

## How did I become a Mod? By Rob Griffiths – Lead singer of Mod band Little Murders

The Melbourne 'Mod Revival', like the Adelaide and Sydney Mod Revival, started up with small groups of enthusiastic fun seeking individuals gathering in inner-city pubs and clubs and starting up bands and DJing '60s/mod music.

### How did I become a Mod?

Everybody's story would be different. Mine began in 1972 with the release of *Ziggy Stardust* by David Bowie. I became a huge fan and bought 'NME' and other UK music papers to collect all the information on him that I could. Many articles referred to his new "mod" haircut after the long tresses of *Hunky Dory* and his "mod" instincts for style and trendsetting. I came from a UK background and bought albums by The Who and The Kinks not having any interest in Australian Music. But through Bowie and his *Pin-Ups* album I became a total sixties nut and sought out albums by Them and Pretty things and even The Easybeats.

Buying The Who records led me to *Quadrophenia*. Not so much the music, which was alright, but not totally what I was into, but the booklet inside really appealed to me. I thumbed through those photos creating my own private world where kids had this style. I started looking out for sixties UK films which fed this vision like *Billy Liar* and *Alfie*. When punk came along it seemed a lot closer to what I wanted from this world than ELO.

I formed bands and wrote songs all with a touch of the sixties, in particular The Who and The Kinks. With the coming of punk in 76/77 I formed a punk band called **The Fiction** and we covered Troggs and Beatles songs as well as our own. But it was when I saw and heard The Jam that I knew where I wanted to be. Firstly, I got The Fiction to wear suits on stage. It didn't last long and the musicians at the time weren't ready to follow this path. We recorded our first single 'Things will be different' and broke up.

The single was released under the name **Little Murders**. We played many gigs around town, but it was a support to **Boys Next Door** (featuring Nick Cave) that I saw the light, as they say. They dressed well, looked great and made me feel like I was in a band of gardeners.

It was my band, and we needed to look good. We began to drape the amplifiers with flags and Carnaby street stickers and dress high sixties. It was easy. The first punks in Melbourne had no shops to buy the fashion we saw coming from London saw many adapted their look from artists like Elvis Costello, Dr. Feelgood and bands like Blondie which could be copied from a visit to the local Op shop.

Late in 79 we started to refer to ourselves as Mods and formed a small band of like-minded individuals eager to discover more. Luckily this was timed with a visit from me to the UK where Mod was in full swing and I came back with a horde of music, fanzines and mod gear including the Union Jacket, 2 tone shoes and various shirts.

Arriving back in the early 80s the scene had grown. Mods were spotted on the street. Scooters were appearing everywhere. The core of this scene knew there were many out there but needed to bring

them together. **Little Murders** had a regular gig at the Market Hotel in Prahran and sick of the support bands that never quite fit with our developing Mod image decided to replace the support with a Mod discotheque with Chris Hunter and Graham O'Leary spinning the discs. Two flyers went out for that gig. One was a very Mod advert for the gig, but the other one was a call for all Mods in Melbourne to come together and show yourselves.

This was the beginning of Melbourne Mod. Friendships were established. The friendship thing was very important. To be a Mod was to be an outsider. You were part of a small cult. You could pick out Mods on the street and walk up and talk to them and they would be your new friend who came to all the Mod happenings. You were part of a cool gang. And an exclusive one where to join, you needed a modicum of taste and a shared interest in music and fashion. The word was out. Now they needed a club. A place to bring everyone together.

Michael Phillips and Chris Hunter started 'The Kommotion'. **The Kommotion** in Richmond was on **Wednesday** nights during the innocent hours then of 7pm-10pm. The Mods were supplied with their own backroom lounge with a small window service bar, ideal for dancing and drinking without going to the front bar all the time. The Mods would dance to closing time to the sounds of early 60s Brit pop gems and the latest mod UK singles they could muster from import record shops such as '**Missing Link**.' **The Kommotion Club** was a small little back room, but as described by a mod at the time it was, "**Nights of pure joy**". Never a live venue, Kommotion was a basic home grown set up, that would play crowd pleasers like The Who, Small faces, The Kinks, The Jam with lots of 60s soul. For a Wednesday night club with limited licensing laws from 7 -10pm, The Mods would get pissed and start stage diving on to the dance floor. Some guys would jump off the pool tables and speakers into the crowd and were always caught by the crowd before hitting the floor.

