

Interview with Dale Blair - punter and author of *Life in Padded Cell: A Biography of Tony Cohen, Australian Sound Engineer*

I couldn't cite a particular date or moment that caused me to get into punk. Punk or New Wave was just a new form of music that came along which I started to add to my musical diet but by 1978 it had come to dominate what I was listening to though not to the total exclusion of everything else. I was a huge Beatles fan (and still am) and I can remember seeing the Saints on Countdown perform 'Erotic Neurotic' which is a fantastic satire or assassination of 'I Wanna Be Your Man' and yet I remember feeling a little affronted and going "What the fuck?" A few of the bands got a go on Countdown, the Saints, La Femme, and the Birthday Party. Maybe they should have got more of a go, but they did get aired. I recently saw an old interview from 1981 in which Molly praises the Birthday Party's album and Tony Cohen, but I certainly didn't come to punk through Countdown. I'd become mates with Russell Diggins (aka Russell Street – Z Cars) at the start of 1976 at Rusden Teachers College and I remember Rusty telling me in our first conversation how big Kiss were going to become but Russ was a really astute record collector, and he got all the music papers and really had his finger on the pulse. So, I'd take a ten pack of TDK C-90 cassette tapes to his place and just tape stuff out of his record collection that he'd recommend, so got into the Ramones, the New York Dolls, Stooges, MC5, George Thorogood, Scorpions, Lou Reed and just a heap of stuff and we were definitely listening to all the English punk stuff as it became available.

I had a little Johnny Rotten badge I used to wear on my waistcoat lapel, and I remember Elaine McCready who went on to sing in International Exiles noticing it and coming up to me and giving it the nod and having that secret conversation because nobody else was into them that we knew of at Teachers College. Rob Wellington was there too, and he was in one of my classes and I remember, I think it was the only conversation I ever had with Rob, and he was waxing lyrical about Supertramp and their Crime of the Century album. I think he'd just been to see their concert and, of course, he went on to be one of the early pioneers in the Melbourne scene. So, we were all listening to something before punk came along. As I said, I'd been into the Beatles for years and had been collecting their albums while all my mates were getting into Led Zep, Deep Purple, and Sabbath. I was really resisting all that stuff as well Bob Dylan in preference to the Beatles and I suppose the first non-Beatles albums I would have bought were Slade Alive, Gary Glitter, Status Quo, AC/DC, and Skyhooks but I was aware of lots of different types of music while I was in high school even though I didn't necessarily buy the albums.

Bowie, T-Rex, Creedence, and ZZ Top were all pretty big and you heard those albums all the time at parties or on mufti day at school when the senior students would set up this cool kind of hippie den with incense and great music. And when I got to teachers' college, we would all go across to Monash Uni and they'd have these lunchtime gigs and you'd see the Bushwhackers, Ol'55, Jo Jo Zep, Chain, Mother Goose and God knows who else. There was also **Remainders record shop** at Monash, and I'd buy these remaindered albums – they'd be out of print albums or unsold or something and they'd clip the album cover like it was a railway ticket and I'd buy these cheap albums just on the basis of the covers and so scored bands like Mountain, Budgie, and Hawkwind. Monash also had a record library so you could go and select records and sit in a booth and put on a pair of headphones and so I discovered things like Robin Trower and Ennio Morricone's The Good the Bad and the Ugly. There was Billy Pinnells' album show on 3XY, and I'd hear all sorts of cool new stuff on that like Ray Rivermonte's *Birth of the Sun* album which remains one of my favourite albums to this day. About the same time punk was starting to break Billy Thorpe had returned to Australia and so I was quite happy going to pubs and head nodding away to the Aztecs. So punk, for me, when it came along, wasn't about a new sound that I saw as so good and something that was welcomed as replacing and

tearing down everything that had gone before. I still loved all the stuff I grew up on, including all the bubble-gum stuff, you know, the Cufflinks and the Archies and later, Abba. As much as we were listening to punk music, we were all probably secretly singing along to Abba when we were by ourselves. That said, if punk had a natural enemy, it was probably disco and few of the bands did do anti-disco songs because I'm pretty sure that was a musical form that was broadly detested by people in the punk scene.

