

Interview with Steve Lucas – Lead singer in punk rock band X

I came to Melbourne in 1982, approximately - we'd been playing in Sydney for a while. We released 'X-aspirations' in late 1979/80 and it was a year or two after that that we first came down to Melbourne. I just fell in love with the place. I'd never been here before, and I couldn't wait to come back, the venues were so much better. In Sydney we were working heaps. Previously we'd been banned in something like 32 venues in Sydney. The punters used to go berserk, and they'd trash the joint, cut themselves up and bleed everywhere, so we started running our own gigs for a while, hiring town halls and stuff like that.

The original drummer, Steve Cafiero was a real family man- if you'd seen him playing the drums you wouldn't have thought of him the way he really was, one of those gentle giant types. He didn't want to do it anymore. He came down for the first trip, he had fun, we all had fun.

By the time we got there, people had been hearing about us so much, we were playing to really good houses, filling joints, and we'd go from one gig to another...

When I first got here, I was told that I could stay at this place, I knocked on the door and a woman called Helen opened the door and said "yes?" and I said, "I'm Steve from X and apparently I'm staying here"- she said, "No one told me, but sure, come in." Her girlfriend was the one that I had been in contact with, but she hadn't bothered to tell Helen. So, I stayed there and we did all these gigs, really nice people.

The next time we came back, Cathy Green had joined the band. Steve said I don't want to go away for Christmas I wanna be with my family, if you guys wanna do it, just get someone else. Gerard from Premier Artists said, "there's this chick that plays drums and she's really good." We hit Melbourne somewhere near midnight, and we rehearsed with her and I thought she was fantastic. Ian did too but he still wasn't comfortable about having a girl playing drums, cos X was this notorious punk sort of thing, and Cathy had a different feel from Steve, she had a lot more swing, I said, "if she's not gonna join the band I quit", and he said, "all right", and then it all just took off. I met someone down here that I fell in love with, and I thought that's it, I'm gonna come and live in Melbourne. And if you do shows in Sydney, I'll come up to Sydney.

Ian and Cathy became a couple, and it was good for them, but in a three-piece band, that put me in between a hammer and a hard place, because if one has the shits with the other, they'd use me to gang up on them, it was like being the middle child, Ian was 10 years older than me, and Cathy was 8 years younger. It was funny.

We did literally become, for a while, the toast of the town. John Archer (bass player Hunters and Collectors) was massively influenced by Ian, as were lots of bands. Since everyone's passed away, except for me now, more and more people come up to me and say, "I remember the first time I saw Ian play, and I just wanted to play bass like that!", like Ray from the **Hard Ons**, and one of the first songs **You Am I** practiced was 'Dipstick', which was a classic X song. The influence goes on. **The Drones** are also massive X fans.

We'd be doing gigs at the Palace, with **Iggy Pop**, the **Stranglers**, the **Ramones** - any major act that came through Melbourne, we'd be on just before them, or in the middle spot, otherwise we were headlining and packing joints out.

We didn't like being called a 'punk band' because we thought we were a rock'n'roll band, but our attitudes were punk. We played rock'n'roll with an anti-establishment lyrical point of view. The performances were incredibly physical. Ian was hammering down strokes on the bass, and me screaming my head off telling everyone to "get fucked", it verged on being performance art, because, as the 3 of us played more and more, we got into each other's psyche more and more, so we could go off on tangents, this kind of hardcore punk jazz sound, at some of our gigs that would have been it, and people would come and there was never a middle of the road reaction to us, people either loved what we did or hated it. The punk thing, it was everywhere, and for a rock'n'roll band we'd somehow got elected as the forerunners of the punk scene - it was really more our attitude rather than the music.

Did you get lots of punks at your gigs?

Yeah, dressed in black, eyeliner on, pogoing up and down, it was great fun! We played there (the Ballroom) a few times. I'm pretty sure Dolores booked a couple of our gigs, but Ian knew Laurie Richards from previous bands, I think we played the Tropicana, when Laurie ran the Tropicana...

We were considered punks, and record labels avoided us like the plague. X became like the unofficial nominated scapegoat, but we didn't do anything worse than anyone else did at the time. We packed joints out. We had the brass section from Hunters & Collectors and **Mark Seymour** would get up and join us on stage. The musicians and the punters really really loved us. We could get anyone up that we wanted, **Chris Wilson** was almost an unofficial member of the band for years, he would turn up any time he was in town and not gigging, bring his baritone sax or his harps and wail away. It's really funny, we've been called the eternal outcasts, misfits, I suppose that's what we were, but people loved it and they'd come in droves.

It was more healthy in Melbourne, they weren't as fanatical as some of the Sydney punks, who used to actually turn up to gigs with broken glass and cut X-es into themselves and say, "let us in for nothing cos we're willing to do this to ourselves to prove our love", sort of thing, and we're thinking, "whoa, that's a bit heavy!"

