

Interview with Mick Harvey – Guitarist in Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party

Basically, the reason I want to talk to you, is because I've spoken to quite a few people who have either really praised the Boys Next Door and the Birthday Party or really slagged you guys off and I think it is only fair that you get to respond to that.

I think that's because we were one of the, obviously, important groups in the early scene that people felt they had to take a stand on one way or the other. I think it was also the thing that we were a bit borderline between whether we had commercial potential or were being something more radical and subversive, and people couldn't work out one from the other and what camp we were in, so they tended to accept us or take exception to us for whatever reason.

Did you feel that there was an element of threat there?

It was very competitive in the early days. There was a lot of competitiveness early on so there was professional jealousy and that's why some people didn't like us. Some of the others just had various reasons, whatever. There is really a lot of very strong opinions that groups have about each other anyway, so it's not that uncommon.

From what I can gather from talking to others, there was a bit of a rift going on...

There was a bit of a divide in the scene.

Tell me, from your point of view, how did you see that divide? I know that there were the Carlton bands...

There was a lot of crossovers. It wasn't really a black and white divide. There was the St. Kilda scene, but they were trying to claim the high ground being more artistically motivated and all that sort of thing and then News were involved and they were, apart from being do it yourself, were so blatantly trying to be commercially successful.

News were trying to be commercial, really?

Absolutely. They were really pretentious. They were playing straight 'four on the floor' new wave, trying to make catchy songs. They went all over town. They sprayed 'News' all over...you probably heard about it. If you're not trying to get attention then you don't do that, you know, and if you're concerned about your art you don't run around blatantly promoting yourself like that all over, and it really was everywhere, graffiti over the whole city so I think a lot of people had a real dilemma with that sort of stuff, because the punk scene threw up that whole thing.

Whether you're trying to maintain your integrity, in a way, into people discovering reasons for making art or music and the whole scene attracted all sorts of artists and film makers all around it because of the nature and feel of what was going on. It was exciting and people were sticking their necks out doing something different and not really concerned with commercial considerations. So, with that came a lot of attitude from people about whether you were doing the right thing. Are you on the right path? It's all kind of boring. The reason we stayed out of it for the most part was because we were trying to work out what we were doing. We didn't really have that clear an idea. We experimented with a lot of different things trying to work out where to take what we wanted to do. Some groups pop out fully formed and make their classic albums straight away because there was some concept of going straight in and do it and others bobble along and find what they want to do...We weren't starting as a punk group either. We came on the scene; we were already playing as a

band at school and a lot of our influences or the things we were using or cover versions we were playing were connected with some punk music. If we had formed the band because we saw the Sex Pistols on television, we may have had a very different approach or a more black and white idea of what we were doing but we'd come through a whole process already which we could fall back on those influences. People chucked a lot of things out when they started in '77 but we still knew that we'd been playing this stuff and it was all part of our influences.

I'm really interested in this whole thing; I'm just getting back to the division. I saw that you did that interview on Alternative Animals, and you mentioned that Chane Chane smacked you out.

Yeah, because he was convinced that I was sending them up. Actually, I was just drunk and having a good time.

People have said to me, and he's obviously one of them, that he jumped off the stage one night and punched Nick Cave, and all these other people go round saying "I punched Nick Cave at a party one night or the Boys Next Door got beaten up at parties", and I want to know did this really happen?

The Boys Next Door didn't used to get beaten up at parties but Nick got in a few fights at times, he was quite a good fighter actually, he's got long arms with big floppy hands on the end and he and Tracey went through a bit of a phase of liking getting into fights. I've heard a lot of people have pretty good memories of things that might have happened with Nick these days, just seem to place Nick into stories where he never was because he was five years older. It gets a bit boring. We didn't used to get beaten up at parties, that wasn't an aspect of what was going on.

This whole thing between people like Chane referring to themselves as 'real punks' and the Boys Next Door as 'arty farty'...