Punk was something I did come to identify with though and I think that was more an age thing as well as coinciding with other factors in my life. I got my driving licence in April 77 and would have got my first car, a shit-box little HB Torana, maybe about a month later so I became mobile for the first time and had that freedom to operate off the train lines without having to rely on lifts from friends or my dad. I don't have any recollection of being aware of the first punk gigs in Melbourne, so I missed those and the punk gunk moments, but I was playing footy at that time and cricket over the summer so training two nights a week and playing on Saturdays, so I had another focus. But I was talking to Rusty recently and he says he was aware of those gigs happening. I mean, as I said, Rusty was a pretty switched-on music nut and bought ten copies of the Anarchy in the UK single when that came out. Anarchy was late 76 and the Babees single Dowanna Love, in the lunch bag, he bought 13 copies of that and that was sometime in 77 and I had both of those. I had to buy a copy of Anarchy off Russ because it had sold out. So, Russ kind of knew, somehow, that these things were important and they're both worth a small fortune today if you still have a copy. But all that Pistols stuff was being aired on Countdown and, of course, even Iggy appeared in that classic interview and performance in 1979 where he sticks the microphone down his pants so punk or at least the international biggies were getting a decent airing in the mainstream even though the local stuff remained pretty subterranean. In the press the Sex Pistols were the ones drawing all the attention and heat, you know, these appalling obnoxious punks, just look at them. Disgraceful. It was actually a disgrace what Malcolm McLaren did to those kids. When Never Mind the Bollocks came out, I actually wrote a letter to the Age arguing how great it was and what bullshit the stuff was that the Age was writing about them. It was never published, of course.

The first punk gig I actually went to was Blondie at Great Keppel Island in December 1977. They played three nights there. I thought it was only two, but Russ assures me it was three. Rusty had won tickets on 3XY and asked me to go up with him, so we got to dance right under Deborah Harry's nose and talk to the band as there was only five of us really into them, Russ and me, two guys from Sydney, Mick and Jay – who were huge Radio Birdman fans – and a guy from Rockhampton who had come over to watch them. The first local punk gig I saw was News at Monash Uni on 30 March 1978 at an anti-Fraser demonstration at which they were performing. I can remember wearing an old pair of thick framed sunglasses and I had made up a yellow T-shirt on which I had painted band names and stuff and wore over my old high school jumper. It looked ridiculous and I'm actually embarrassed by the photos I still have of that get up. I can't remember a thing about that gig, but I remember tripping over a chain fence because it was dusk, and I had my sunglasses on and didn't see it. Soon after that Bernhardt's started up in the city. I've since learned that it was the famous Thumpin' Tum venue of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was located in Little Latrobe Street between Elizabeth and Swanston Street. Upstairs was a gay club and Bruce Milne, I think, was running punk gigs in the basement. I don't think you could even buy a drink there, you had to load up before you went in not that that worried me as I didn't drink then. So, News played there quite a few times and Young Charlatans, the Fiction, and the Proles, too, and probably others I can't remember. I distinctly remember one night after a News gig, as we were all milling about the street afterward, this tall guy with black Nick Cave hair who I have always taken to be Nic Chancellor from the Zorros, then yet to be formed, yelling out,

“Who wants to start a fucking band? I’m serious. Who wants to start a fucking band?” I’ve read stuff by Nic about the start of the Zorros and he doesn’t mention this so maybe it never got off the ground or it wasn’t him but anyway a couple of guys went up to whoever it was and I remember at the time wanting to put my hand up but I was just too conservative and self-conscious to do it, worried by what my mates might think. I don’t regret not doing it but I do wonder what might have been had I had the confidence to say “Yeah, fuck it. Let’s do it.” And bugger me dead, about a month later Russ cut off his hair and donned a pair of leather pants and started a band with his cousin and his high school mates and the young brother of his sister’s best friend.

Bernhardt’s only lasted about three months, but I still hold on to that as a really special phase. These bands were all my age, so I identified with them, but they were flying by the seat of their pants and they just had a great energy and brought something electric to the table that just wasn’t being projected by the Premier Artist bands at the pubs. There’s an album of English punk called Live at the Roxy recorded between January and April 1977 and if you listen to that you hear the same energy and buzz that was happening in the basement at Bernhardt’s. After that we gravitated to the Seaview Hotel and saw heaps of bands out there and a lot of the Boys Next Door and La Femme who had pretty regular gigs there. I really wish I could remember something of all the bands I saw but I just can’t. I distinctly remember News, Young Charlatans, La Femme, the Boys, Jab (you had to love Bohdan’s fire breathing act which failed and succeeded by various degrees), Z-Cars, Zorros, Olympic Sideburns (later, I think), Chosen Few, International Exiles, Hitmen, and Flowers but I’d be lying if I said I could remember anything of the other bands even though I saw a heap of them.

The other thing was that at that stage, mid 78 it was still a very small scene. I actually remember counting the crowd at Bernhardt’s one night because I thought there were a few more in the joint than was usual and it was over twenty but under thirty so that’s not a lot although it was a small space. And if you think about that, if you had a crowd of twenty for two bands, ten of that would have been the entourage of each band which left ten regular punters! We went to a gig out at Bombay Rock in June 78, it was the first gig I’d gone to after rupturing my kidney playing football, and the Negatives, Jab, and the Angels were playing in the corner of the front lounge off the carpet. There was seriously no more than about six of us at that gig. I’ve still got the grainy shitty pictures of the Angels I took that night. Twelve months later the Angels were fucking huge. I also remember, I think it was a mid-week gig at the Seaview, watching the Chosen Few upstairs and there was only a smattering of punters. We could have all swung dead cats around and around and not hit each other. So, it was small, but it began to build. Probably the Ballroom was getting about a hundred to two band gigs on the main weekend nights but not early in the week and their New Year gigs always pulled a few hundred punters because they’d have about four or five bands.

