

ART AND POLITICS

Twenty years of rock and roll in Wollongong

The heart of the rock and roll industry is the thousands of men and women who rock it out night after night in the pubs and clubs across Australia. NEIL PORTER and ARNIE OLBRICH live and play in Wollongong, a bastion of heavy metal. Here they speak to MIKE DONALDSON about the current state of the rock industry, and reflect on the 22 years their careers span.

Interview by
**Mike
Donaldson**



Neil: I first seriously picked up a guitar in 1961. I learned to play E, A, B7 which is about par for most guitar players and joined my first band in 1962. I performed pretty continuously until 1980 when I gave it away. I played with a famous Wollongong mid-sixties band, *The Marksmen*, until 1968. We then had a name change, became *Imagination* and went on to Sydney for two years playing full-time and living hand-to-mouth, stealing food where we could get it. We played every major venue in Sydney and a few other states and put out two singles. The first single got to number 80 nationally, scoring a 13 on a country station in Queensland, and 25 on another Queensland station. That caved in due to starvation and other financial problems. I decided that it was better to be a big frog in a small pond, than nothing in Sydney, so I moved back to Wollongong and played out the rest of my career here in *Music Co*.

Arnie: I've been playing 20 years. I began with *The Coffin Cheaters* with whom I toured Leeton and Griffith (laughs). It's hard to believe but in one night we made a hundred bucks, **each**. That was unbelievable for those days, and is bloody good money today. After that, I spent a short time with *The Solomon Right Crusade*, another Wollongong band. I had a break in '68, coming back in '72 with a band called *Gas stove*, the remnants of which became the three-piece that Neil worked with in his closing seven-year stretch. Then came *Tree* with whom I played Checkers and all the major Sydney venues.

AC/DC were playing at Checkers at that time too and we used to do half hour about. When the special guest band came on, we'd sit down together and I'd say to Angus (Young), "What're you guys going to do next set?" He'd say, "Aw, shit Jumping Jack Flash, Wishing Well, All Right Now" I'd say, "Christ, you can't do them, that's what we were going to do" "Ahh ... OK, we'll play the first set again." We did that for about four years. And then that band merged with *Freshwater* which was already an established band with a top ten national hit single, directed by Peter Sheen.

I left them to it and started a band called *Fools Theatre*, which didn't last long. Then came *Cloud*. Then I went to the UK and played around a bit, doing some time with the guys from the *Masters' Apprentices*, *Nashville Teens*. When I came back I started *Hard Grind*, put out a single, and I'm now in the process of kicking off *The Works*.

Mike: Neil, why's Arnie going around again?

Neil: Nobody from Wollongong in the hard rock scene has ever "made it". We don't even know of an individual person, let alone a band, that has made it out of steel city. But it's just not true that all the best musicians are in Sydney, Melbourne and the capital cities, so why hasn't Wollongong produced any significant music? The bands in Wollongong that have made their own singles, *Reverend Black and the Rocking Vicars* in 1967, my band, *Imagination* in 1969, a great huge gap until *Tarquin/Gangsters* in about 1978, and Arnie's old band *Hard Grind* in 1982. Four bands in 20 years. What happened? Why didn't they get famous? We call it the Wollongong syndrome, but we don't know what it is. It's discouragement, despair and slackness all mixed in together, which stops Wollongong musicians from ever really making it.

Arnie: It's not lack of talent. If you take the working class suburb of Berkeley, one small area of Wollongong, it had a greater concentration of musos than anywhere, and that's no shit. Heaps and heaps of players and bands, all from Berkeley.

Mike: Maybe the problem is that it's also got the highest concentration of communists?

Arnie: Yeah, it's probably all your fault. But maybe it's that we prefer to be big fish in a small pond than a sardine in the ocean.

Neil: The five top Wollongong bands that had a single and toured have all had one individual who has been maniacally single-minded, and has driven the rest of the band. I drove my band, made them practice seven days a week. They jacked up, hated me, said that what I was expecting of them was humanly impossible. Arnie drove his band, but not hard enough in my opinion. Billy Mawer of *Tarquin* used to drive his band hard and sometimes seemed cold-blooded in the way that he would sack someone. I used to say to him, "Sack 'em now, mate, don't wait for five years regretting that you hadn't". So he turned into a bloodthirsty slave driver.

