* had certainly been dominant in the music industry during its time on air, but also not without its critics. In a history of the local music industry's development at the time, Breen alludes to the programme's negative effect on live music, suggesting that 'for an entire generation of young Australians, live music performance became the least engaging activity for the music industry, as audiences found adequate entertainment in the comfort of their homes' (1997: 159). Similarly, Stratton notes that substantial parts of the local live scene had not made it on to *Countdown*; 'Australia's Alternative Rock scene that developed in concert with mid-1970s punk, hardly got a look in on *Countdown*' (2006: 247-8).

*Countdown* ended in 1987, the year MTV's global reach finally extended to Australia. Given the relatively small television infrastructure of the industry at the time (only five free-to-air broadcasters, with no cable services), MTV was launched in April as an individual program on free-to-air commercial television. The two programmes were on air together for only a few months (*Countdown*'s finale aired on 26 June, 1987). Reports in the press around MTV's local launch were focused on the promise of the arrival of the internationally recognized brand rather than an expansion of the local, music video program landscape. MTV Australia was not promoted as an 'anti-*Countdown*', but its point of difference in terms of host, approach and global connections was made clear. As the *Sun Herald* reported a few weeks before MTV Australia's debut, 'after weeks of speculation, Channel 9 has finally announced the two local video jockeys for its link with the giant American cable music network, MTV' (Purcell 1987: 48). The article reported that MTV Australia 'will be a mixture of video clips, concert footage and music news as well as lifestyle entertainment and fashion segments' (ibid), giving brief credentials for both expected hosts (emphasizing an actor and personality as well as music industry figures), but with no mention of any focus on local music content necessarily. Indeed, Purcell describes the local MTV as a 'link-up' to the international franchise, making it unclear if MTV Australia would have any local programming at all or merely international material using local hosts.

MTV Australia screened over six hours early on Saturday and Sunday mornings, and soon moved away from international MTV forms to mirror what local audiences had come to expect from *Countdown*, 'a local presenter (the New Zealand disc jockey

Richard Wilkins), local news segments and a considerable proportion of mainstream local music' (Mitchell 1995: 299). Mitchell compares MTV Australia to the ABC program *Rage*, a show that showed old episodes of *Countdown* on a regular basis. Asserting (albeit in unspecified terms) that 'MTV in Australia is less successful than *Rage*', Mitchell argues that as a consequence of competition from the ABC programme, 'MTV has attempted to respond to the challenge to its ratings offered by *Rage* by programming more independent Australian and overseas music videos' (ibid). MTV Australia ended in 1993, on air for six years as opposed to *Countdown*'s thirteen year run.

Just prior to *Countdown*'s conclusion, Australia's music and broadcast industries were engaged in a 'pay for play' controversy, where record companies reportedly began to ask television programmes to pay for the right to play video clips as a means of recouping expenses. In an article called 'Pay for Play: Or, you can't have your music and screen it too' (1988), Stockbridge explores the importance of the relationship between television broadcasting and the music industry and the tension between the two during this time, noting that the music industry felt it was directly losing while broadcast was directly gaining; 'For record industry associations, records and video music clips are both products/commodities and promotion simultaneously ... They [music videos] are advertising, but, unlike regular advertisements, they *are* the product' (Stockbridge 1988: 10).

Questions over the changing nature of music and television's relationship, the authorship of music videos, and the connection to industry continued to be circulated during this time. Stockbridge argues that 'the pay-for-play issue protects the rights of record companies and recording artists but does not acknowledge the rights of clipmakers' (Stockbridge 1988: 10). However, for *Countdown*, screened on the publically funded ABC, the introduction of such financial restraints would have been untenable (as well as threatening the public service broadcaster's commitment to not show advertising). A report in *TV Week* in April 1987 noted that the 'pay for clips ruling [was to be] muted' in Australia, with the editor using *Countdown* as a key argument point; 'Australia's longest running rock show, *Countdown*, is in jeopardy if major changes to broadcasting costs are implemented ... the future of *Countdown*

and other music shows is in serious doubt if the planned “pay for play” system comes into effect’ (Anon. 1987: 34). The same article cites then recent changes to *Countdown*’s format to include more live performances and quotes Meldrum as saying that ‘*Countdown* is one show that could survive’ a potential pay for play scheme (ibid). It also reports that ‘discussions about introducing the [pay] system have been going on for over a year’ and that ‘negotiations between television stations and ARIA should be finalized within the next two months’ (ibid).