In Melbourne they arranged a special breakfast for us - so we'd be playing all night, and we'd turn up at someone's frigging mansion - it's like being royalty. Our official breakfast was delivered to us by Kate Stuart, she and some of her friends had organised this thing - there was Coco Pops and Kahlua, strawberries and whipped cream. We put the Kahlua on the coco pops, threw in the strawberries add a bit of brandy and that became the sort of official X breakfast.

It was much more social in Melbourne. In Sydney, it was really aggressive, there was a lot of pent-up energy in Sydney at the time, and we'd go to cafes and stuff like that and people would sneer at you and I thought it's just so different down here.

The first album we did, up in Sydney, we'd been saying that it took 5 hours to record and in a poll by Australian Rolling Stone, and not so long ago Ralph magazine, we came in the top ten of the top 100 most influential albums ever recorded in Australia. We found someone who'd kept a diary and we discovered we'd actually done it in 4 hours. That album didn't sound like anything else (*X-aspirations*).

Then we came down here and we were playing at Chasers one night and a guy came running up, his name was Jex, he used to play with the **Olympic Sideburns**, and he said, I've been trying to get in touch with you guys, I've got a contract for you, we want to do a record with you. That's how we did **At Home with You**.

I remember doing a gig at the Users Club, not long after Cathy joined, we turned up about 1 or 2 in the morning, played our set, and at that stage Cathy had only just joined the band and only knew about 22 songs, and people kept saying "more" so we thought, oh well, we'll repeat the first song we did, no one will remember it, we ended up playing the whole set, and we didn't get out of there until 5 or 6 in the morning. We got into the habit of doing 2 1/2-hour sets, which were pretty full on.

The venues were cool; they used to pay us a lot of money! There was a stage where we just refused to even consider walking onto a stage unless we got 1000 bucks each, plus production. We always pulled a drinking crowd, so no matter what they paid at the door, over the bar they'd make a fortune.

We had a punk following, but we also had a lot of people who were just into Avante-garde shit, in that we were more Avante-garde as a rock band than more a punk band. I thought it was stupid, I thought of punk as a fashion, people with designer garbage bags did not impress me. We used to write songs like 'Dirty Degenerate Boy' slagging off these people, it was really satirical and very acid in its commentary of what we saw as a big part of our audience, but they saw it as a salute to them, an absolute confirmation and acknowledgment! But we were fairly self-effacing ourselves, if we mocked the audience, we were also mocking ourselves. But we did play really hard and fast and it was real Rock.

In those days they'd say **Cold Chisel** is a rock band, **Rose Tattoo** played rock- what we played made them look like the fucking Wiggles. And we lived fast and hard and we had a hardcore reputation - in those days and up until recently, people could smoke in venues, and my type of vocal style was, a lot of screaming, bellowing, so I'd be breathing deep all the way through, and by the end of the performance I would have sucked in so much second hand smoke, I'd be hyperventilating, I'd fall over and collapse and people would say, "oh, he must be out of it", but actually at that stage I was the straightest person in the band! In the 1970s there was the heroin thing, though I'd tried it, and used it for a while, quite honestly my metabolism couldn't handle it, just the smell of it, I'd have to run off and spew... We all did it. I remember being really pissed off with Ian at an interview once when I was on a bit of a high horse, and I didn't want to sing songs like 'Degenerate Boy' anymore because I thought we were encouraging drug abuse and aberrant behaviour; it was supposed to be a commentary. Ian, when he was drunk, he could be quite charming but once he reached that limit, he become kind of violent. Ian and Cathy got into this thing where it was cool to use smack, because it kept them down, on an even sort of basis, an even keel. I decided I didn't want to know about it, and just drank beer, or scotch or something. I remember doing this interview for an ABC TV show called **BeatBox**; they're going, "alcohol's really bad because it incites people to violence", blah blah blah, we like a bit of heroin because we just chill out. And they said, "what about you, what do you do?" And I happened to have a can of VB in my hand and I said, "I just drink this! Why? Because it's cheap and it's legal."

Then for fucking months everywhere I go, I'd walk into a pub, someone'd stick a can of VB in my hand! They were saying heroin is cool because it keeps you down and stuff and alcohol was bad because you get really depressed and you get really angry and erupt. But there were other people I knew who took smack and they'd be breaking into people's homes, ripping off things...there's no way to equate or justify anything, people will do whatever they wanna do, no matter what you say, but at that stage, I gave up drugs and just drank. And I got very good at drinking. Then I gave up cigarettes, which made me drink even more!

We were like a family, I'd been playing with Ian for years by then anyway, and Cathy and I were very close in a brotherly, sister kind of way, both Virgos, Ian was a Leo...