I probably started to see fewer gigs in 1979. I had a girlfriend who wasn’t really into punk although I did take her to the Champion Hotel one night to see the Z-Cars first gig with the Fiction because she knew Russ having gone to the same school and was in the same form as his sister. That gig was pretty cringeworthy. Z Cars really could only just play their instruments. I remember somebody kept yelling out “Tune your guitar” because it was sounding pretty tinny but I’m not sure the guitarist even knew how to. And the songs were pretty basic. No Brains. One Man Army. I think I can still remember the opening lines to that one. I’m a one-man army and I wanna destroy/ Get in my way, you’ll leave me no choice or something like that. So, they weren’t one of the great bands in the scene but they did get better and in the spirit of the day they had the balls to get up and have a crack so hats off to Rusty and co because I didn’t have the balls to step forward when I had the chance. And they did produce a single which has just actually been re-released by some company in Canada 40 years on. Go figure. I also remember seeing one of International Exiles first gigs out at the

Champion. And again, Elaine didn't have a great voice, but she had the guts to get up and do it and she was one of the few women in the bands at that time. So that was pretty courageous of her. News had a female bass player, Joy Relentless, I believe, and I remember her having to play sitting down one night because she had broken her leg or busted her leg up somehow. But as far as women in the scene at that time that was about it, I think.

Then in June I went overseas for four months and in the last two days in London before I came home, I got to the Marquee in London for two nights in a row and saw the Pretenders supported by a band I can't recall and the Adverts and 999 on the other night. And that was an entirely different beast to the scene out here. For a start, the band supporting the Pretenders had to play through a barrage of spit. Fair dinkum there was just this shower of white pouring onto the stage and this heaving pit of pogoing kids ten deep from the stage. But as soon as the Pretenders took the stage not a droplet of spit. Nothing. Complete respect. It must have just been some bizarre rite of passage that the other band had to endure. I was twenty-one at that time and felt like I was a grandfather. I was the oldest person there. These kids were all about fourteen and I'm sure they were drinking. I remember the drummer from the support band for the Pretenders getting hit in the head by a glass that was thrown and playing on with blood trickling down his face. I'm not sure what the Marquee's policy was re admission and drinking. After the gig I was surrounded by these punk kids hitting me up for change so they could catch the Tube back home. "Ere Guv. Got any change?" And these kids were really dressed up in punk gear. One kid had a picture of Sid Vicious shaved and died in the back of his head. The Melbourne scene had none of that. As I said, I'd made up a punk T-Shirt and at one stage I wore an old grey short sleeve school shirt with an Australian flag stitched to the left shoulder but mostly you just wore ordinary clothes, the same you wore to college with maybe a few punk badges. So, England definitely had this real working-class teen thing going on whereas I've always felt the Melbourne scene was made up mostly of middle-class arts and humanities students but maybe that was just the crew I was running with. People probably came from a variety of backgrounds but in England there certainly was a class factor at work.

The other thing worth mentioning is that none of us referred to ourselves as punks. Other people might call you that because you were associated with the scene, but we never went around calling ourselves punks. One of the frustrating things for me was the lack of albums by the local bands. La Femme and the Boys both ended up with an album, but I can't remember too many others. Some of the bands were doing DIY singles, of course, and that was great but none of them had albums. If they had been in England, they would all have had one because punk got commercialised really quickly over there and record companies were falling over themselves to sign up bands. But the scene was just too small here to be economically viable. The release of Lethal Weapons, even though I know there has been a lot of bad stuff said about that album and the supposed exploitative nature of it, was really important to me because at last I had something local I could listen to.

I started to drift away from the scene in 1980. Rusty was getting more involved in the Z Cars and was becoming a bit wayward but that's his story to tell so I was becoming less connected with him. I met my wife that year too, actually I had met her at Christmas 1979, but our first date was at the Ballroom to see Flowers. 18 April it was and soon after I took her to a Z Cars/Zorros gig at the Exford Hotel to meet Rusty and another mate John. Thereafter I became more involved in my wife's circle of friends though I still had an interest in the punk scene, but it was from afar and I missed the whole Melbourne scene when it sort of exploded in the early 80s. My last hurrah was the Ramones gig at La Trobe Uni in July of that year but what a gig to end my punk journey on.