

The Little Bands Archive

A Guide for Listening Pleasure

Written by Alan Bamford

An Introduction ~

The Little Bands existed during 1979 - 1981 in and around Fitzroy with occasional migrations to North Melbourne and St Kilda to show off. There was also a contingent from Springvale who made the journey to the centre occasionally and finally landed and settled in Johnston St, Abbotsford.

They consisted of an extended friendship circle of artists, art enthusiasts and spontaneous musicians, poets, performance artists and filmmakers. This menagerie would spend their time flinging ideas about and if a consenting quorum coalesced around any idea it usually found expression of some kind.

It's been rumoured that the Little Bands lacked any intellectual foundations. This is scurrilous and beside the point. It's also typical of the big fish in a small pond syndrome that we all suffered from at the time in the inner Melbourne alternative music scene. Tch Tch Tch!!!!

The Little Bands were drenched in ideas – it's just that the ideas served the expression of feelings and thus at the time of performance may have been hidden amongst the onslaught of angst and joy that characterised Little Band nights.

The first Little Band night actually occurred as part of a Boys Next Door gig in St Kilda. It was uphill after that.

The most common manifestation was in the Little Band itself. A spontaneous and usually short lived but vibrant and fresh agglomeration of folk, ideas and borrowed instruments would result in quick, intense and sharply focused performances of some material based on a new idea. In many cases - once expressed these ideas would often be superseded by the next time the same people surfaced. A constantly turbulent melting pot of people, band names and sounds.

There were at the time in Fitzroy two electronic music ensembles living in a twin double storey terrace in Nicholson St., Fitzroy - directly opposite a venue at the time then called Hearts. These were the Primitive Calculators and WhirlyWorld, both of whom had instruments and rehearsal spaces in their respective slums.

These resources were shared among the north of the river extended family and the spaces were in permanent use 24 hours a day as people rolled up to try things out. Over time other small collectives setup their own spaces but the core group of people in and associated with these two bands were the nucleus of the Little Bands.

Climax Records was a punk rock record shop in Gertrude st Fitzroy run by Max Robenstone. Max made two records - a Primitive Calculators single and the Little Bands EP. Other Little Bands rehearsed behind the shop and people hung out there to listen to the latest singles vomiting out of London and New York during the heyday of Punk Rock. WhirlyWorld had their music released on Missing Link - a 7" and a 5 track 12" EP. With the assistance of a fan, The Primitive Calculators released an independent live album recorded at Hearts with the unsold copies of the Max Robenstone released single included for free. This has been re released on CD via Chapter Music with previously unreleased tracks in 2004.

The Little Bands performed regularly - usually monthly - during 1979 and through 1980. Until the end of 1979 the Calculators and WhirlyWorld members took part. After recovering from the 1979 woolshed workers strike these bands went to Europe and vanished from view never to be heard of again. This happened around New Years 1980 – WhirlyWorld playing their last gig at the Ballroom and being ripped of by Laurie Richards a few hours before the plane left on New Years day 1980 – and those left behind continued during 1980.

In 1980 the two key collectives with instruments and practice space were Use No Hooks who had space in Gertrude St Abbotsford and The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Gave Up Living and Became Crazy Mixed Up Zombies – who were interred in Johnston St Abbotsford by this time having fled the Springvale cemetery in late 1979. These two groups of utterly different musicians drove the Little Bands during 1980 when the phenomena was well supported by Delores who booked for the Ballroom and then at a pub in Spencer St North Melbourne, the 451 Club. There were one offs as well - notoriously at Collingwood Town Hall and innumerable house parties - though the were just called parties in the '80's.

By late 1980 the energy was dissipating and the social fabric of the extended family was rent by dislocation, poverty, heroin, alcohol and particularly amphetamine use and there were no more nights in 1981. The Creatures set up a warehouse performance venue called the Killayoni Club with Lawton Ellery and his home made sound system, Dresden Sound, and presented some truly psychedelic nights of film, sound and performance in the year that followed. There exists a video archive of this space but its whereabouts are uncertain. The night Essendon Airport performed alongside Cutting People Up and the Lunatic Fringe is a nightmare we all savour. Use No Hooks strutted their stuff as a serious funk band and gigged regularly in 1982 – 1983 before death and other disasters rent them asunder.