Meldrum’s assurance that Australian programming ‘could survive’ a possible ‘pay for play’ approach may not have saved *Countdown*, but his point did hold true for *Countdown*’s successor, *Rage*. *Rage* was not affected by a threat of pay for play because it did not rely solely on high budget international product. Rather, *Rage* presented a mixture of genres and styles of music videos, with locally produced, low-budget productions regularly featuring. This point of difference provided *Rage* with a market advantage during the 1980s period of change, and has also helped secure *Rage*’s future during more recent industrial transformations. For example, the development of the ‘YouTube aesthetic’ for contemporary music video production (the type of thing that is often said to have ‘killed’ MTV’s emphasis on music video), has not affected *Rage*’s style or audience appeal because such a low-fi approach has always been a part of *Rage*’s presentation.<sup>8</sup> This low-fi and local aesthetic also allowed *Rage* to become a natural home to repeats of *Countdown* episodes, which the program still regularly runs as part of its ‘*Rage* Goes Retro’ month in January. These replays and repeats, which often celebrate what also appears low cost and dated, have added to *Countdown*’s cult status.

### ***Countdown* as it has been remembered, recycled and reconfigured**

Like other ‘cult programmes’ from around the world, many of the original *Countdown* episodes were wiped not long after they were produced, with others ‘saved’ or discovered only by chance years later. For example, biographies of *Countdown* like the one by Wilmoth (1993) and online *Countdown* fanpages and forums (particularly [www.countdownmemories.com](http://www.countdownmemories.com)), can be compared to science fiction fan practices highlighted by Jenkins (2006), as fans reminisce and compare their first encounters with the programme. *Countdown*’s infamy (and relative scarcity) has also been noted

on the Australian Screen website (the official depository for the National Film and Sound Archive). Here *Countdown* is described using 'cult' language;

Produced in Melbourne, the program [*Countdown*] became mandatory viewing for teenagers and continued to be transmitted nationally until 26 June 1987. In addition to featuring the first television performances of most Australian bands during its lifetime, *Countdown* attracted international guests including Prince Charles and Iggy Pop, whose lip-synched performance of *I'm Bored* in 1979 is still talked about by those who saw it (Anon. 2014).

*Countdown*'s cult status has been sustained by a series of replayings and recontextualisations of the program and its essence on Australian television since its demise. Although *Countdown* has never been replayed in full (nor can it be), the spirit of the show has re-circulated in a number of ways. These includes an attempted reboot as *Countdown Revolution* (screened on the ABC from 1989-1990), as well as Meldrum's regular new music segment on long running variety show *Hey Hey it's Saturday* called 'Molly's Melodrama' (screened on Channel 9 until 1999), and since then various one-off music television programs and specials hosted by Meldrum on Channels 7 and 10, as well as on pay television network Music Max. This history has added to the mythology of the program in many ways, with nostalgia events like the *Countdown* Spectacular stage show and tour (held around Australia in 2006 and 2007),<sup>9</sup> providing clear and immediate evidence of the program's continued cultural favour.

The first notable replayings (and recontextualisations) of the original *Countdown* series came via the early 1990s ABC TV sketch comedy show *The Late Show*. In 1992 *The Late Show* introduced a segment called '*Countdown* Classics', which saw comedy cast members Tom Gleisner and Jane Kennedy compile and present *Countdown* clips in a *Countdown*-era style (wearing bright coloured flares and seated in beanbags). The aim was to celebrate, but also laugh at the appearances of *Countdown* performers and Meldrum, as well as the quite dated presentation of the show generally. While the segment was ultimately good humoured and a celebration of the programme, there was also a clear acknowledgement of the relative absurdity

of how 1970s and '80s *Countdown* appeared to a 1990s audience. Pieces chosen as 'classics' included part of *Countdown*'s 100<sup>th</sup> episode (where Meldrum was so 'tired' that he had to hand over hosting duties to musician John Paul Young), and a collection called 'Stoned performers', whereby Gleinser and Kennedy provided commentary before, during and after each short screening, as well as reproducing key parts of the program (notably Meldrum's drunken address to camera). Although the '*Countdown Classics*' didn't make it to *The Late Show* DVD release, its cult appeal has been demonstrated by fans who have reposted the '*Countdown Classics*', complete with Gleinser and Kennedy's introductions, to YouTube.<sup>10</sup> This demonstration of a 'cult within a cult' (which appears to have been the digitization of a home VHS recording of the original 1990s broadcast) further solidified *Countdown*'s cult following during *The Late Show*'s original run. It also shows, within the context of the YouTube redistribution, a continued cult audience interest in both the original music television programme, and the comedy show's reconsideration of it.