Arnie: Yeah, I've been catching so much shit lately, too. Like at rehearsal, I say "Pretzel, what the fucking hell are you doing? Last time you sang in that song, now you're not singing, what are you doing?" He gets all petulant and drops his bottom lip, "You know, well ... it just didn't sound right" I'd say, "Look, man, we got two rehearsals to go. Are you going to sing, or are you not going to sing? I don't like surprises on the first gig." "Look, Arnie," he'd say, "I'm just trying it out."

Neil: Sack him, I'm serious, sack him.

Look, who's the leader in that band? You've got to have someone to hold the thing together.

Arnie: I tell you what. I'd hate to work for a rock and roll musician. They treat you like shit, and I'd be working for monkey's shit. I wouldn't be getting any overtime or any of the other benefits. Look, the overwhelming majority of rock musos have got absolutely no commitment to anything except the individual road to money or fame, and that's it. They have no time for trade unions, and no sense of class solidarity at all.

Mike: What were the tools of the trade like that you started off with?

Neil: I bought myself a twin 12-inch speaker amp and started playing bass through it — bass didn't go very well through those sort of speakers — so we gradually tried to build up our gear, but you tend not to, thinking that you'll only be playing rock and roll for a couple of years, while you're an "immature teenager", and then you'll grow up and do something else. So it goes on for a few more years, and you suddenly think, "Gee, I've played for five years on this rotten dud gear".

We saw *The Executives* playing out at Wollongong Showgrounds, and they had these beautiful amplifiers called Leonard amplifiers, so we found out where to buy them, went up to Sydney and spent a thousand bucks each on these new amps and went full-time. It did look impressive, with big walls of amps stacked up behind you. A write up in *Go-Set*, Australia's only rock magazine at the time, said that we were so loud that you had to go four blocks away for the sound to come in focus — we were ahead of our time with regard to booming volume. So the point about equipment back then was that, through the 'sixties it got bigger, and more and more expensive.

But the equipment was for instrumental music. What was a microphone? You never made any announcements, you just got up there and played.

Of course *The Beatles* came in and kicked the bottom out of the bucket. Overnight, we had to learn how to sing. Six guys singing through a six-inch speaker. The feedback! Then it just grew like crazy, the amps got bigger and bigger. Now, of course, they have a one-foot square amp, like the one I started with, but with unbelievable quality. The quality these days is incredible. You can hear every instrument. And mixing became crucial. Before, if you had a solo, you turned yourself up and set new settings on your guitar and then, after the solo, you readjusted. I reckon we worked

Opposite page: 1974 (from left) Arnie Olbrich, Jim McCallum, Lou Bellancic and Pete Mazzloli in Tree.



'IMAGINATION'

MANAGED BY ABSOLUTE
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1969: (From left) Lyle McLaine, Nell Porter, Max Stefanovic, and Geoff Foster in Imagination.

hard for our money.

Arnie: I don't know. I think you work a lot harder now. If you're in a band that's on a shoestring budget like most of us still are, you've got to hump gear. You can't afford roadies, so you've got to hump half a ton, or a ton of gear to the gig.

You've got to get there about four o'clock, set up your gear, have a quick sound check. Then you work while you're still sweating, knackered, absolutely tired out. At the end of the night, after you've finished your gig, instead of sitting down and having a nice beer and driving home, you've got to have a real quick beer and then hump your gear out to the truck again and then drive home. It's no fun. Roadies are a luxury, without them we're on overheads of \$350 a night. In a pub you only earn \$250 a night — you're paying to play.

Nell: To play a four-hour gig takes you from 2.30 in the afternoon to 2.30 at night — and you might come home with \$15 or \$20 apiece, if you're lucky. In the 'sixties, a four-hour gig would only take you six hours maximum, and the money was more or less the same, maybe a bit less.