Recording Lunatic Fringe....for CMHC – compilation.. track comes on about rape, Yorkshire ripper

The recordings made during these years were made by Alan Bamford on a TEAC ¼ track reel to reel tape recorder using a Shure 58 mic on a stand positioned in the air next to the mixing desk. These tapes were then broadcast immediately after gigs on his 12 – 2am Friday night slot on 3 RRR FM. The Little Bands were most often mixed by the Boys Next Door mixer, Groper. Groper had his own sound system and he was completely cool with the prospect of 12 to 15 bands a night all playing different instrument setups for 10 minutes and managed to sort acceptable sound with no sound check with great ease - these recordings owe an immense debt to his skill. He also mastered the Primitive Calculators LP. For free.

The Primitive Calculators have released archival material from several sources - live recordings and rehearsal tapes - on a number of overseas and Australian imprints. These releases are listed at www.project.net.au/primitivecalculators

Several of the Little Bands members went on to have productive careers in various fields of creative and artistic expression but noone can help that and it's all best left unsaid.

This CD archive was created from cassette copies of the original recordings with no eq or noise reduction attempted. A selection of the original 7" reel to reel recordings exist but are barely playable. These tapes were 'sourced' second hand from the 3 RRR FM newsroom, surreptitiously liberated and bulk erased without permission by Alan Bamford and used to capture material for his radio show.

It was intended to make a double LP of Little Bands performances. A master tape was prepared by Alan Bamford and artwork completed by the painter Peter Tyndal - a member of several Little Bands. This material survives though the record was never made. The LP – 'No Sin Like Dancing' (how prescient!!) is referenced in the index of the Clint Walker book about Australian Punk, Inner City Sounds. Consideration is being given to a reprint of this book with an accompanying CD.

In fact the Little Bands moved on after the preparation of this record and it is quite unrepresentative of the Little Bands as they evolved, being more a record of the first phase that concluded with the departure of the Primitive Calculators and WhirlyWorld at the end of 1980. This remains an unfinished project.

A great deal of photographic archival material was lost when it was loaned free of charge to the director Richard Lowenstein for use in researching his film Dogs In Space. When the photographs were returned many were missing and it proved impossible to have them returned. The Little Bands are represented in a number of scenes in this film with varying degrees of accuracy. Alan Bamford appears in a scene in the Ballroom doing exactly what he was up to at the time. Thrush and The Cunts also appear with Mari Hoy covering the Boys Next Door tune, Shivers - something she wouldn't have done in a pink fit at the time.

There was a video made of the Primitive Calculators by Janis Lesinskis and it survives. Scott Anderson commenced production on a CD ROM entitled Alternative Animals focusing on Melbourne music of the period 1976 - 1979 that was shown in a pre release form at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2003. This included unauthorised Primitive Calculators material and was meant to include authorised WhirlyWorld material. This CD was set for release late 2004.

Rob Wellington, a musician very active in bands at the time, has plans to prepare an archive of the scene at the time, focusing on the now extinct Seaview/Crystal Ballroom that once roared out its madness from the Seaview Hotel on the corner of Grey and Fitzroy St's, St Kilda. This project was slated to commence at the end of 2004.

At the time the Little Bands music was sent around the world.

Alan Bamford prepared cassette compilations that were called Network Copies. These were posted free to people in a Mail Art free exchange style during these years. These tapes were published under the Slow Drama Music cassette tape label and are referenced in the publication The Australian Various Artist on Cassette 1978 – 1996 by Paul McHenry and Chris Spencer (Moonlight Publishing Melbourne, 1996)

Alan Bamford
Tuesday, July 13, 2004

The Archive ~

1.