Since 1993 full *Countdown* episodes (which were preserved) have also had a place to receive a new airing via overnight music video program, *Rage*. As part of the show's annual month-long festival '*Rage Goes Retro*', *Countdown* has been represented back to existing audiences wanting to relive *Countdown* as it was, as well as providing an opportunity for new, younger audiences to engage. As former *Rage* producer Narelle Gee explains,

We try not to be repetitive and to find lesser-played episodes, but certain favourites do get repeated (e.g. Iggy Pop not quite miming 'I'm Bored'). [However] it can be a 'what we can find' situation given many episodes of *Countdown* were erased at the time. We also note audience suggestions and play artists who may have passed away during the year (Gee in Giuffre, 2009: 50).

Here *Rage* uses *Countdown* as a way to acknowledge prior Australian music television programming (the 'retro' programme also includes *GTK* and 1990s show *Recovery*). Like *The Late Show*, *Rage* carefully selecting 'favourites' with respect to the expectations of the old and new audience. Gee's note about *Countdown*'s position within Australian music and music television history, particularly her

acknowledgement of the opportunity to play old episodes as something of an obituary for 'artists who have passed away', demonstrates, like other forms of cult television, *Countdown* helps audiences continue to create and recreate a sense of community and commonality. In addition to its initial broadcast context and meaning, *Countdown* becomes part of a larger, ever expanding narrative.

Music quiz programme *Spicks and Specks* (broadcast on ABC 2006-2012) has also recontextualised and recreated elements of *Countdown*. This happened explicitly three times over the show's history, first in 2006 when *Spicks and Specks* staged a 'Countdown Special' featuring Molly Meldrum as a panellist,<sup>11</sup> and then in 2009 as part of a 1970s special where Meldrum again featured (also discussing his role as a producer and talent booker), and finally when *Spicks and Specks* host Adam Hills dressed as Meldrum in the former *Countdown* host's trademark Stetson hat and a *Countdown* T-shirt to host the 'Australiana' special in 2010. In the 1970s special in particular, Meldrum's influence was spelt out when he and iconic Australian music promoter, Michael Gudinski, were placed on opposing teams for the programme's games. Over the course of the show they were encouraged to recreate the famous professional rivalry they shared in the '70s. Hills used as the programme's final question 'who was the most important man in Australian music in the 1970s?' to bate both men to argue their own influence during that time. While the exchange was playful, it demonstrated the continued appeal of *Countdown* and Meldrum for audiences still engaged in music television programming as it has evolved into the current popular quiz format.

Adam Hills continued the connection between *Countdown* and new music television production with his variety/talk show *In Gordon St Tonight* (ABC TV 2011- 2012). The program was named in honour of the ABC Gordon St studios which housed *Countdown*, and featured a regular segment called 'Gordon St Classics', where visiting musicians were invited to recreate performances originally broadcast during *Countdown*, as well as other Gordon St-based music television shows like *Recovery*.<sup>12</sup> Prior to each performance, Hills introduced each song in terms of its original broadcast, and the segment became part of the continued appeal of the new programme. On the promotional sleeve for the DVD release of the first series of *In*

*Gordon St Tonight*, the programme's link to earlier music television was demonstrated with the text; 'The "Gordon St Classic" brought us musical highlights from the likes of Tim Minchin (Better Be Home Soon) and Martha Wainwright (The Ship Song)' (2011: ABC DVD). In each case, the 'classic' was delivered by a relatively unlikely new musician, in a new context (Minchin a cabaret and musical theatre artist, and Wainwright a Canadian folk/pop singer/songwriter), but the recreation of the music television programme's key moment within the new music programme drew a cross section of audiences. Minchin appeared seated at a grand piano as opposed to the guitar based (and likely very pop-1980s styled) original by Crowded House, while Wainwright performed Nick Cave's original gently on an acoustic guitar, in stark contrast to how Nick Cave may have done it originally. While there is a slight historical and editorial inaccuracy with both performances (the original songs were released after *Countdown*'s conclusion, likely featuring on other 'Gordon St' music programs), the connection between live studio performance and audience commitment and memory connected to the initial *Countdown* rhetoric.