Mike: Well, why aren't you making more money?

Arnie: I just think it's a matter that you've got to have the technology. Your overheads have gone up, but the wages that you get from the pub haven't gone up at all. Ten years ago, you were making \$150 a night in a pub, without overheads. Nowadays you've got heaps more overheads, but you're still earning basically the same wages. If you want to get better, you've got to get better gear. Your overheads are

trebling and quadrupling, but you're still making the same money in the pubs, in the hope of maybe getting there one day.

Another really big change in music that we haven't spoken about yet concerns original music. With *The Beatles* we had to start thinking about writing music too. Australia didn't really come into its own with local songs until 1970/71, but now original stuff just can't be played in clubs.

Nell: Wollongong bands get disheartened because they get all fired up, buy their gear, practise for six months without a gig, get their first gig, wait six months for another one, find

that no one will hire them because they play their own music. So they start playing 30 percent of their own songs, so someone books them and says, "Look, you need 50 percent covers", so they learn 50 percent of other people's songs, and so they're up to 80 percent. By then they're five years older, got a wife and kids, and think, "Gee, it's easier to learn other people's songs than to write your own", and so the originals disappear, and they become a bland, boring, tame club band.

Arnie: But I suppose that there is some room for optimism in all this. There is simply such a vast diversity of music around today — you've got your jazz freaks, old time rock and rollers, heavy metal, the so-called punks, the new wavers, and popular music. It's so diversified I think that you could find a niche for yourself and almost survive. A lot of years ago everyone sounded like *The Shadows*, then it was *The Stones*, and *The Beatles*, but the range of choice around now is so much greater today.

Mike: Isn't that the same as saying that you have to become more specialised? If you put all your eggs in one basket and become a highly proficient specialised musician, and put all your talent and money into one style, what happens if you've chosen wrong?

Nell: You cry a lot and get old quick.

Mike: How do you get your little niche to become the *Modern Pavilion*?

Nell: *Radio Birdman*, when they first came out, sounded absolutely abominable to the average ear which had been trained on *Abba* at that time, and the *Ramones*, they were playing punk in the sixties, and just kept on playing it, until someone picked up on



1967: Arnie Olbrich (left) and Henry Emerich in Coffin Cheaters.

it Like *Birdman* — roaring chords — some kids saw in that style of music a need, and supported them, is it luck or what? Who knows, they got cult enough to be popular, and *Birdman* is accredited as being the precursors of Australian punk, and they did pretty well between 1974 and 1978.

Playing covers is a funny business, too. I mean you have to be good to play them properly, and it's easy to tell a bad band by listening to how they play covers. The guitar player in *The Marksmen* used to write a lot of original instrumentals, for the truth was that we weren't good enough to copy *The Shadows*, so we did a lot of originals. Later, of course, we got good enough. Original stuff was pretty unheard of in those days. Even *The Beatles* didn't produce an LP of all their own stuff until *Revolver*. The only Australian band to produce all their own stuff was *The Easybeats*. Right from their first album, they did hundreds of originals, and I don't know anyone who can say that.

Mike: Disco was a major technological innovation that was said to be bad for rock and roll. I guess it hit in the mid-seventies, but live bands are still around and seem just as popular now as when we were young.

Neil: By 1979, bands were back in discos, and the band got paid its full price, and the disco got paid its full price, but they both only worked half a night each, so really the musicians got it better. 1976/77 when disco peaked, were worrying years, when disco appeared to be taking over, but it was just a fashion. But you see, the bands weren't playing good music to dance to, whereas disco music between 1975

and 1978 was just great to dance to. So, of course, the bands started playing funkier music, and they got their jobs back.

Arnie: It's really hard to criticise a disco, know what I mean? A record, you hear it, you like it, you don't. What is there to talk about? People were getting sick of disco — they liked human musicians, up on stage with their own personalities and idiosyncrasies.