Oh, come on, come on. Chane's the 'real punk?' This is something you could argue until the cows come home about what punk was really about. Some people, they call on the working-class card and go "it's about really fast loud music and being working class or egalitarian." You could keep playing the same repetitive music round and round ad nauseum. For me that wasn't what punk was about. Chane Chane (**La Femme**) had a very pedestrian rock band, and they fell into a side area where they were in the punk scene, but they were just like a rock band. They were playing Cars songs, you know? Come on, give me a break. They're punk? They weren't even very punk in reality... For me, the whole thing that exploded there was about people having artistic freedom.

In England it got commercialised very quickly but the great thing about the Melbourne scene was that it opened up the opportunity for people to go into all sorts of areas and play all sorts of different types of music and actually have a platform for that. As soon as you narrow down what it could be you were limiting, you were destroying the whole idea. It was about artistic freedom. It was about going back to being shit at playing your instrument but knowing what you wanted to do and making something interesting. It was about the whole spirit of rock and roll in a way. Making something exciting and as soon as someone goes "Oh, we were the real punks" they, to me, don't know what they're talking about. They're completely missing the point of the whole movement.

How do you feel about constantly being referred to by people as the arty farty wankers and private school boys?

The private school one always comes from the Primitive Calculators, they're always the ones that waffle on about and hate us because we went to private school. So, fucking what. What's that got to do with anything and they were a really good band and yet make fools of themselves every time they say that. It's an absolute nonsense and completely irrelevant to anything we were doing and to discount us. They really hated the idea that we went to private school and really have no idea about the background of any of us. That's just out and out prejudicial nonsense. Really stupid and they couldn't see the wood for the trees.

I remember the singer out of Primitive Calculators being in London when we played with Lydia Lunch. She kinda did this spot before us. He was heard to mutter something about "After watching Lydia Lunch do that, I can't hang around and watch a rock band go through its paces" and that was the **Birthday Party** at our peak, and he clearly couldn't see what we were doing because of his prejudice. He couldn't see what we were actually doing because Lydia Lunch could see what we were doing, she just thought we were the best fucking thing she had seen but he...it's just a waste. It's a waste of opportunity and having an open mind. The way it divided the scene and that was the shame of it and for us, I think we just had to avoid it as much as possible because in a way we were in a privileged position because we were one of the more popular groups in the scene so we could afford to ignore that sort of stuff. We had a pretty small following when you look back on it actually and the scene was kind of small.

It was very vibrant but it was kind of small in the late 1970s still but there was a lot of professional jealousy...I think they bitch a lot more about us now than they did then because now they're really pissed off because we've gone on to be successful and got bigger for 25 years so they've had to live with seeing that going on. They were probably pissed off in the first place, but they're even more pissed off about it now and all it is, is us sticking by our own music and doing our own thing and persisting. If they can't cope with that, that's their fucking problem. Just because they couldn't cut it. It's not my fucking fault and there were a lot of really good bands in Melbourne. I really appreciated a lot of them even if I didn't necessarily like their music all the time too. I mean one thing that was really particular about the scene was just about all the bands were different from one another. There wasn't like half a dozen bands that were copying the Clash or copying each other. There was just some incredible diversity, and to me it was really healthy and for people to be bitching about it. Just get on with doing what you were doing.

To be perfectly honest I probably didn't like 90 per cent of the groups on the scene and I wouldn't listen to them, but I wouldn't go around putting shit on them and bitching about them all. What's the point? It's just a waste of time. I appreciate the scene was really diverse and all the different things that were in there gave it energy and that helped us too and I appreciate that. I do think this bitching about us was nowhere near that bad at the time. There was a couple of different camps, but they couldn't possibly have known that we were going to go on and have such longevity. They weren't that bothered about us.

When Chane jumped off stage and hit you...

It was actually on the way backstage.

Did you confront him about that? What was it all about?

