The Birth of Melbourne Punk by Lachlan Kanoniuk

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While Sydney and Brisbane can lay claim to Australia's two foremost protopunk outfits in Radio Birdman and The Saints respectively, a strain of the DIY movement was developing in Melbourne during the late '70s.

Telling the story of the bands, spirit, venues of Melbourne's formative punk years are: Owner of Bakehouse Studios, SLAM co-founder, and Why Punk? curator Quincey McLean, solo artist Penny Ikinger, musician-producer-promoter Julian Wu, Au-Go-Go label founder Bruce Milne, and Boys Next Door/The Birthday Party drummer Phill Calvert.

Putting the Melbourne in Melbourne punk

Quincey McLean: "No one ever called themselves punk. No one identified openly as working class (contrary to some commentators' opinions). No one identified openly as middle class. It wasn't middle class, but it wasn't classless. To my knowledge the Melbourne 'punk' scene was full of people who loved the energy of a broad new direction in music that loosely existed under a punk banner (or new wave, post punk, power pop) but no one ever called themselves a punk. Not at least until the early '80s when everyone had moved on and the cookie cutter 'punks' came along."

Penny Ikinger: "The climate and our love of fashion, in particular our love of wearing black, black, black. Punk rockers embrace the fashion as much as the music."

Phill Calvert: "We didn't want to be part of the mainstream, we wanted to be part of the new."

Julian Wu: "3RMT/RRR introduced a lot of new music happening outside the mainstream at the time, and their gigs gave me a chance to experience it firsthand. Archie & Jughead's (Missing Link records). Liquor licensing laws (If you were underage, you only needed to sign a stat dec), most gigs finished early so you could go out and get home without a car since you could catch public transport there and back. Also, early finishing shows meant more after gig parties which lead to lots of interesting friendships being formed. Also licensing laws meant you had to provide a meal and entertainment to open past 6PM (I think, perhaps after 8PM?) so more bands had a chance to play and poor music fans got a free feed, even if the food was a bit dodgy."

Bruce Milne: "Melbourne's weather and indoor culture had a major effect on Melbourne punk (and any other form of Melbourne art). Dark clothing, brooding looks, arty attitude."

Phill Calvert: "I never really thought of it as a punk movement as such. We never called ourselves punk. We didn't want to be part of the mainstream, we wanted to be part of the new. Even the name 'new wave' stuck in our throats. It was about being different. We were just following what was happening in new music. Before we found the new wave punk singles in the import record shops, we were buying Bowie and Lou Reed and the Stooges and all of the stuff that informed the change that took place in music in '76-'77. We then took it on and went forward with that. We were not living in Thatcher's Britain. Sure, it was Melbourne in the '70s, but it wasn't that bad. We were all art school kids and mainly from middle class background – not exactly the Clash or the Pistols – but then neither was our music or the lyrical content either."

The Bands

Bruce Milne: "The bands that defined the birth of punk in Melbourne included Babeez/NEWS, the Boys Next Door, the Spred, the Young Charlatans, the Proles, the Reals/Negatives and Tch Tch Tch."

Penny Ikinger: "Shivers was not a fast thrasher but a beautiful existential crisis."

Phill Calvert: "Boys Next Door, News, JAB, The Reals, The Obsessions, The Spread, The Chosen Few La Femme, TRS. That's the Early punk scene. After that there were so many bands that were great and contributed to the changing Melbourne sound. I was only aware of the bands that I saw and that played at the same places we did. I also think that Radio Birdman and the Saints touring Melbourne and people going to see them, opened up people to a lot of music they hadn't heard and sent them towards playing in bands themselves."

Penny Ikinger: "Boys Next Door broke all the rules of music and helped redefine the perimeters of what was considered to be a punk or post-punk. Shivers was not a fast thrasher but a beautiful existential crisis. Composed by Rowland Howard, the song became somewhat of an anthem. It was originally performed by Rowland Howard's punk band: The Young Charlatans."

Quincey McLean: "News (or Babeez), Negatives, The Fiction, Jab, Two Way Garden, The Young Charlatans, The Boys Next Door. And later on, The Models, Primitive Calculators, Whirlywirld, The Marching Girls, Microfilm, the Ears, The Fabulous Marquis's, Secret Police, The Fizzpops, the Moodists, the Video Pirates, Lachelle, Lisa Gerrard."

Julian Wu: "Boys Next Door, Models, Primitive Calculators (& Little Bands) Whirlywirld."

The Places

Quincey McLean: "The dedicated punk gigs were Bernhardt's (Tuesday nights), Footscray (or Yarraville) Gardens – Suicide records "Lethal Weapons" record launch (for a one-off weekend daytime event), the Tiger Lounge (generally Tuesday or Thursday nights) The Kingston Hotel (random nights), The Seaview Ballroom (Crystal Ballroom) (originally random nights then eventually Wednesdays to Sunday nights). Bananas, Martinis, The Champion, Melbourne University student hall and Student Union building. Then there were the venues that hosted occasional punk / post punk based nights like the Mt Erica, The Exford, The Oxford, the Prince of Wales, the Espy, Bombay Rock, Earls Court - The Venue, the Electric Ballroom, Hearts, the Marquee Room, the Club (or the Jump Club)."

Phill Calvert: "The main venues outside of parties at people houses and studio spaces, gigs at colleges and universities would be The Tiger Lounge, Bananas, The Kingston, Martini, later The Crystal Ballroom and Bombay Rock and Hearts."

What Happened Next?

Bruce Milne: I am not sure that punk existed after the initial burst, but punk attitude has probably infested much of the music made in Melbourne since then. The city has grown tremendously since the '70s, but it still remains a non-tourist city and that has a strong influence on the personality of Melbourne. People feel part of a community, even as Melbourne expands. They seek out that community and interact with it in ways I don't see in other Australian cities. The geographic locations may have shifted (St Kilda, Richmond and Fitzroy were the punk "centres" of Melbourne once) but new areas become important centres.

Penny Ikinger: "Melbourne always had its own distinctive type of punk that seemed to ignore gender and class. The common bond was a profound belief in the authenticity of these musical ideas that lay outside the mainstream. Where is it today? Still in the hearts of those so heavily influenced by it in the late 1970s. It informs our belief system our aesthetic. And still, we wear black."

Phill Calvert: "Punk as a form keeps going around in ever decreasing circles. This happened in the UK 2-3 years after the first wave of punk: There were new bands with even bigger Mohawks. So, every generation can have their view of what it is or where it is. There is always something to be excited about and angry about especially in your late teens and early twenties. So, it's always a very healthy and vibrant scene. I am still involved with bands such as Masses in a recording and production capacity and I like their approach. I wouldn't call them punk, but that is how they identify. They have a political edge and I think that that is important to the "punk" movement as it stands today. As I said starting out, we heard that music and people pointed at us and called us punks. Funny thing was we never identified our music or ourselves as punk rock.

So punk now is geographically north-side and – as always –where the cheapest rent is. Just like it was in St Kilda in the '70s early '80s. Sonically – It has morphed a lot more with what people might have called Hardcore or speed metal in sound. And a lot of it sounds like the post Punk sound of Manchester thrown in with the 70's punk all mixed together.

Melbourne punk was never political, it was more about social isolation or a feeling of not belonging or wanting to belong. It wasn't about being anti-Fraser government. Which of course, we were anyway. It's just an evolution. Not a revolution."