

Interview with Paul Stewart – Lead singer in Painters and Dockers

Did you consider Painters and Dockers a punk band or more of a rock band with punk attitude?

I suppose at the time, we wanted to be the complete opposite to Nick Cave, you know. A lot of private school kids coming into the Ballroom taking their mum and dad's depression pills and acting like they had it hard, and I loved Nick Cave, but everybody wanted to be him. There were so many bands that had singers that looked like him and that were trying to be them and we just wanted to be the exact opposite, so we just set out to offend and piss people off and if that's punk, I don't know.

But my thing is I always say the greatest punks at the Ballroom weren't the crew with the Mohawks and black leather jackets, which became a uniform in the end, but it was the guy in the wedding dress. That was the one I went "I love this guy", you know, like really pushing the boundaries there.

So, even though punk is a sub-culture that is anti-establishment, individuals end up being a clone of each other?

Well, a lot of it seemed to head that way I thought.

But that's any subculture, isn't it?

Absolutely, but with punk what I sort of took on was the anarchy aspect, and using the music to change things and that was what we've always done in the Dockers, I reckon. I'd like to think we had.

What year did the Dockers form?

In 1983, and it's funny because we're supporting the Cosmic Psychos on Saturday night ...we formed in 1983 to do a one-off benefit to support the Cosmic Psychos for one night only in Port Melbourne and we called ourselves the **Painters and Dockers** because it was one of their pubs, the Union. Well, you see in Melbourne the Mafia of the 1980s, that really hardcore nasty crew were the Painters and Dockers.

Yeah, I heard about some of the shootings.

They were like the 'Underbelly' of their day, so being absolute shit-stirrers, we decided to call ourselves that because it was going to be for one night, supporting the Cosmic Psychos.

And how did that go down with the actual Painters and Dockers?

What happened, and I was not particularly into music before that, but what happened to me was I went to RMIT, one of my first girlfriends had bright blue hair and I went out with her because of her hair and she started taking me round to see bands like the Models and we'd go to the **Ballroom** and see bands like **Dresden War Crimes** and **Grong Grong** and **Depression**.

So, okay we were going to do this one-off gig supporting the Cosmic Psychos and while the Dockers were playing, and this is a true story, the neighbour jumped the fence with an axe because he had mental health problems, and he hated the music so much, he started chopping up the mixing desk, right, and all these middle class kids were there, freaked out, someone rang the police and the police arrived.

Now, at the Painters and Dockers pub, the one rule the Painters and Dockers had was 'no police on the premises' because they were all dealing drugs. So, the cops arrived, and the real Dockers said

“No, no, you’re not coming in.” The police said, “Oh yes we are”. So, they started an all-in brawl. The PA fell over. The kids were all screaming, collapsing and I’m on the stage with this mike thinking “this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I found out what I fucking want to do. This is it.”

Actually, to tell you the truth, the next two or three pubs we were meant to play cancelled us because we were this notorious fucking band that caused riots, but we were the biggest soft cock boys you could meet in your life.

What a great story.

And now it’s like a thousand gigs and seven albums later and we’re supporting the Cosmic Psychos on Saturday night.

So, calling yourselves the Painters and Dockers and that happening that night, but how did the Painters and Dockers respond to your band being called Painters and Dockers? Was it okay?

It’s funny. People ask me “what’s the scariest gig you’ve done?” I say it wasn’t supporting Midnight Oil twice where there was 20,000 people each night or supporting Billy Idol, those big concert tours. They were easy. The night the head of the Painters and Dockers, Bob Dix, he was in Pentridge at the time on murder charges and he sent his wife to the gig, so this little woman comes in surrounded by two of the biggest fucking blokes you’ve ever seen, like hardcore sort of wharfies and she came up and said “So you guys have been using our name. I’ve been sent along to watch the show and if we like the show, you can use the name but if I don’t like it you have to stop using the name”.

And we were like “oh, okay”. So, she came and saw the show and we thought “Oh Fuck”. So, we did the usual set and afterwards she came back and said “Ah that was pretty good boys. Actually, there’s a couple of young boys in the union and they love having a band named after the union so you can use the name.” So, they did let us use the name but it was pretty terrifying and in January we’re doing a big gig with the Painters and Dockers Union at Port Melbourne for Australia Day and I had to walk in recently to meet all the guys and these guys are like, they’re working class boys and they don’t fuck around and I’ve walked in, I’m this poofter in this band “Hi guys...” “Oh we love the Dockers”. They loved the infamy we brought to them. Now some of the kids go “Painters and Dockers, what does that mean?” They don’t know the history.

