

ROCKY ROAD

Australians take for granted providing comfy studios in Paris for our writers, and generous funds for our opera and ballet. But rock music has never been viewed as 'worthy' of public support. Would subsidised pop lose its cutting edge? Or could public support for the local product break the overseas stranglehold on our airwaves? Graeme Turner charts a course through these and other dilemmas.

As a post-colonial, Second World nation, Australia has a long history of protecting selected national cultural sites from foreign domination, narrow bases of local control, or an alignment with exclusively sectional interests. That history may be reaching its end in the rash of deals and deregulation since the Hawke government took office. Nevertheless, it does not much surprise Australians that the Australian Opera is subsidised to the tune of hundreds of thousands, the Australian ballet to the tune of millions, or the Australian film industry in tens of millions.

Since books published by Australian writers have a hard time competing in the market place against international titles dumped on our booksellers' shelves for the price of waste paper, the Australian Literary Board subsidises publishers of local works of literary merit, underwriting their admittedly modest print runs against loss. Studio-flats are maintained at taxpayers' expense in Paris and Venice where writers can work untroubled for periods of up to twelve months. The Australian Film Commission regularly hosts programs of Australian films overseas and maintains marketing offices in key cities as well as at Cannes during the festival. Australian films, Australian literature, Australian dance, are seen as cultural flagships, operating as quasi-official representatives of an

egalitarian but cultured, distinctive but parochial, modestly world-class Australia.

Rock music has had very little of this kind of protection. There are Australian content regulations covering music broadcast on radio, and some concessions regarding the use of local support during tours by overseas bands (often more notable in the breach than in the observance), but nothing in the way of a program of political interventions or set of institutions produced by the operation of a cultural policy. Last year, one brave government member of a committee on arts funding suggested that the rock industry deserved a government-funded office in LA and perhaps a writing and producing studio in London: this may have borne fruit in Pete Steedman's newly incorporated quango, the Australian Contemporary Music Development Company, but it is still too early to tell what it might actually do, and little sense of what kind of cultural policy might drive it. The fact that it was launched in WA might indicate something about its marginality.

This situation may seem entirely natural to most Australians. Indeed, the conventional establishment contempt for the popular in all its forms — music, fashion, popular fiction, soap opera — may seem a full and adequate justification for such a state of affairs. Rock music is certainly not the only category of popular culture without string institutional or political support.

Writers of Australian popular fiction once found it hard to get arrested until Peter Corris managed to force the door open for detective fiction (an achievement not unrelated to Corris' long stint as reviews editor for *The National Times*). Equations between the popular and meretricious are deployed as alibis for the neglect of such cultural formations. Rock music, in particular, occupies a significant place within the demonology of mass culture, threatening mainstream, democratic, moral society by its "jungle rhythms" and thirst for excess.

Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that rock music has always regretted its cultural positioning, or that the industry has persistently fought to revise it. Rock music has exploited, and is in some senses defined by, its marginality. Elsewhere I have argued that rock's musical form sets up "a central (if often bogus or putative) opposition between its values and those of the rest of straight society"¹. Rock's musical and verbal discourses regularly flirt with connotations of the demonic, the primitive, and even the satanic — Kiss, Alice Cooper and so on. Rock Music invites, and luxuriates in its ability to generate fear and loathing — both as an index of its significance as a genuine threat, and as a surrogate for any more explicitly political challenge. Successive generations of rock musicians customarily dismiss the previous generation, and even some



Photo: Jane Ollershaw

The local product: V Spy V Spy

its most venerable elder statesmen (The Rolling Stones, The Who) as boring old farts who have failed to maintain an authentically oppositional posture. In discussing pub rock elsewhere I have argued that the music's roots as a form and as a social practice are in the group, and one of its functions is the ritualised demonstration and celebration of the difference between the group and those outside it. So rock music necessarily takes on subcultural meanings and proposes them to mainstream culture as challenges, exceptions or propositions for renovation.

