

large extent, the content of Minogue's work, there are those who would question her credentials to be engaged in the work of music making at all. Because Kylie's music (disco) is perceived as lightweight and worse, unpolitical, her background was in females' television (soap opera) and her audience is widely assumed to be very young and female, she is considered by many to be scarcely credible. As well, her apprenticeship in the already-judged-worthless soap opera context doesn't fit with accepted notions of musical pedigree in Australia— notions which revolve around the pub as the legitimate performance context; the live audience as the legitimate audience; and guitar-based pub music as the legitimate sound. Dues paying or work within these parameters has been seen as the true breeding ground of rock musos.

But when she released *Locomotion* Minogue had been acting on the public stage for seven years. In anyone's terms that's a decent sort of apprenticeship. Given that the production of

a television series is normally a high-pressure, work-intensive experience, she also came from a tradition of hard work. What we have, therefore, is a distinction based, not on the amount of work but on the content of that work—music against acting—and the context of that work—pubs and live gigs rather than television, and, more specifically, soap opera. We are by now reconciled to the idea of soap stars turning into recording stars. I'd argue that this reconciliation has come about as much through a reconceptualisation of soap opera as an acceptable incubating context as it has through the frequency with which it occurs.

On these terms, Kylie's career can be depicted as the development of a successful worker. To be considered as a successful worker on today's terms, there must be an acknowledgment that one's work is defined, in some sense, "on one's own terms". Extended to Kylie's stardom, it confers on her the right to be seen as a woman who "articulates stardom on her own

terms".

Such interpretations of Kylie—as worker/star, as a "woman in control of her own stardom" and as an artist with a positive cultural/political significance—jeopardise the ideological bent of the "star as commodity" argument. For commodities are things we buy and sell and which have merely an exchange, not a use value. Unlike our pop stars, they can't give positive expression to our experiences and articulate positive ways of being in society, or impart strategies of resistance to social inscriptions.

One wonders how many other "ideologically unsound" facets of our multi-faceted society have been unjustly discarded and denigrated as a result of our own blindness. How many other realities are there behind the appearances our analyses have constructed?

"Yay Kylie." "Fuck the lotta ya!"

■
IDENA REX teaches in cultural studies at the University of Western Sydney.

THE COMFORT OF ALEX

There must be very few adults these days who, upon buying the daily paper, immediately turn to the comic section: those that do are probably self-consciously trying to rekindle some childhood pleasure. Most people probably don't even read the comics anymore, and certainly the days are long-gone when a paper's popularity stood or fell on its comic section.

More fool them. Even when the mainstream comic sections aren't funny (that is, most of the strips most of the time) they're an essential "take" on the western world—even dross like *Archie*. In fact especially dross like *Archie*.

But there are at least three strips appearing in Australian newspapers which are extremely entertaining in themselves. Two of these—*Calvin and Hobbes* and *Alex*—deal with self-centred males struggling to keep their own comfortable corner of an uncar-

Newspaper cartoon strips are an underrated pleasure, thinks David Nichols.

ing environment. Both characters inhabit worlds where nothing is as it seems to be—until reality, the inevitable punchline, comes to shatter their—and our—perception.

Alex, by Charles Peattie and Russell Taylor, is the only strip run by the *Australian Financial Review*. It originally ran in the London *Independent*, until its creators defected to *The Daily Telegraph* last year. The strip is also regularly collected into 'best of' volumes, the most recent of which is *Alex IV* (published by Fairfax at \$12.95); the authors also produce the similar *Celeb* for *Private Eye* under the pen-name Ligger. *Alex* is their foray into the world of so-called high-flying big business; while *Alex* himself never comes down from his high-flying with a bump (except for one episode where he literally crashes into

a rainforest) there are few around him who escape his self-centred greed. *Alex* is an entirely unsympathetic character who, not very surprisingly, seems to spend his impeccable existence with his eyes closed or at least wincing. But those around him do not present any sort of contrast or relief; he's a ruthless man in a ruthless environment. Appearance is everything and success very much an end in itself (though being seen to succeed is possibly even more important).