Mike: After the disco flare-up in the mid-seventies, bands adapted their music to get back to dance music, but at the same time the speed of technological change in the industry seemed to be accelerating — with quite marked effects on social relations inside the band — increasing use of keyboard, lead guitarists starting to move away from centre stage, wind instruments starting to come back. There's been massive changes in technology on stage — foot pedals, equalisers and offstage — mixing, phrasing. Did you have to re-learn, re-educate yourselves?

Neil: Yeah, I've undergone a fair bit of retraining. Take a graphic equaliser. Bass guitarists like me might once have said what on earth's a graphic equaliser? And yet most stereos and even car stereos contain these things now. What it does is to adjust the various frequencies in the sound range of that instrument, and colour the tone of the instrument in a beautiful way, so that with a couple of switches your guitar can sound like a heavy metal instrument, next song, jazz. Before, you had to work a lot harder to get those sounds, and couldn't just flip a switch. Speaking for myself, I'm

greatly in favour of the current technology. It is absolutely magnificent, and I can't over-praise it.

Arnie: Yeah, but it's not just foot pedals, you know? The whole thing has become so professionalised now that it's not funny. In order to step out on stage now, it seems that you've got to have a choreographer trained in the USA to tell you where to stand and how to move.

Neil: Ah ... come on. Sure, there is professional choreography, but look, you take someone like Ross Wilson from *Mondo Rock*. You can't tell me anyone is pulling his strings. From the first moment he walks on stage he is brilliant. He is just *there*.

Arnie: You're *putting* the chicken in front of the egg now. He's already famous; he's already made it. If he got out there with a bunch of guys that weren't famous and tried to do his stuff, everybody would scream out "Bullshit, bullshit; fuck off. We want *Mondo Rock*".

Neil: No, a brand new band can walk on stage and if the players have got real presence and charisma, and precision timing to back it up, they'll get their following.

Arnie: But what are the kids going to think? They can go up to the Entertainment Centre, or Horderns in Sydney, and see this super tech-ed up band, and then they come back home and go down to the Headies (Hotel) and check out the local band, what are they going to think?

Neil: OK, so how do you cross that gap? How do you go from a local band to the Sydney Entertainment Centre? There's only one way to get famous, have an album and a film clip.



Above: *Tree*. Right: 1981: (From left) Bert Matteschek, Brett Cooper, Peter Ryan and Arnie Olbrich in *Hard Grind*.

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Arnie: Oh, yeah? And tell me, how do you do that without money?

Neil: You work part-time jobs until you've got the money. Dedication, ferocious dedication, that's what it requires.

Arnie: We had all that. We had an album in the can, we had arranged some guy from the university to finance us to the tune of \$10,000. We had a film clip that Donny Sutherland played two or three times. We dropped the single out, all fine and great. And what happened? We end up back at the Oxford (Hotel) getting the sack the first night for swearing. We had to crawl back and say, "Look, we're really sorry for swearing, we won't do it any more, just give us another gig, this is the only one we have to go to." Look, I'm just saying it's not all simply a matter of commitment. Commitment has a way of running dry, especially when you've got a family to support. A family man can't afford to hump gear around till 4 am in the morning and then start down at the steelworks at six. How can you do that for more than a few years? How long can you live in absolute poverty? You need more than the songs and the drive, you need someone who can push, and it's money that pushes songs.

Now, here's a good example of albums and successful people — so called. I was hanging around with *The Masters' Apprentices*, rehearsing in London. So we're sitting around, we'd rehearse for a while, have a cup of tea or something, go downstairs to the kitchen and ponder the day, and think, "Well, what are we going to do?", and somebody would say, "Well, let's check out the *Melody Maker* again, there might be some options in there, so we all go through the classifieds. Everyone's sitting there with no money to spend, all pretty down and out — in the days when tight jeans were in fashion they were still wearing flares. Here they are, sitting there, a successful band, they recorded an album at Abbey Road, they had three or four number one singles in Australia, and two or three albums out, and they're still on the compilation albums that come out here every six months. So here we are going through the ads, and suddenly here's an ad which says *Masters' Apprentices* album due to be re-released. So someone says, "Shit, better phone the record company up, we might get some royalties out of this". So we did, and got two and six, or something. I mean, there's a band that got somewhere, with no work, no money, nothing. A month ago, the two of them



1981: Neil Porter in *New Beginnings*. that were left played Shellharbour pub. The point is, they're just hanging in; guys who have had top records.