Punk, in the rest of the world was a sort of piss weak fucking fashion statement with a whole lot of bloody girly bands - the issue, I think, was confusing punk with new wave. OK, the Sex Pistols were punk, and I suppose if anything we were more like them, except, they had more people in the band, and we tended to be more sort of like, simplistic in our sounds, not as complicated, we had started to develop minimalism - we had the driving bass, we had the drums thumping behind it, and I'd do minimal guitar so I could concentrate on the singing...

X got the name because there were a lot of bands with X-es in them in the mid to late 1970's, like **Xray Spex**, and Ian Rilen really wanted something with X in it, and we were racking our brains, and Ian said, "why don't we just call it 'X'?" "X?" "Yeah, just X"- yeah, not only is it a name, but it was also a symbol. We used to make our own posters out of newspapers, we'd get the big double sheeters, just paint a big red X on, Friday 23 oct, or whatever. It was home-made, it was rough, DIY.

We were shunned by the industry. The first time we played the Pacific hotel there were people climbing up the drainpipes trying to get in the window, we had a full house 3 times over, and at the end of the night, when everyone left, the floor was covered with so much shattered glass that it looked like snow, and the publican said, "I never want this band here again", and the promoter said, "wait till you've done your tills", he said, "I don't give a fuck", and then when he looked at the tills, he said, "can we get these guys in twice a week?" The promoter told me that he eventually got his first house up in the mountains because of us, thank you very much...

We used to break up all the time. After a couple of years, we did a whole run of posters, '**X is always lovelier the 7th time around**'.

Lobby Loyde (producer) talked Mushroom Records into signing us (1989/90). We were doing an album, Lobby was producing us, it was sort of business as usual, but then everything got really complicated, really complex financial arrangements people were making with each other...

Basically, we'd signed a deal and everyone was really happy, and Mushroom decided to put on this big lunch for us, we went to a pub in Albert Park, and we all had this wonderful lunch, but because my wife was fairly pregnant at that stage, I thought, it'd be nice to kick on, but I'll go home now, and I'll see you guys tomorrow and sign all the publishing deals. "Are you sure, there's this cocktail party we can go to" - "No, I'm gonna go home", and Ian and Cathy went to the cocktail party and got really really smashed, then they decided they wanted to go back to Mushroom and have them play the video we made for 'Degenerate Boy', which at the time they couldn't find, so Ian and Cath got really upset, tipped the boardroom table over, messed all the gold records around, started abusing people, things like that...

And I turned up the next day to sign all the stuff, and everyone was looking at me like I was an alien - "what's gone wrong, we had lunch yesterday everything was fine, everyone loved each other, and now even the girl at the desk" And I said, "can I at least talk to Ian Jones, the head of publishing?" And he said, "What do you want?" I said "I wanna know what's going on, why is everyone being so cold?" And he said, "don't you know?" "No, what?" Then he told me, "everything's off, cancelled, the whole deal, we don't want anything to do with X." Fuck!

I wasn't angry, I was just really disappointed. I sat down with the publisher and worked out a deal anyway, but it was very annoying...

X would stumble and fall, get up, fight on, stumble, fall, get up, fight on, until we just couldn't do it anymore. There was a time when we were gonna go to the States, and I think that was the thing that really broke the back.... We did a whole lot of gigs, we had a tour lined up for the West Coast, and then stuff just started happening and basically it fell apart because we were generating an income, and the thing was, we've got this money, well I need some now because I'm behind in my rent, or I've gotta pay for this or that, but if we do that we can't pay the airfares, but we also want so-and-so to come along and be like a minder for Ian, or something, so we need to do more gigs, and we'd already exploited 'X's last gig' to the shit-house, we can't really keep doing this, and I kind of cracked the shits with Ian and Cathy, and I said, "let's split everything 3 ways and see ya later", and for a long time I didn't talk to either of them, but then 5 years ago, it came up to X's **25th anniversary** and I thought it'd be nice to do something, so we did a double album 'Live at the Basement'; we had lots of guest players, Cathy didn't want to do it, so we got another drummer called Cath Synnerdahl. It was ironic in the end, because she also passed away. When we started the band had two Ian's and two Steves.

X was a band that was just full of disaster.

Did you ever have a manager?

We had a few people who tried but who were horrible. In the end a friend of one of us said look, you need a manager and I'd really like to do it. And my sentiment was, how long do you want be our friend for? Because when you start managing us you will hate us, you'll despise us, you'll never want to talk to us again, he said, ok, I'd rather be your friend [laughs].

We played at the Ballroom, the Espy, the Users Club, the Anglers Club, the Venue, the Palace, of course the Prince of Wales, on the north side I think we played at the Duke of Windsor, the Tropicana, Chasers in Chapel st. Those were the main ones and up in Sydney the Trade Union...