Which is really sad isn’t it? Well, it’s your job to educate them. Look, Port Melbourne is gentrified now and that whole rough as guts working class Painters and Dockers thing doesn’t really exist in Melbourne anymore, so you were there at a really critical time in history.

Because we all lived in the area too. Because houses...we had our house in Bay Street, Port Melbourne for 50 bucks a week and there was about five of us living there, a two-story terrace house and up the road was some other Dockers in another two-storey terrace house.

So how did the band form? How did you guys meet?

Well, all the other guys in the band used to go and see the Models, a group called the Emus, they were all ex-Melbourne Uni, they used to go to the Ballroom a lot too. Like I said, the girl I was seeing, they were all mates of hers and she introduced me and it came up with one guy one night, “oh, I used to play trumpet in the school band” and I saw him months later at the South Melbourne Market and said, “oh we’re getting this night together to play for the Cosmic Psychos to pay for Billy Walsh’s parking fine, get up and play trumpet on one song. Get up and play trumpet on one song” and I said “Oh, okay”. And from that it ended up with me singing half the songs.

Because there's quite a big brass section in the Painters.

Oh yeah, that was always the idea, and if you say that we're a punk band I suppose we weren't a classic punk band in that we did include brass, which made it a bit more ska and soul. But there was a definite rock element, and the lyrics were quite political like "You're going home in the back of a divvy van", "All men are bastards except me" and "Die Yuppie Die". So lyrically a very punk attitude, very punk, but just maybe not in the aesthetic perhaps? And it's funny because in Melbourne we're not considered punk whereas in Brisbane we're headlining punk events. I've had to debate a priest up there.

Really?

Yeah, because he accused us of being Satanists and a Current Affair in Sydney did a story on us about inventing the pogo and I'm going "Hang on.", like... they're so lazy, news people.

The Painters and Dockers are a sort of Melbourne version of the Rollo band with the brass section, and they were definitely thought of as part of the Brisbane punk scene. I think there is a place in the punk genre for your band. You were also on the same bill with a lot of punk bands and venues. You were part of the core group of bands that were playing at that time.

I suppose what we were lucky enough to do Melynda, is that we broke out of the punk scene. We went to the suburbs and that was the difference between the Dockers and all those other bands.

You played at the suburban beer barns?

The Village Green, the Waltzing Matilda and we were managed by Lobby Loyde who was an old rock peer.

So, Lobby Loyde who took over Richmond Recorders. You guys went in and did your first album with him?

We did 'Kiss My Aunt' with him which was the album we were signed to Mushroom for.

So, you were signed to Mushroom? How did all that happen?

Well, it's funny, our big commercial hit that we had was 'Nude School'. Gudinski wanted us to do a clip on a yacht with models and bikinis and that, so we said "Nah, we're gonna do it at a pig farm, naked", so it's like "What?" We went out of our way to give him the opposite of what he wanted. Subsequently we didn't do too good with them.

Why did he sign you guys up?

It gets even weirder than that. Bryan Adams. 'Summer of 69', have you heard of that guy, you know him? He made so much money that he formed an international record company in Canada and one of the first bands he signed was the Painters and Dockers from Australia and we went over to play this tour of Canada and they're like "Who the fuck are you guys?" And we said, "Well you signed us."

You're kidding? So how did the gigs go down?

Oh, the audiences dug us. We got off the plane in Vancouver and they said "G'day guys it's really nice to meet you. We're waiting for the band." We went, "We're the band". They went, "Who's in charge of the sound?" "Oh well, that's the drummer, he does it mixing it from the..." "Who's doing publicity?" "Oh, well I am." "Who's doing your equipment?" "Well, that's the bass player." They just couldn't believe we were doing it all ourselves.

They were expecting a thirty-piece touring party. We were also famous for being the only band that landed in the land of the Maple Leaf without any money. We'd been on this American tour, and we literally got to Canada, and we didn't have any money. We did 28 gigs in 32 days in Canada, but the thing was, I tell people one night we were supporting this well-known ska band in Montreal and there were two thousand people there and the place just thought we were the answer. It was fucking great and the next night, five people at the gig and four of them walked out after first song. That's life on the road in a rock band, you know. I reckon most bands would have that experience where you go from being the answer one night and to the next night "Fuck off".

You wouldn't have been known in Canada. And having your Aussie accents.

Oh, we stood out like a sore tooth.

So, Lobby Loyde managed you, For how long?

He sort of mentored us. He was like our uncle.