He just thought I was sending them up or being rude to them by making fun of them, being at the front of the stage.

And what was your response to that?

Ah, if you're gonna be sensitive like that, you're already hung up about what people thought about you.

He told me that you guys, at that point of time, did a residency at the Ballroom and that you swapped between headlining and supporting. Is that right?

Yeah, probably. We weren't that popular. There were probably only a couple of hundred people at those nights but that's probably right. I mean he'd remember the details like that more than me. I've done 1000 gigs since then. Some people are still focussed on that, obsessed about that period and they remember details like that. A lot of that has become quite fuzzy. I know, apart from Primitive Calculators and Ollie Olsen's bands, there wasn't even crossover there. We were friendly with John Murphy and a lot of the people that were connected with the Little Bands; Marcus Bergner, Marie Hoy. We were friendly with those people.

I spoke to Ron Rude last night.

Oh, well he was a big fan of ours. Is he still? Or does he hate us now? I keep coming back to it was a really healthy scene, a milieu for bands to find their own feet. One of the things that distinguished Boys Next Door was late '77, we were probably at our punkiest. We were very impressionable. We were 18 or something, barely allowed to be in the pubs we were playing in, so all this stuff is going on and you're having your influences and trying to work out what you'll do. It was very exciting but nonetheless you were being heavily influenced by stuff that was around and I think probably out of that you'd play that stuff for a couple of months and then go "Oh, I'm sick of that" so you'd be over-influenced by and drawing on all sorts of sources, and groups you were hearing from America and England, groups you were hearing in Melbourne. There were really good things going on.

People were in quite original bands and I just think Nick and the band took a while to find our own thing and we had to go through all those processes, trying out different things with our music and if you looked at that through 1978, a lot of people would have thought we were just an aimless kind of group that didn't know what we were doing. Perhaps they could have, that would have a more accurate phase of what we were doing. We were aimless and we didn't know what we were doing or what we were trying to do. We were just trying to work it out while we were playing. We were on stage working it out and it took us a little while to get there and we didn't really get there until 1980 and then it suddenly came into focus, we found our own sound. We found our own thing and were able to move and draw on all the things we'd done before and put them into what was really our thing and then the next three years we were really fantastically creative, really exciting and inspiring and people who couldn't see it, I can't really be worried about those people. I've got better things to be doing.

Would you be interested in commenting, just briefly, on, if drugs were a big part of that?

It came a big part of it; it wasn't in the beginning but by '79 there was a lot of heroin around. Mostly heroin. I don't think there was any coke or even much speed. People didn't smoke pot much that I was aware of. Most people didn't smoke pot, smack kind of came into it, a lot of heavy drinking...I can't really comment on it. I think everybody was afflicted by it to a lesser or greater degree. I mean I

never really used it, I should say. Our band had a big reputation as one of the bands but, in fact, it was only Nick and Rowland who were using it and later on I think Tracey got a bit caught up with it too by '83 or after a while. I don't think he was using at first. So, it was only two of the band members actually, the rest of us weren't using.

And was that fine?

I don't think it's ever fine with heroin around. It's a drag for people who weren't on it.

But you made it work somehow for the band to stay together...

It's hard to say. Lots of bands in Melbourne would have had a member or a couple of members using so we weren't that different in a way. It was probably more visible with Rowland and Nick because they were prominent members of the group or something. Nick wasn't ashamed to write things pointedly or metaphorically in his lyrics about it somewhere, so in that way he would wave a flag when other people who just used wrote about their girlfriends in the park somewhere, so I don't know that we were that different from other bands around town to be honest.

I heard that you had a job in the tax department very briefly.

Oh, 1976.

Did you see yourself as a punk band though?

Not particularly, no.

You were classified and put into that category.

