

## THE CHAMPION HOTEL

I first came in contact with the Little Bands in January 1980. Me, Terry and Paul were at the Champion to see the Primitive Calculators. After they'd played we were talking to Stuart about how frustrated we were playing music in a lounge room in Dandenong and having no connection whatsoever with the place we were living. He told us there was a Little Bands night coming up and that we should put our names down to play. In hindsight it seems that the Champion gig of the 3rd of February was the first time that the Little Bands threw the doors open and invited anyone to get up and make a racket.

I'm going to backtrack for a moment and talk a bit about where we came from. Contrary to the commonly held view, punk in Melbourne didn't originate from the working class, most participants were middle class. Now in a supposedly classless society like Australia that shouldn't matter but it did. It mattered a lot but I didn't realise it till long after the dust had settled. More on this later.

Ok, so there's six of us in four in Dandenong. For some unknown reason we're into Dada and falling over in public. Paul can play guitar, Phil can play drums but the rest of us, forget it. Myself and Terry weren't even interested in learning conventional musical skills. It didn't matter, we'd get together in Phil's bungalow, make a big racket, tape it, pretend to be rock stars and take the piss out of each other. We were having fun, producing something original and knowing for certain that one day we'd be world famous. So what, a lot of suburban kids could say the same thing. How does it relate to the Little Bands? In my opinion the Little Band's best moments were when people made noises (tuneful or otherwise) to an audience who were willing to accept mistakes as long as the sensation was communicated. I might normally use the word emotion but it wasn't just emotion, there was a lot of thought behind the noise. I wonder if irony can be classed as an emotion? Our whole approach seemed to be one long rehearsal for what we eventually found at the Champion.

I played guitar for six years before I made an effort to learn chords. It was a conscious decision. I felt I didn't need to know chords to express what I was after. Terry was of the same mind. We'd only really ever played one gig. That was at the Lantern in Burwood. It was a hippy coffee shop I suppose. All I know is that three obnoxious teenagers, with pots and pans borrowed from the establishment's kitchen, cleared the room in about ten minutes. What's more we were proud of ourselves for doing it. So when we saw the Primitive Calculators we knew we were in the right place.

On February the third we arrived at the Champion pretty early and unloaded what little gear we had. Stuart organised the running order and the room filled up pretty quickly. The Person's Brothers kicked things off. Country and Western noise, probably the first time anything like it had been presented to a Melbourne audience. We loved it. It also made sense because me and Terry had done a song in a similar style a month or so earlier. We didn't care who else liked it. It was glorious. No one could do the acid rasp quite like Stuart. Suzi Wang thought otherwise, in her review which appeared in *Tagg*

she describes them as, '*Trash country noise, nuisance value only.*' What did she know, she called us The Hope and Glory Band when we were the Band Of Hope And Glory. A thing to note about the Little Bands was that there were a lot of jokes happening that some people just didn't get.

We were next. For some reason I was wearing beige clothes. The sort of thing you'd wear if you worked in the arse end of the public service. Most people were dressed in the 'no fashion fashion'; dark op-shop style, we all wore it sooner or later. I wanted to look as suburban as possible, just checking to see if it made a difference.

The following excerpt was written in my diary the night after the gig. For the sake of authenticity here it is. "*Last night we played our first public appearance. It was all part of the first little band's night at the Champion Hotel. We had nothing rehearsed and we had to go on second. There were ten bands in all.*

*We had ten to fifteen minutes. After some stuffing around (Paul was drunk because he had to sing and Terry was slightly pissed. We started with 'I Suffer For My Art' . Terry got the rhythm wrong. Paul forgot the lyrics and none of us could hear ourselves. So basically we made a racket.*

*Second song - the drum machine wouldn't work. Paul's amp kept going on - off - on - off. Terry was playing the spoon and frying pan into the mike. I just kept on laughing and playing something I thought was a bit demented but I couldn't hear. ... God knows what we sounded like and we must've given a very anarchic impression. Terry's chair fell off stage and he had no guitar strap. I kept on laughing and yelling to Stuart that I couldn't hear a fucking thing. Paul was trying to fix his amp. All of a sudden Terry dropped the pan and walked off. Paul followed suit. The audience actually clapped us. And I don't know what to make of this but Stuart actually said we were the best (there were at least five bands who could play their instruments and had stuff arranged and rehearsed)."*

That pretty much sums it up.

Next up were The Orotan Bags (great name). I don't remember too much of their set I was probably still laughing too much to take anything in. On the whole I wasn't a fan. They had a serious drum machine and synthesiser sound and their songs were pretty structured. I wasn't the best person to ask. All I was after was something loud and harsh or funny and fiendish. They became Little Bands' regulars and were well supported.