When did that all happen?

Well, that sort of happened in the mid-80s to the mid-90s and Lobby wanted to set up as rival to Gudinski, so we had the recording studio there [Which was Richmond Recorders] Yeah, we had a printing plant next door, and we had a shop up the road. Now that's pretty punk, we owned all the means of production but unfortunately, he introduced the human element, and you throw in things like speed addiction and alcoholism, you know, and it doesn't end up so good.

It failed basically.

Well, we were making the records ourselves. They were coming out like pizzas. It was too much. Crazy days but Lobby was this guy who, when we signed to Mushroom, and they were going to give us money, plus I had my daughter at the time. You need money. "Lobby sign the deal so I can get some fucking money" "No. no, no. Until Gudinski gives us...If there's life found on another planet, I want to have the right on that planet to put your music out there. Mushroom don't own...so until Mushroom agree that there's life found on another planet, we get those markets. I'm not signing a thing."

I'm going "Lobby sign the fucking deal. What do you mean life on other planets? I want some milk and bread to take home for the missus. Just sign the fucking deal." Nah. So, look...it all made sense at the time. We were also working with Ball-Bearing from the Hell's Angels who was dealing speed from Richmond and two people died in the toilets and it was all pretty chaotic and that was the punk days but he...Lobby's wife was Debbie Nankervis and her best friend was Dolores San Miguel, and obviously you know about Dolores' book and that...Lobby sort of ran off with the secretary and then she would ring in and he'd say "I'm with the Dockers working" but he wasn't and we sort of got caught up in all the surrounding drama...It had nothing to do with me. I said to them "Don't get together" Lobby had five kids.

So, Lobby wasn't a very good business manager?

I often say, absolutely useless at business but for music he was an enthusiast. He loved music

Did he produce your records as well?

Well, Lobby was actually deaf in one ear, so we put him in charge of live sound, making and producing our records where you need the full capacity. Then we find out he's deaf and put him in charge of the sound. A typical Dockers thing to do. Put the deaf guy in charge of your music.

Were you happy with how the album turned out?

I hate every single Painters and Dockers record that has ever been released. None of them have ever captured what I think we do. Lobby and...they were all into speed, so everyone was speeding all the time. So, if you record something when you're speeding, right, and then you listen back to it the next day when you're all sober it's like "Fuck!"

Fred Negro was telling me that when they went in to do Fruit Loop City that Lobby made him sound like a chipmunk and he had to do it somewhere else because it just sounded terrible.

Yeah, yeah, well that was typical. On 'Kiss my aunt' we did 98 takes to get one drum cymbal right. Then in the end, of course, it works out, "Oh we've run out of time. You've got four minutes to do the main vocal once." The vocals sound shit but yeah, the cymbals sound great but who gives a fuck about the cymbals or the lyrics. So, it's been rambling, stumbling, crazy...

Can you re-record anything or is it too late for that do you reckon?

Oh, look. Mushroom want us to do a best of, who knows.

So, how did the albums sell?

Well, it was funny. The Mushroom one we sold 28,000 copies but were dropped because we didn't sell enough. Nowadays if you sell 2,000 copies of a CD, seriously, you're the Rolling Stones because of downloads and stuff but 28,000, they said "Nuh, that's not enough".

Did you guys get any money out of it?

Nah. I've never made any money from the record side of it but from live you do. In fact, tomorrow night, now that we're everyone's old favourite bloody band again we're getting offered Meredith Music Festival, you know, for really good money, money we've never been offered before...

Like 10,000 grand or something?

Fucking oath. That's exactly what it is, which for us is like yeah!

How many people are in the band at the moment?

Oh well, it depends on what day it is, doesn't it? Like this band played before and they've now got a 14-year-old trumpet player...If you listed everybody who has played in the Dockers there'd be eighty people, have you ever met a punk Jenny Pineapple? Do you know her?

Well, I don't know her personally, but I always remember her playing in your band. Is she still part of it?

Well, she lives in Brisbane now and we're going up to Brisbane tomorrow and she's getting up to do 'Know Your Product', the old Saints song. I often say of Jenny Pineapple, if you want to get rid of the Taliban you just parachute Jenny Pineapple in with a baseball bat and say, "Jen these guys don't treat the ladies so good" and she would sort them out. Within three days the Taliban would go. "Can we come to Australia?" No, she's fearsome, she's great but that has always been the fantastic thing about the Dockers for me that every state we go to there's someone who we'll get up and play with and it's always been encouraged, and it makes it fun too.