Mike: Getting back to the tools of the trade, tell me, Arnie, what's the difference in the hard gear that you have to play successful rock and roll today, compared with what you had when you set up your first one?

Arnie: The essential equipment is a decent p.a. system that is capable of mixing the whole band, music and vocals. You need about a dozen mikes just on the drums. To buy a system like the one we can only hire, would cost \$30,000 — that's the mikes, the p.a., the desk. That still leaves you to find the lights and the truck.

Neil: The current style is such that keyboards and synthesisers are really big. *Australian Crawl* went back into the studio and remixed their album. On stage, they use four guitars, and then the lead singer would pick one up and kick in, too. So what do they do? They go back into the studio and pull down the guitars so that you can hardly hear them at all; learned how to play or program keyboards and mixed that sound in. Now, what's that mean to a pub musician? You pay \$800-\$1,000 for a guitar, but a synthesiser costs \$5,000. You need, at a minimum, an electric grand and a synth. All up, \$10-\$12,000 and that's the basics. Now a Fairlight CMI which is what you would like to have if you could, runs out at \$30,000. Whatever instrument you can care to name can come out of that machine. It's not only instruments, but you can create animal sounds in it by programming it and playing the keys. *Stevie Winwood's* last three albums were all done by him on one of these things, almost.

Arnie: Yeah, but the *Stones* still use two guitars and a set of drums, and Jagger. A machine doesn't sweat. That's what people want to see. Another thing, you ever seen someone try to sing to these programmed machines? I tell you, if they make one mistake, miss a beat, the machine rolls on, no mercy. So you've got two vocalists and a pack of machines taking the place of five or six musos, but they are so stung out trying to keep up with the machines, that they look like robots themselves.

Neil: I don't think that we're going to lose jobs out of this though. The high-tech bands still have four, five, six musos, the same as we've always had. But, of course, they sound like 15 or 20. As it currently stands, the technology is enhancing, not replacing musicians.

Arnie: When *The Beatles* played at the Stadium, they weren't miked up, they just had raw vox amps, like a p.a. at a speedway. These days, the top bands have a million bucks worth of gear and you're supposed to compete with that.

The discrepancy between the top and the bottom is much greater now than it was 20 years ago when we started. I mean, 20 years ago we could emulate *The Shadows* quite easily, if you had the talent and an echo chamber to do the Hank Marvin bit, that's all you needed, right? A vox amp, a Burns guitar and an echo chamber and the ability. What can we do? We can't even afford a snort; just sit here and drink beer.

I don't know how the kids today do it. When we were young, you always knew you could get a job, a skid strapper at Lysaghts, maybe, but at least you could get a job and pay off the modest amount of gear that you needed. Now there are no jobs and the amount of stuff you need is simply outrageous. Sure, there will always be bands, but the problem is that the big bands are just getting so much bigger, turning into music multinationals.

It was easier for a band to come up before than it is now, that's for sure. We got tight playing in backyard barbies and school dances, but how do you pay off all this gear you've gotta have now, while you're doing that? And how can a bunch of young kids hope to sound anywhere near like the super-doooper, extra-special, dubbed-over, cleaned-up, teched-out tapes and records that are around today? Nowadays, you listen to *The Beatles* and you think, "Christ, how did they get away with that?" *The Beatles* would have had a hard time getting a job today.

Another thing, I'm dead. Lead guitarists are finished. We're trying to play some of this modern stuff that's around, and I'm up there hanging around waiting for the lead guitar break that never comes. I don't play a chord in this Top 40 stuff.

Neil: You're living in the 'seventies, mate. Why don't you get yourself a synthesiser and learn how to play it?

Arnie: Yeah, and why don't I get a job so I can pay it off? What am I going to do? Trade myself in for a machine?

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