Peattie and Taylor are effective satirists, but like many daily cartoonists they also rely on an ingenious formula to get their point across while giving the regular reader some anticipatory enjoyment. Often, a four or five-frame strip will be an extended pun, so cleverly constructed that the reader will go back and trace the way



it was set up purely for the enjoyment of its structure. Many of Alex's fans, one assumes, would find this more satisfying than actually laughing.

Alex's world is one of prestige and priority: being seen to be busy and always being in meetings (or "meetings"). Because there are no genuinely sympathetic characters (in *Alex IV* he has an affair with his secretary Wendy, who perhaps lacks the evil intent of the rest of his associates, but who nevertheless would need more verve to present a lighter side to Alex) it takes a persistent reader to see beyond the grim satirical punning of the strip. Luckily, most *Financial Review* readers got where they are today by being persistent.

The back cover of *Alex IV* sees our hero, having driven to a secluded spot with the luckless Wendy under the cover of night, turning instead to the *Financial Review* itself. How many executives would adore the idea of their colleagues pointing to that picture and cackling, "That's just what ___ would do!"?

Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* has all the complexities of Alex - but with an unfortunate syrupy tinge of boy-and-his-tiger sentimentality which probably explains its popularity in paperback reprints (of which *The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes*, Warner Books, \$17.95 is the most recent). Where Alex's drawings are ordered and neatly rendered, Watterson seems happiest depicting Calvin and his toy tiger Hobbes falling through the air. Hobbes takes on a distinct personality alone with six-year-old Calvin; whenever another human being intrudes, he instantly turns into an ersatz Tigger doll. Thus, Hobbes' personality is entirely Calvin's alter-ego; where Calvin expresses disgust for schoolfriend Susie Derkins, Hobbes' eyes fill with lust.

It's easy to imagine a senior citizen—or a five-year-old—in Duluth, or Dumphries, or Dubbo, cackling away at *Calvin and Hobbes* yet giving up in disgust or confusion at the cynical nature of Alex's world. Yet there is a very un-Middle American strain to

Calvin which contrasts well with Alex's abject terror at being socially or financially disgraced. "I don't want to learn teamwork!" Calvin screams to his father, after having been coerced to join the baseball team. "I don't want to learn about winning and losing! Heck, I don't even want to compete! What's wrong with just having fun by yourself, huh?" Encouragingly non-conformist sentiments from an artist who, apparently, was producing pro-Republican editorial cartoons before getting his "big break" in newspaper comics.

As in Peattie and Taylor's punning denouements, Watterson tends to show Calvin's adventures through a Calvin-eye view until reality creeps in for the final frame: alternatively, we might see the real world up until the punchline, where Calvin has set up a fantastic situation for his own devilry (such as carefully building a city of snowmen so he, as tyrannosaurus rex, can pillage and destroy it!)

Where this imaginative play in place of the three Rs will get Calvin is probably an irrelevant question—because he is unlikely to ever get older than six, and he and his parents are trapped forever in their respective roles and at their respective ages. But anyone who saw the *Simpsons* episode in which Bart—for whom Calvin was undoubtedly a forerunner—becomes a Supreme Court judge must surely have cause to wonder.

All in all, things are looking good for the newspaper cartoon in the 90s—especially when you add a third work of genius to the list of those currently running in Australian newspapers. Brian Kogler's *Thin Ice*, which can be found in the *Sydney Sunday Telegraph*, has only been running a short while, but it's a classic. Who can resist a single parent polar bear who makes her living writing romance novels and a cast of snowmen? How you respond to that glittering invitation surely says a lot about you. ■

DAVID NICHOLS has edited teen magazines. He only likes reading comics and is so starved for them he sometimes even resorts to drawing his own.