These recontextualisations and replays of *Countdown* are fundamental to cementing its status as Cult TV. Although with music television 'the television audience is rarely conceived as a music audience' (Frith 2002: 277), by referencing *Countdown*, *The Late Show*, *Rage* and *Spicks and Specks* play on a sense of nostalgia for the show felt by older audiences, as well as recontextualising the older form in order to make genial fun of it and engage younger audiences. Beyond these television references, *Countdown*'s influence was also acknowledged with musician, fan and writer Brian Mannix's musical *I Can't Believe it's Not Countdown: It's a Musical Comedy*, staged in Melbourne first in the late 1990s and then again in 2009. Featuring comedian Michael Veitch impersonating Meldrum, the show was a live recreation of the television series, not with the original artists as they have now aged (as was the case with the *Countdown Spectacular* live concerts), but with young performers impersonating 1970s and '80s musicians as they were in their (*Countdown*) heyday. The stage show makes fun of the show with a similar warmth to *The Late Show*'s 'Countdown Classics', and it received positive and playful feedback from Meldrum himself, who via newspaper *The Age* approved of Veitch's impersonation, 'I always have a half-stunned look on my face and he [Veitch]

captures that. Once he whacks the hat on, there's an uncanny likeness' (Meldrum in Lawson 2009).

### **The continued cult of Molly: 'Do Yourself a Favour'**

In a special issue of Australian literary journal *Meanjin* focused on popular music, profiler and interviewer Manuell (2006) presents a piece on Meldrum. In discussing *Countdown* and its success she notes his position as the initial talent coordinator for the programme, as well as his prior experience as a record producer (notably for Russell Morris' single 'The Real Thing') and journalist for 1960s local music newspaper *The Go Set*. Her conclusion is that Meldrum's mixture of experience provided a perfect storm; 'if the ABC had wanted just another television presenter for just another music show, *Countdown* might have been a very different beast altogether. But Molly Meldrum was always more than just a television personality' (Manuell 2006: 95).

Meldrum's position as 'more than just a television personality' has also been discussed by new television personalities, notably *Spicks and Specks* hosts Adam Hills, Myf Warhurst and Alan Brough. In an interview with ABC Local radio in 2008, which was also accompanied by a text story on the ABC called 'The Countown of the naughties,'<sup>13</sup> the trio were asked about their music television programme's relationship to *Countdown*, and specifically if Hills was a modern day Meldrum. The question came as part of a discussion of the role and evolution of music television in Australia over time, and in response Hills answered, playfully but also as a clear fan, 'I have to say I don't think that makes me a modern day Molly, I think that makes all of us [himself, Warhurst and Brough] contributors to being a modern day Molly, I think we are all different parts to Molly' (ABC Local 2008). Supporting the comment (and also continuing to light-heartedly engage with the comparison, Brough, added, 'And I think that's a tribute to Molly, that it takes three of us to be Molly' (ABC Local 2008).<sup>14</sup>

These comments demonstrate the impact Meldrum's work has had on the music television landscape in Australia over time. As the interview progressed the group and listeners to the program continued to discuss memories of *Countdown* and of

Meldrum specifically, with the interviewer recounting Meldrum's interview with Prince Charles (where he famously swore in front of the Prince then inquired about the Queen by asking the Prince about 'his mum'). The encounter, which has subsequently been used by the ABC as part of its promotional material more broadly, is typical of the type of cult status Meldrum gained and has retained (as fans remember and recount the story), as well as the process of reconsideration that the television piece has undergone.<sup>15</sup> Warhurst, who also has worked as a broadcaster and print music journalist herself, explains:

Someone like Molly existed in a television landscape [that has now passed] ... If you were like Molly [on air now], if you made the mistakes that he made and just the beautiful naturalness that he had, the whole television landscape has changed too. People are far more polished (ABC Local, 2008).