Even more impressive was the outside courtyard where the Mods would park their new scooters and cool off in the early evening air, smoking, drinking beer and planning the weekend or their latest and greatest places to buy accessories for their new urban lifestyle. The scene was an early focus point for Melbourne Mods and scooter scene.

These were brilliant times for the Nouveau Mod movement of Melbourne. New people were coming into the scene each week. Scooters bought. Deals made. Melbourne Mod grew in numbers to become a tribe. New bands were formed like **5-15**, **The Most** and **Bleu Scooters**.

Graham and Gina Woodhead started a fanzine 'Start', that for its short-lived time span kept the scene together. Scooter runs were organised, and parties organised.

If it was all leading anywhere it was the Mod Invasion of easter '81 when we were introduced to our counterparts across the border. For many of the Melbourne Mods it was all a bit too much. This was like Quadrophenia. The Sydney Mods had genuine leaders such as Don Hosie and were well organized and really living the life. Many Melbournians felt the focus shift from themselves to these invading Mods who seemed to have been raised on a diet of the *Sweeney* and *Minder*. A report on the scene by The Age newspaper had a volume of information on the local scene but all the photos seemed to be of Sydney Mods. So began resentment. Not only to Sydney mods but what they perceived as Ronny

Williams and Michael Phillips who had moved from the Kommotion to the equally successful Batcave in Richmond.

Each Friday night at the **Batcave** the DJ spun 60s greats, soul and '80s mod revival UK hits. The dancing was so intense that at closing time at 1am, the PVC plastic on the ceiling would be dripping with sweat, looking as wet as a real bat cave. **The Batcave** was also a vibrant live venue for local Mod bands.

**Little Murders. 5.15, The Most, the Bleu Scooters.** and other bands like **Psysche 59 & The Triggers** would play there regularly.

So began what was known as the Mod boycott. Michael and Ronny were making money off Mods so let's not go to their venues. After all that they did for the scene, it was a shabby way to treat them. The split saw mods drifting away from the scene because many wouldn't go to the clubs and numbers dropped. A scene like this can't operate without commerce.

They were still great moments. Little Murders staged a mini-invasion of Sydney setting a record crowd at The Sussex before the Sets broke the record a few weeks later. Friendships between the leading lights of both scenes were forged and continue to this day. Many Mods moved into the ska scene.

Ronny and Michael also ran on Thursday nights at The Office Hotel called **THE BLUE BEAT CLUB**. Changing theme, this was an all-SKA night. **The Blue BEAT CLUB** drew crowds of Rude boys/ girls as well as Mods. Playing records of the best of British Ska and Bluebeat with contemporary bands like The Specials, The Beat. Selector and Madness.

**The Blue Beat Club** had live music with local bands like **Strange Tenants, No Nonsense** and other Melbourne Ska bands often beginning their career there. This happening Thursday night spot pulled large crowds that moon stomped all night and drank like fish.

**The Rubber Soul** opened in late 1985 till the early '90s and operated out of The Office Hotel. Another '60s Discotheque with a high emphasis on psychedelic inkblot lighting, strobes and smoke, **The Rubber Soul** played a wider range of music that spanned the '60s pop, soul, and psychedelic experience.

The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Cream, Small Faces, The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Velvet Underground. The club was open 8.30-1am and was a full house by 10.30. It was a very popular spot for Mods and '60s music lovers to Go.

The short-lived **Bardot's** in Swan Street Richmond was another inspired Mod and 60s appreciation music spot to dance. **Bardot's** was a '60's night club on Thursday nights, started and partly managed by **Mods Peter Bainbrigde and** Steve Crosby. The opening night saw the **Blue Scooters** debut.

**The Jump club** in Collingwood was another popular venue and nightclub. The Little Murders being the virtual house band there. It was frequently used as a late-night haunt after the pubs closed. **Mod House parties** too were the Go for the Melbourne Mod scene after the pubs and Mod night clubs had closed.

At the height of Mod, the sight of 100 Mods dressed in primary colours, op shop glad rags and two tones, fashion dancing to **Green Onions** in a venue no bigger than a living room was a joy.