Well, everybody was, there were a lot of bands that were more arty farty than us. I mean Primitive Calculators were just more arty than us. I mean I'm not going to make criticism of Primitive Calculators because I really liked them so it's not really a criticism. I'm just saying they were an arty band. They were an arty, electronic, really noisy, loud band but they were very arty in a New York style or something. Maybe if they'd have been really popular, and didn't have a decent song that they'd written, just had a conceptual idea, and they were still going 27 years later and sold X million, I'd be pissed off with them. I don't know. I doubt it though somehow. I don't think I ever got caught up in that jealousy stuff because I could see that it was counterproductive, and I tried to stay out of it. We had our own agenda, and we were just trying to figure what to do as a band. If Primitive Calculators had spent a bit more time figuring out what they could have done and continued doing as a band they might still be around.

Does it perplex you that people are really bitchy and back stabby?

No, we're liked in our hometown. We don't give a damn. It's their problem. If they've got their own hang ups about it, it's not something I need to deal with. It's their problem. It's a shame and waste of their energy and resources probably. It would be better to do something constructive about their position and I think it's a shame too because it reflects badly on a scene that was really positive, and I think you should concentrate on that and by '81 it was even better. When we had gone to London, we came back in the summer and saw all these bands playing around town. It was so fantastically vibrant.

The hard-core punk scene had just kicked in...

Oh, the scene was a lot bigger, there was more people around and there were a lot of interesting bands, some of which didn't even record, and they were great. It was much more interesting than the scene in London, much better. The scene was really fantastic, vibrant and people didn't appreciate it for what it was, appreciate it rather than being bitchy about it. A lot of people were bitchy about the **Models** too because they really were a band of the scene much more than we were.

They were another borderline band, going to crossover and sell out and a lot of people hated them at the time because that was kind of obvious that they were going to do that, and nobody talks about that because they're not around anymore. They were resented more at the time than we were. They were clearly going to become a pop group. **Teenage Radio Stars** were like an infiltration of the real scene by a bunch of dressed up punks pretending to be punks who were actually a pop band who were signed and pushed by the record company. They were actually a manufactured punk band, and the record company fired their rhythm section and that kind of stuff. To me, that was really weird because that was outside of what was going on in the scene or with the people who were with the local groups. It was this infiltrator. What's that beast? It's kinda like an industry beast, a parasite coming into our thing.

That was starting to happen I suppose...

Well, it didn't really work you see.

Things started to happen then, and everybody got ripped off?

I don't know if people got ripped off particularly.

Lethal Weapons?

Oh, everybody thinks they got ripped off if the record only sold three copies anyway. Who ripped them off? I don't know if I ever received much money from Lethal Weapons. I think a lot of people had a weird idea that because they've got something in print the record company should give them 10,000 dollars or something. It doesn't work like that. That was also unrealistic. These people you've been interviewing, they're very bitter and twisted you know. You need to certainly talk to some people who are actually positive about the scene. What's their problem? Have you talked to **Philip Brophy**?

Not yet.

Philip Brophy was someone who felt themselves very much out of the scene and that nobody liked them but, in fact, they were really arty farty, much more than us, and was a real conceptual art band but actually everyone kind of liked them in reality and he spent decades thinking nobody liked him.

That's bad.

Not really. He's fantastic. I really like him. Very funny. He's got a real punk ethic. He does what he wants to do. He does work on films and there's a fantastic Forum interview with him and he just started talking about film makers, and they don't know what they want and ignore all their advice and make the music you need to, and I'm a composer and I know what you need and that was about it. It was fantastic. Not a very practical position to take but admirable. Really kind of old school. I'm going to do what I want and that was the basis of the scene anyway. That was what was there from late '77 to '78. I'm going to do what I want to.

That was the punk ethos really.

Exactly. From which standpoint, anyone criticising the **Boys Next Door** can get fucked. We were doing what we wanted to do. Fuck off. Can anyone call what we have done for 30 years overtly commercial? Not really. What have we done that would be considered to be...like we've had one hit and that was because Kylie Minogue sang on it, not for any other fucking reason. That's the weirdest dark little evil song imaginable. We're just not a commercial band and we never actually were.