This acknowledgment of *Countdown's* place in the history of Australian music television exemplifies how the series functions as Cult TV that is apart from the mainstream or other more popular forms. For viewers who remember *Countdown* and other older forms of music television in Australia, *Spicks and Specks* is obviously a different type of music television program, one that, as Warhurst suggests, is 'more polished'. But this endorsement by the contemporary television personalities encourages viewers who are too young to have watched *Countdown* when it originally aired in the 1970s and '80s to seek out the program and further to investigate music history (including music television's history) because of Warhurst, Hills and Brough's recommendation. It also provides a historical and cultural point of difference, as Warhurst's emphasis on Meldrum's 'mistakes' as a form of 'naturalness' demonstrates her loyalty as a fan herself.

*Countdown's* relative difference to other types of music television programming can also be observed in the way the program has been repositioned by the ABC. The ABC Library Sales official YouTube channel features eight videos specifically dedicated to '*Countdown* Bloopers', including the Prince Charles interview noted earlier, as well as a video entitled 'Tired and Emotional Molly'.<sup>16</sup> In the clip Meldrum is clearly drunk, unable to get through his lines, swearing and glassy-eyed. This style of presentation has become infamous. However, the repositioning of it here is not mean

spirited, but rather an indication of a now unusual (and perhaps unrepeatably) piece of music television programming history. Meldrum's apparent lack of professionalism with the medium of television has since been explained in terms of lack of focus with the demands of presentation, with *Countdown* producer Ted Emery later recalling Meldrum's naivety: 'He [Meldrum] had no sense of my timetable making a television show' (Ted Emery in Bowden and Borchers 2006: 159). Despite such logistical frustrations, the ABC and its production staff persevered with Meldrum because of the undeniable success he had and his clear enthusiasm for the music he presented. This enthusiasm clearly engaged audiences as well.

Some have argued that Meldrum's style of presentation during *Countdown* became as entertaining as the music he curated, with his 'artfully incoherent' (Inglis 2006: 356) approach said to be central to the show's successful capture of its target audience. In one extreme, ABC historians Bowden and Borchers argued that Meldrum had 'carefully cultivated [a] bumbling presentation and interviewing style' so as to avoid intimidating young audience members or musicians (Bowden and Borchers 2006: 158). This was in direct contrast with other music television programming like *Bandstand* and the 'chaperone' image of host Brian Henderson; 'Henderson represented the generation gap and the view that this pop stuff was all a bit of frippery... Molly changed that. No longer did a host condescend, or feign ignorance. Molly was assuredly one of us – a fan' (Wilmoth 1993: 31).

In addition to his 'open' style, Meldrum often handed hosting duties to artists, interacted with the audience and encouraged artists to experiment with new visual and musical styles. His clear position as a fan was one that also provided authenticity and quality to his voice as a critic, a sense of 'quality' that is also often attributed to discussions of Cult TV (see Pearson 2010: 14-16). He was considered the 'the arbiter of quality' (Stockbridge 1992a: 139) on a program which gave 'a band credibility as far as the industry and the young viewers of the program were concerned' (ibid), a power he developed because of his clear enthusiasm with the music and musicians he was engaging. As above, this enthusiasm has since been used as a euphemism for his clear enjoyment of a rock'n'roll lifestyle (appearing drunk on camera), but this enthusiasm is also something that Meldrum has maintained since *Countdown*'s

demise, remaining central to his appeal. His recommendations for music were delivered apparently as part of his fandom as well as his position as an industry professional, with his catchphrase during and since *Countdown*, 'Do Yourself a Favour', appealing directly to listeners to engage with the pleasure of discovering new music generally. Manuell calls his recommendation 'Molly's Stardust', suggesting that 'with a bit of "do yourself a favour" ... a band might even be back [on air or stage] with a top ten hit' (2006: 96).