A line of scooters parked neatly along the curb outside the latest night spots, Christ we could have been in London 1965.

## Melbourne Mods versus Sydney Mods

Art school versus old school. To me it seemed like the Sydney Mods came with a very UK outlook on music and fashion. They've seemed to be a lot of English influence in the musical preferences. A greater appreciation of bands like Dr. Feelgood and other pub rock luminaries. With the leadership of the Hosie brothers the Sydney scene seemed to be ripped straight off the streets of London. I couldn't imagine some of the Sydney Mods ever being anything other than Mods. Melbourne Mods had no such leadership. Their influences and musical preferences also took in Art school bands like The Models and Joy Division. Melbourne mods didn't seem to take themselves as seriously, especially the core group. I never heard Northern Soul and R & B classics played at Kommotion., just the lighter and more populist hits from labels such as Motown and a smattering of sixties hits. In the end Melbourne and Sydney had totally different scenes. Both were brilliant in their own special ways.

## Union Jack Jacket

December 1979 - I walked in Carnaby Cavern in London and ordered a coat made from a Union Jack flag just like Paul Weller and Pete Townshend before me. The tailor said Paul had been in just 2 days earlier to pick up a new suit for his forthcoming tour. He probably told that story to any Mod walking through his door. Four days later I picked up the coat. It was lighter than I thought it would be and it was quite visibly a real flag made into a coat. Excited as I was, I didn't have a clue when I would wear it.

The first time I wore it was at the first big Mod night at the Market Hotel in 1980. It wasn't to appear on stage again until the Ballroom gig during the Easter Invasion of 1981. I did however get to be in many photos as Mods would come over to my Fitzroy flat and we'd stage a photo session outside the San Remo Ballroom or in the City Square. Even Sydney Mods weren't averse to having a photo taken in it.

After Easter, I didn't wear it on stage ever again, but it still wanted to be seen. So Poz, the lead singer of **The Squad** wore it for their first photo session. He also wore it when playing the part of Roger Daltrey in the TV mini-series *Kangaroo Palace*. It would also turn up on the Jimeon TV show when Jimeon got a band together to play '*Down the Tube Station at Midnight*.' It also featured as the cover to Little Murders 1996 album *...and Stuff like That*.

I tried it on this morning. It's now a snug fit where when I bought it, I told the tailor to give it a bit of looseness for when I swung my arms round Pete Townshend style. And then I put it back in the cupboard.

## **Interview with Rob Griffiths (The Fiction, Little Murders) for Modern Times**

1. To backtrack quite a bit, can you tell us when the Little Murders formed and played their first gig?

Little Murders formed in 1979 and played their first proper gig in, I think, September of that year at a pub in Fitzroy called the Champion Hotel. The first Little Murders gig whatsoever was at Bruce Milne's (Au Go Go Records founder) and Clinton Walker's (writer) birthday party in August 79. But we had to borrow a drummer for that one, which was Phil Brophy from Tch Tch Tch. The first line up was Clint Small, Ken Hamilton and I. Then Rod Flegg joined and a few weeks later we started playing regularly.

2. What reasons made you form a band and was it difficult?

Little Murders came from the breakup of my previous band The Fiction a punk outfit from 1978. However, what made us different from the others is we started wearing suits on stage and sticking 60's covers in the set. One review said we were like The Saints meet the Monkees. By the end of the year, it was falling apart but after forming a friendship with Bruce Milne who had just started up the Au Go Go label, I really wanted to make an indie record. So basically, we took in the Fiction to record 3 songs. If you ever see the record, it says The Little Murders EP when they're only 2 songs on it "Things will be Different" and "Take Me I'm Yours" the third song wasn't finished in time and ended up on the flipside of our second single. However, the band didn't know that the record was coming out as Little Murders, a name I'd already planned and incidentally included in the lyrics to "Take Me, I'm Yours", so I don't think they were too happy about that. With the record ready for release, I recruited the new guys except for Ken who was in Fiction. When the record came out it got such great reviews and airplay that we started gigging from the week it was released.