But you're a popular band.

Because we've worked really fucking hard, done our own things

And you're famous in your own right.

Well, in Victoria. A lot more of those bands could have been in a similar position if they just persisted and kept finding things that they really wanted to do.

You know I think there is always going to be a standout group in any scene whether it's the punk scene or the early punk scene or later, there's always going to be one or two bands...

There were other bands, there was the **Saints** from Brisbane. A lot of people would rate **Radio Birdman** in Sydney, but Birdman were obviously the scene in Sydney and anybody from outside of their orbit, they were just hated. So American and so specific about what it was meant to be. Stooges, Detroit, MC5, were all on deck but it wasn't free, it wasn't kind of open and exciting and full of possibilities. It was a different sort of thing that went on, entirely. Good on us. We were one of the arty farty bands. I think a lot that we brought eventually, when we focussed our vision in '80, '81 and found our direction, was we were able to mix what we'd learnt listening to all those weirder sorts of music that might be called arty and meshed them with real aggression and venom of the punk thing because we had all of those resources and it became something really outside of anything as far as I was concerned.

The Birthday Party stuff... People consider us arty and it's true. We were from the artier kind of background. I even heard some old fart on Triple R some months ago getting people to call in and say what was overrated and some guy said, "Ah, Nick Cave is overrated" and some people can think that and he said, "Yeah, I mean, Nick Cave that's not rock and roll" and I say, "No, it is fucking rock and roll". Does that mean it's overrated? We've always been a mixture of influences, always been against genre music, specific limited focus genre music, we play blues or we play jazz or the music starts sounding like that and using a formula of a genre which is just so boring and we've always been influenced by European music, by American folk music and I think that's a really important part of whatever we do. Our music's a hybrid of all sorts of influences and it's kind of what we do. You can either like that or not.

I like it.

And we're always very passionate of what we do, and you can or cannot like it. I've been compiling video for the Nick Cave exhibition the Art Centre is doing. There's one interview with Nick where he talks about, at one stage, I don't know what the question would have been, but he says, "Look, what I'm trying to do is push to the extremes of certain things. What we're doing is not easy and easily palatable and I know I'm not going to convince everybody". If you're pushing the boat out and doing something really different and radical, you're simply not going to convince everybody because what you're doing is taking in a whole lot of forms and doing things that aren't exactly recognisable styles and things as well, so it's hard for people to understand the language you are using musically

because you're not using easily recognisable forms all the time and so, as Nick said in this interview, "I know I'm not going to convince everybody but I have to keep doing it with as much self-belief as I can".

Well, it's worked.

I can also say that bands like the Models liked us. They didn't have any issues with us, so they were unconcerned. I think you do sense that competition on some level, jostling around or whatever, but I don't think we were ever overtly competitive because we were trying to find our own ground. We were always trying to find our own ground so whether we were successful early is another issue.

Your music was completely different to theirs so the other thing...

Well, yeah. It's like that saying, "Don't try to be the best at what you do, be the only one who does what you do". I think that's always been our ethic and Nick's, certainly that's his approach and Rowland don't make things that sound like anybody else really. It's certainly my thing. I'm not really interested in being in line with the way other people do anything. With my film music I'm not interested in doing it the normal way...but a lot of the bands really liked us. The Ears.

Yeah, I spoke to Sam Sejavka.

Well, Sam and Nick have got a bit of a bad history, but he was always a big fan. The Models started off a bit competitive, they were fine about us. **JAB** liked us too actually. We just thought they were hilariously bad, you know, I mean you didn't feel any animosity towards them. They were just this kind of weird; they were very funny sometimes. The great thing was they took themselves so seriously, they really did. They were so deadly earnest, but they were just so funny. Some of their songs were so kind of crappy it's just brilliant in hindsight in a really good way.