Since *Countdown* Meldrum has remained a high profile member of the Australian music and media industries, appearing regularly on television, radio and in print. Some of these include the use of his name for key 'histories' of the industry, including *Molly Meldrum Presents 50 Years of Rock in Australia* (edited by Jenkins 2007), which only actually featured an introduction by Meldrum of a few pages inside the volume, but led with his name and iconic Stetson hat on the front cover. A version of Meldrum's hat was also included in the Australian Centre for Moving Image's exhibition on the history of Australian television in 2012. He received an Order of Australia in 1986 and has been variously impersonated including by comedians Michael Veitch (first on sketch show *Fast Forward* on Channel 7 in the 1990s), as well as by Paul Hogan (as part of *The Paul Hogan Show*, broadcast on Channels 7 and 9 in the 1970s and 1980s).

Meldrum's private life has seldom been explored in public as part of his association with *Countdown*, however as various commentators have noted, his homosexuality has not been actively hidden either. When Meldrum's sexuality has been discussed, it still tends to be in terms of his relationship to music, as with Young's (2004) exploration of masculinity in Australian pop during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Young acknowledges Meldrum as a key part of the 'de-sexing of the queer perception of the male performer' (2004: 179), drawing comparisons between Meldrum (with the female nickname 'Molly') and singer Graham Strachan from 1970s Australian band Skyhooks (who was also given a female nickname, 'Shirley'). Young notes that during his time on *Countdown* 'Molly was not an out gay male' (2004: 1980); however, the contextualization of Meldrum within this popular music discourse is significant as it shows a changing attitude towards displays of masculinity during this time. The Skyhooks performer, like other *Countdown* regulars Split Enz, The

Divinyls and AC/DC, often wore flamboyant clothing as a way of provoking and exciting audiences who may have otherwise become bored with Australian music or television generally, and as such these acts were celebrated rather than challenged. Strachan, like many of these musicians, was straight; however his hypersexualised performances became a key part of the band's use of the music television programme to gain audience attention. Young's implication is that whether or not Meldrum's sexuality was known at the time (or since), it was not something that was ever interrogated as part of the show. Rather, enthusiasm, flamboyance and hypersexuality (whether hetero or homosexual) was a norm. While there is no one clear 'outing' of Meldrum on public record, his position as an iconic homosexual Australian public figure has been referenced including Offord (2001: 165) and Rowe (2006: 156). Indeed, when his sexuality was famously focused on as part of a 2003 television special, *Molly: Toasted and Roasted*, there was widespread media condemnation not just for the manner in which it was discussed, but also the intrusion into his personal life (Anon. 2003).

In 2011 Meldrum was critically injured following a fall at his Melbourne home. It was an incident that made national headlines. The Prime Minister of Australia at the time, Julia Gillard, was among the public figures who publically wished Meldrum well during the recovery, cementing a feeling of national affection for him by tweeting 'Australia's thoughts are with you, Molly, Keep fighting' (quoted in Duck and Butler 2011). Reports of members of the international music community sending well wishes were also circulated, highlighting messages received from Madonna, Elton John and Cher (Rule 2011). Meldrum's progress was regularly reported in the press and in 2012 Meldrum was inducted into The Logies Hall of Fame in recognition of his services to the Australian television industry.<sup>17</sup> In the introduction to his induction was a compilation of Meldrum's work ending with a 1980s clip of Australian musician John Farnham stating, 'Ian Meldrum is a music fan, which is more important than everything'.<sup>18</sup> Meldrum's continued commitment to the music industry was demonstrated by the man himself in a 'one year on from the injury' interview with breakfast television in December 2012, where Meldrum quickly moved away from talk of his recovery so he could use his time on the show to discuss new music he was currently interested in.<sup>19</sup>

## **Far from the Final Countdown: the future of Cult TV and music television programs**

*Countdown* was a rare product in terms of local Australian media and internationally as part of a history of music television. Broadcast during a pre-digital era when audiences and musicians were still relatively isolated, (that is, beholden to the power of large record companies, powerful radio stations and a large touring circuit), *Countdown* allowed fans to see great music without leaving their lounge rooms, while also allowing artists to explore different performance and presentation styles. Led by the ever-enthusiastic professional music fan in Meldrum, the show broke many of the expected 'rules' for music television programs. This innovation added to the series' charm at the time and has subsequently been the source of continued interest in the program in new media and evolving music industry contexts.