2 months later I'm over in England where the Mod thing is everywhere, and it just pulls together all the ideas floating around my head for what a band should be about. "Eton Rifles" is in the top 10, scooters everywhere, kids dancing to "Green Onions" in a record shop off Leicester Square. I saw a few mod bands over there "Purple Hearts" stand out and I liked the way they incorporated a soul/ska disco into the nights preceding, something Little Murders would use when setting up the mod nights at the Market Hotel

Back in Melbourne we ditch the guitarist and bring in our producer and flashy dresser Stuart Beatty on guitar. Ken leaves for personal reasons and Steve Fuzezi auditions in a suit for a bass. We start draping flags over the amps, dressed up sharply for gigs and it felt like a real band.

3. *Were those days of Mod made up of sleepless nights of playing or were gigs few and far between?*

We established a rapport with the audience straight away, so we were playing constantly sometimes twice a night. Because we were a bit of a draw for punters, we would support a touring band then go off and do our own thing. Then I'd be off to a mod party somewhere. And on Wednesdays there was a club called Kommotion where I would DJ a bit. Luckily, we had some of 'Mother's Little Helpers' to kick us along. Sundays was saved for the week's hangover.

4. *Did you form an alliance with any other mod bands?*

There wasn't much in the way of Mod bands about at the time. We gave 5:15 and Bleu Scooters a couple of supports but most the bands weren't ready for the pub scene where we were prowling. Some of the bands were pretty dodgy too. I got on pretty well with Ronnie Williams (5:15) who was pretty

much an instigator of Mod happenings. Later we teamed up with Ronnie and Gary Lake from 5:15 for a couple of gigs as Blow Up.

**5. *What was the typical weekend in the life of Rob Griffiths at that time?***

The weekend.... get home from my 9-5 job on a Friday arvo. After a few drinks, quick recharge nap and off to a gig...usually the Crystal Ballroom in St. Kilda or the Jump Club. On to a party. Home sleep wake up eat smoke go shopping for clothes, usually op shops, look for records in the city, off to an out-of-town gig, drive back to Melbourne and either go to a party (no party too small) or have a drink at the Jump Club in Collingwood.

**6. *Members have come and gone throughout your musical career, are you a hard person to work with?***

We've had some constant line ups.one lasted over 2 years. I don't think I'm hard to get on with it's just that the band runs its course, the band breaks up and then for some reason it starts all over again. Believe me we've had plenty of farewell gigs in our time.

**7. *In releasing your CD "...and stuff like that" how and why did you go about that?***

"...and stuff like that" came about because I write songs and it's pointless to write songs if no one hears them. Basically in 94 I went into the studio with the same idea I had in 78. Make a record then form a band. The basic premise was to release a record under a new name which was going to be "Pretty Green". A couple of years later I have a record label and I'm out mixing with bands again (after 9 years DJing) live and in the studio. The bug took a big bite this time and in 96 I got some more musicians and finished off what I started. After recording it was obviously a Little Murders record.

**8. *Why did you include some older tracks?***

It was just a gathering of Little Murders stuff the original idea was to mix the album up with old and new tracks next to each other. The Murder tracks we re-recorded were from our first album "Stop" which was basically the singles plus demos. These demos were taken from cassette tape and were basically in a shitty state made even more obvious by cd technology. And anyway, they were the demos and deserved a bit more attention. Listening back to it there are still some tracks that need attention, I'm thinking of "Anything" which really needs to be re-done.

**9. *Has the fire ever burnt out in the Little Murders soul at any stage?***

God yeah. Back in 81 I gave up after "She Lets Me know" was out and I went through 3-line ups in a space of 8 months. Luckily, I secured a great band after that which included Mick Barclay who went on to Paul Kelly and weddings parties anything and Rod Hayward who was in Dave Grayney's band. That line up was the longest lasting and extremely satisfying to be in. Unluckily that folded in 84 and the next line up spelled the end for me. One line up too far I'd say.

#### **10. Do you consider yourself a Mod?**

Hard question that one. I've still got my union jack coat in the wardrobe, which was made by Paul Weller's tailor, mind you. I'm still fascinated by the whole mod culture but as Don Hosie says I used to be a mod. There are still aspects interwoven into my life and in my writing. I feel "White Line/ Black Day" on the new cd is very much a mod song. I'm still terribly a sixties nut with a modern soul.