Then the Clue with their epic Weekend In Warsaw. What the hell were they doing here? Their sound was slick. Seventies pomposity meets eighties Eastern European pseudo gloom. It was a song often requested on Alan Bamford's show. I must admit I wasn't sorry that they never returned.

These nights often had purely instrumental performances. That's what you get when you ask for short sets and minimal rehearsal. I don't know how much the Soporifics rehearsed. The recording sounds pleasant enough. All I remember was that Greg Perano (Hunters and Collectors, Deadly Hume and believe it or not The Kylie Minogue Band)

not The Kylie Minogue Band) was involved. Suzi Wang described it as '*sparse scratching of a repetitive type*'. Hmm, not bad.

There were many distinctive features about Little Bands' nights. Not least of these was the chaos of so many changeovers. There were bodies and bits of instruments everywhere. You'd want to run over and tell someone how much their set excited you but you might be on next or you might miss the next act. There was a lot of booze flowing, a lot of excited talk of future projects and (especially at later gigs) heated arguments about god knows what. One good thing though, things never got so bad as to end in violence.

Ok on with the show.

The Swinging Hoys were rough, raw and pretty damn exciting. One of my all time favourite Little Bands' songs is I Got Brains. Tom Hoy screaming out lyrics like;  
*I wanna be an animal but I got brains.*  
*I got brains that make me fall asleep*  
*I got brains that make me shout and scream*  
*I got brains that make me lose my hair*  
*I got brains that make me drag my feet*

Tom was one of the few people who was around for the entire duration of Little bands and he kept bobbing up with all sorts of weird covers. This set contained a sputtering and spat out version of Cherokee Nation. As far as family bands went the Hoys were never going to challenge the Osmonds. In fact they were probably everything the Osmonds weren't.

All girl bands were thin on the ground in those days. Women playing rock music in Australia was still frowned upon unless their was a good deal of tits and arse. Thrush And The Cunts obviously didn't give a shit and neither did the audience. If that's not a name that's saying 'hey guys stick it where it fits' I don't know what is. They were definitely in the style of the original Little Bands. Solid rythmic bass (always a simple riff) with scratchy guitar that got nice and noisy every now and then and a singer with not much technique but an in your face attitude. Diseases was a nasty list of horrible things that happen to our bodies. There were people who were shocked. The bottom line is that it was damned funny. I was over the moon hearing stuff like this in a Melbourne venue. Then came Stand By Your Guns ( soon to be Junk Logic) and I was over the moon again. All those nasty guitar sounds and why Lee Smith never became a pop star is still a mystery to many of us. Charisma wasn't high on the agenda at these nights but Lee had it. Another thing that made Stand by Your Guns special was Lisa Gerrard's (later of Dead Can Dance) voice. Not many of us could actually sing, we either yelled or spoke the lyrics. Lisa had a strong and unique voice that had a strange warble and great acrobatic ability. It was impossible to understand any of the lyrics except for Junk In Cupboard which became one of their standards.

Considered Town Planning bashed together some instrumentals, the first of which sounded like an Ears song without Sam's vocals. Maybe it's got something to do with Kathy McQuade from the Ears being on Bass. There really does seem to be something missing when you listen to the tape.

Finally the Delicatessans. there were probably a dozen or so people on stage all wearing silly costumes and singing silly songs. A guy called Crusader Rabbit (I think he used this name out in the real world) seemed to be the ringleader. Me and Paul thought it might be fun to join in. He grabbed a trumpet and I grabbed a trombone. We started blasting away and were totally stunned when the Deli's got pissed off with our efforts. I thought 'stuff this for a joke. They're all up here supposedly being anarchic if they want me off they can carry me off.' The short time I'd been involved in Little Bands had already told me that this was a great place for people to unburden themselves. The whole idea of planned mayhem was abhorrent to me. The Deli's ploughed on through such songs as???. They reminded me of a University review crew, "Oh aren't we rebels". To them I was probably just an obnoxious little shit. But even now, almost twenty years after it happened, I still feel my heart was in the right place even if my methods were a little unsound. The gig ended with me standing at the back of the stage on top of an amp blowing like crazy into a trombone. I was obviously on a mission from a slightly loony god.

The reason I've reviewed each band is to try and give some idea of the quantity and diversity of the music/noise on offer. Some of the bands were a revelation to me and even if they were only doing three songs I'd rather see them rather than a host of so called proper bands. The Boys Next Door were big news at the time and quite frankly they bored the shit out of me. I preferred the Clifton Hill mob, at least they were what they professed to be. I was never convinced that Nick Cave was such a bad ass. It was all a bit too contrived and modelled on overseas music. I felt offended by what I saw as fake pain. From what I can gather Nick has a similar opinion of what went on. But at the time I was young and angry and not exactly in the best mental space. Little Bands was in some ways a public therapy for many of us.