Little Bands Network 1_a & 1_b: 1979 – 1980

From the first period and including the material slated for the LP release. This was the first Mail Art style Slow Drama Music cassette sent around the world.

Most recordings made at the Champion Hotel, ex of the corner of Brunswick St and Gertrude St, Fitzroy. Some from the Crystal Ballroom, downstairs section, Seaview Hotel, St Kilda.

2.

Little Bands Network 2_a & 2_b: 1979 – 1980

From the second period – during 1980 in the main and mostly recorded at the Crystal Ballroom, downstairs section, Seaview Hotel, St Kilda. No recordings were made at the 451 Club.

This was the second of the eventual pair of Mail Art style Slow Drama Music cassettes sent around the world.

3.

Invisible Music Presents: 1_a & 1_b

Use No Hooks was the performance name for the shifting membership of an ensemble that centred around two guitar players and a drummer. The recordings are all of various Little Band live performances during 1980. While Use No Hooks members were both well practiced musicians and a stable conceptual entity they also included many others some of whom were not musicians, but all playing instruments.

In collaboration with the other members the painter Peter Tyndall, who named the Little Bands record, designed a label for the purposes of making archival cassettes. It was here the umbrella title of Invisible Music appeared.

4.

Invisible Music Presents: 2_a & 2_b

Over time Use No Hooks presented their music at their own gigs - these recordings are of several versions of the band that took this approach.

5.

Invisible Music Presents: 3_a & 3_b

Use No Hooks continued to be active as a Little Band at the same time as coalescing as a stand alone entity. They investigated the use of various performance media - especially recording tape played on the Revox - A 77 ½ track reel to reel tape recorder - and also investigated the interactions between pitch, timbre and tempo when music is played at extremely slow tempos.

These recordings reflect some of those investigations. Some of this work was presented on radio and 3_b contains edits of radio performances.

6.

Invisible Music Presents: A Prelude to Brian Eno

The full recording of a two hour live to air improvisation presented on Alan Bamford's radio show on 3 RRR FM in 1980.

7.

Invisible Music Presents: Use No Hooks

Edits from performances as a trio of two guitars and drums with the Revox A77 highlighting their investigations into music free of key changes and music utilising the A77 as a real time rhythm instrument.

8.

The Pastel Bats: Seaview Ballroom 1980

The Pastel Bats were a Little Band that eventually developed a full set. They performed at Little Band nights doing one or two songs and then did this set at the ballroom in front of their adoring fans. Their members were all in other Little Bands.

The Lunatic Fringe: The Clang: The Buck Stops Here

Recordings made at a night organised chiefly by the Springvale contingent whose main bands were the Incredibly Strange Creatures ... and the Lunatic Fringe – both improv projects for largely unpracticed players. The Buck Stops here was one of their lots solo projects.

9.

The Creatures

Clang: Three Toed Sloths :: Fall

More recordings from a night organised by the Creatures and featuring ensembles of theirs.

The Creatures and the Lunatic Fringe at Dresden Sound

The Creatures formed a close friendship and partnership with Lawton Ellery and this is the record of a Sunday afternoon spent performing using the Dresden Sound System.

Associated Material

1.

WhirlyWorld ~ Live Performances ~ Hearts and Crystal Ballroom ~ 1979 – 1980

Recordings of various WhirlyWorld shows with the second lineup as a 4 piece.

Ollie Olsen – vocals and Roland Space Echo

Arnie Hanna – Fender Telecaster Guitar and various pedals

Greg Sun – Rickenbacker Bass Guitar

John Murphy – drums, metal percussion and SynDrums

2.

The Moths/Primitive Calculators

Rehearsal tapes from 1977/78 – 1980. This shows the very rapid evolution from a 60's Texan garage punk band to the fully electronic ensemble that is recorded on the LP. Also included are rehearsal tapes from some Little Bands that the Calculators were central to.

3.

The Last Little Bands Radio Show

As mentioned the purpose of the recordings was for broadcast on 3 RRR FM. This is a recording of the very last of those programs – some time in 1980.