#### **11. *"Things will be Different" has become probably one of the most revered songs by mods in Australia, tell us about writing and recording it and what brought it about?***

Things will be different was the first song I ever recorded in a studio when the Fiction went into this little studio in Carlton in 78 and recorded 4 tracks including a cover of the Troggs "With a Girl Like you". Things was written a few months before when my writing turned around in style from punk to something a little more melodic and 60's. The song was written about living in the suburbs and playing in the city plus a few references to girlfriends etc. It was originally played to a similar beat as "Be My baby" by the Ronnettes. Later when we went to record it for the Murders debut single, we made it faster and put an acoustic bit through the first verse. Later we changed it to a chunka chunka guitar. Since we recorded the first bit last so to speak it took us ages to fit the two bits together. Since then, it became the cornerstone of the Little Murders live show. We rerecorded it in 82, which is the version on the cd. Also, Weddings Parties Anything covered it on the b-side of "Mondays experts". Interesting fact Mick Thomas of WPA auditioned for Little Murders and not getting into the band he went off and formed his own with the drummer who was also auditioning, and the rest is their history.

#### **12. *In the earlier days you had a journey or two back to the UK. How did it compare, and did it inspire or change you?***

As I said before my visits to England changed my approach to music. Seeing the Purple Hearts in Scotland was fantastic. I also caught the Dolly Mixtures in London around that time. I only found out recently that the band that supported them which was called V2 was actually U2 on one of their first forays into England. I remember them being quite naff and a bit of a throwback to pre-punk days. Another big influence on my music from those visits back to the UK was going out dancing in Blackpool, my hometown, at the Blackpool Mecca where Northern soul was king. Little Murders sets always had a few soul covers in their somewhere.

#### **13. *Easter 1981 in Melbourne saw the biggest gathering of Mods Australia has ever seen, did you enjoy yourself over the long weekend and do you have any memorable experiences you'd like to share?***

Easter 81 was incredible. A long weekend of full-on party. We were playing the Jump Club and it was about 30 minutes before we were to come on stage and there were about 20 people there and we thought it was going to be shit. I popped over the road to get some fags and when I walked back in the place was full. The Mods Melbourne and Sydney all turned up together. That night was mad. The Ballroom gig was over the top. I remember going to Luna Park after staying up all night partying and feeling 2 seconds close to death but still going on the rides. Flash. Glyn W spray-painting Sets + Little Murders = God on the side of a church in Fitzroy. A bunch of hoons throwing a firebomb at the scooters outside Macy's. I remember stuff but can't seem to get it in the right order. Blame it on the chemicals.

**14. Do you think you've written the ultimate mod song in any of your material?**

The ultimate mod song. I don't think you can top "My Generation" "Midnight hour" or any of those classics. I've written about mod. Basically, it's about what other people get out of my songs.

**15. Tell us about "First Light" and "We Should Be Home by Now" your last 2 releases?**

Well, "First Light" is not all that new now. It started out as a bit of a song story but that went out the window pretty quick. If you program it in a particular order, you get the idea, kind of. "White line" is a mod experience you're your basic wake up how am I going to get through the day type thing. And then it goes on. Mojo (UK music magazine) compared it Joe Strummer singing with The Jam, which I thought was great.

They also mentioned Wilco, but I see certain bits of Teenage Fanclub instead. All in all I think it's a good record.

**16. What's in the pipeline for Swerve and Little Murders?**

Swerve is a bit quiet at the moment. We've just released a compilation/sampler. No new records til the next century. Should be a new Little Murders next year and maybe a Quincy McLean album?

**17. Anything else you'd like to add?**

The eighties mod scene was an absolute blast until it fell apart through elitism and in fighting but I'm sure anyone into mod had a great time and can't shake off the influences. I was watching the telly the other day and Kate Ceberano film clip was on for "New Romantic". Now back in the Batcave days Kate and her brother Phil were well-dressed young Mods, and you can see in the film clip they haven't forgot the style. I remember Phil was a very snappy dresser. Anyway, the Mod/sixties look is still associated with being cool. You can see it all through media/music/fashion. Personally, I love it! Did I mention how cool I think Michael Caine is? But that's another story....