Music television programmes tend to be considered by academic commentators in terms of periods of rush production or historical retrospection. Programmes that provide important cultural significance in other ways, particularly programmes whose significance has evolved, have yet to be explored coherently. This article offers the model of Cult TV as a way for more work to be done on a music television as a form of cross industry production that clearly influences audiences who are simply fans, as well as those who go on to also be artists themselves. By considering *Countdown*, and music television programmes generally, as a type of Cult TV, we are able to explore a type of television that is often otherwise overlooked. In addition to this, the role of Cult TV in broader industry and creative practices can be further explored, as the second wave of *Countdown* fans such as those now working on *Rage* and *Spicks and Specks*, openly discuss how the Cult TV of the 1970s and '80s informed new music television productions decades later.

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## **Videography**

*Adam Hills in Gordon St Tonight*, ABC DVD, 2011

*Countdown: The Wonder Years*, ABC Music/Liberation, 2006

*Long Way to the Top: Stories of Australian and New Zealand Rock & Roll*, ABC DVD, 2001

*Love is in the Air*, ABC DVD, 2003.

*Spicks and Specks: Up To Our Eras* (ABC DVD, 2009)

*Spicks and Specks: World Tour* (ABC DVD, 2010)

## Notes

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- 1 The author wishes to thank the reviewers and editors for their kind attention and suggestions for this paper. The resulting study benefited greatly from their patient and insightful assistance.
- 2 I place 'live' in inverted commas because many of the performances were clearly lip-synched. However, the emphasis on having a simulated live performance, complete with musicians singing to and interactive with an in-studio crowd, remains significant and standard fare for much music television.
- 3 It should be noted that until 1987 ABC was known as the Australian Broadcasting Commission.
- 4 The program was also replayed on Saturday nights during its initial run, and also rebooted briefly as *Countdown Revolution*; however, this was short lived and not nearly as well received as the original program.
- 5 This problem has been noted elsewhere with relation to the long running, but hostless Australian music video program *Rage* (Giuffre, 2009).
- 6 See Stockbridge (1992a: 136) for a short history of *GTK* and its relationship to music video programmes.
- 7 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-V-3a9HT8w>, accessed August 10 2013.
- 8 See specifically Sinilla's argument that the postulated death of music video relies on lamenting changes where 'music artists are now producing music videos solely for YouTube, following different standards than in the case of clips intended for TV', concluding that such music videos 'require less focus on technical quality and budget, and greater focus on ideas' (2010: 229).
- 9 For more details see:  
[http://www.frontiertouring.com/index.php?action=retail&form\\_name=view\\_retail&merchant\\_id=927&sectionID=](http://www.frontiertouring.com/index.php?action=retail&form_name=view_retail&merchant_id=927&sectionID=), accessed August 10 2013.
- 10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thd5kLShIMs> for 'Stoned performers';  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzoLImmHQGg> for the '100<sup>th</sup> Show', accessed August 10 2013.
- 11 Originally screened 5 July, 2006, with full broadcast details available via  
<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/spicksandspecks/txt/s1674764.htm>, accessed May 5 2011.
- 12 The details of each of these are listed on the *In Gordon St Tonight* website,  
<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/adamhillsIGST/episodes/default.htm?seriesNo=1>, accessed August 10 2013.
- 13 While this was originally a radio programme broadcast locally, I have accessed an online podcast. For reasons of space, here I will reference it as ABC Local, but full details of the online access and original airdate are provided in the bibliography under the title 'ABC Local'.

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- <sup>14</sup> This quote comes specifically from the audio file named 'Adam, Alan and Myf on *Countdown*' which is embedded at:  
<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2008/12/11/2443762.htm>, accessed August 10 2013
- <sup>15</sup> The official ABC Library Sales YouTube Channel has also reproduced an edited version of the interview via this link:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a78mzQZPDAQ&list=PLBE7D22719D868224>, accessed August 10 2013. See also a description of the interview and its context in Bowden and Borchers (2006: 159).
- <sup>16</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-UNC0CL\\_o4&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PLBE7D22719D868224](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-UNC0CL_o4&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PLBE7D22719D868224), accessed August 10 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> The Logie Awards are an industry and popular voted event celebrating Australian achievements in television.
- <sup>18</sup> Broadcast of the 54<sup>th</sup> Logie Awards, Channel 9, April 15, 2013.
- <sup>19</sup> The segment was broadcast on Channel 7's *Sunrise* program on December 13 2012.