Yet rock music is also a large commercial industry, whose most successful performers often end up "crossing over" into the mainstream entertainment industry, becoming regulars on talk shows and voicing ambitions about becoming serious actors or all-round entertainers. Neither the subcultural roots nor their subversive forms and styles

inhibit the regular achievement of commercial success — even for unlikely contenders like Boy George, Lou Reed or Alice Cooper. Rather, and probably definitively, rock music's industrial and ideological history is one of a "continual dialectical process of the articulation of opposition to, and incorporation within, the dominant structures of society". I found, when I looked at the perceived "Australianness" of rock and roll in the pubs, that, despite the regular moral panics excited by the "delinquent" or criminalised behaviour of the audiences in these pubs, it was remarkable how entirely this subcultural form was enclosed within dominant constructions of an Australian character — invoking radical egalitarianism, lack of pretentiousness and so on. While the Australian formation of rock and roll I was examining took some pains to represent itself as an oppositional one, the values it opposed were not

those of Australian society — it expressed those — but those of the big, capitalist American, hype-riddled music industry.

This bicentennial year has given us another example of the way in which rock music, and rock musicians, are incorporated — not merely into the industry, but also into the nation. John Farnham's installation as Australian of the Year, while not a first for an entertainer (Paul Hogan got it in 1986), is a first for a rock or pop musician.

This is more complex than it might appear. For a start, Farnham is no Michael Hutchence. He has actually gone from being an all-round entertainer first, and is not the most marginal, the most rock'n'roll, he has ever been. And yet he is not a rock star like Michael Hutchence, Jimmy Barnes, or James Reyne. His "Australianness" is more pronounced than any of these; his wholesome, country-boy parochial-

ism is unlike these quintessentially metropolitan stars. To watch a Farnham concert is an ambiguous experience. What we hear is a stylish, technically flawless rendition of international blue-eyed soul pop stripped of its subcultural core but still exciting; what we see is a blond, gregarious, fortyish lad with a permanent suntan, and total lack of satanic cool or predatory sexuality, who prowls the stage about as menacingly as Kylie Minogue. His relation with his audience is folksie, the well-loved entertainer still trying hard to establish the hipper, more abrasive rock credentials. The result is curiously disjunctive on stage, although there is little of this contradiction on record.

John Farnham is one image of the way in which rock music can negotiate its relation to the discourses of the nation. Molly Meldrum is another. Molly has long acted as a gatekeeper in the industry, championing the cause of local product while also helping to determine exactly which local product gets their chance in the first place. Molly's role is ambiguous, too, however. On the one hand he acts as the messenger from abroad, bringing home all the news of what is happening in the capitals of rock — elsewhere — and on the other he trumpets whatever successes are achieved by Australian bands in those same distant centres. This attempt to mediate, and its inadvertent restatement of, our marginality in the global rock music industry is what used to be called the cultural cringe.

The duplicity of the affiliations Molly signifies is admirably encapsulated in the symbolism of his hat, an icon of "Mollyness" so powerful a copy was presented to Bob Hawke in a gesture of reciprocal appropriation when the PM appeared on *Countdown* to flog Priority One. At the simplest level, Molly's hat can be understood as a stylised Australian bush hat and is thus naively and gormlessly nationalist; or it could be understood as a reference to rock'n'roll's love affair with American cowboy headgear and its invocation of the

outlaw. It is possible to have both understandings at once, leaving Molly stranded in mid-Pacific pushing the commodities from both nation-states. The hat, and Molly's national function, is also complicated by its material necessity of hiding his bald head, and thus his disappearing credentials as representative of Australian youth and culture. Finally, Molly's nationalism is also complicated by his notorious bumbling, his fabled inarticulacy, and his effective representation of someone who has somehow or other managed to overcome his hopeless provincialism by becoming an institution. From such a perspective, Molly becomes harmless, powerless, and this is misleading. He is not, nor are the industrial institutions for whom he speaks.

Molly's hat, an icon of Mollyness so powerful a copy was presented to Bob Hawke when he appeared on *Countdown*.

The point I am circling here is what does happen to rock music, rock musicians, rock culture, as it is appropriated, incorporated, institutionalised — as it would be under a cultural policy. How did you feel when Redgum signed with Warners, Midnight Oil with CBS, when the Dingoes rerecorded their best Australian album for the American market and ruined it, when Boy George became the darling of the talk shows, when Elvis joined the army, when Christina Amphlett stopped parodying male sexual fantasies and became their object? Should rock music resist incorporation into public policy, asserting its essentially subcultural form, despite the similarities between the rock industry and, say, the television industry? Cultural policy formation does appropriate, selectively and with motivation — the film industry has demonstrated that; but it does not only do that. Recent history suggests that, particularly in popular culture, which offers often quite unofficial

pleasures, the official regime can be subverted. So, the Australian film industry starts out making *Picnic at Hanging Rock* but ends up making *Mad Max*, *Scales of Justice*, *Vietnam*, *Going Down*, and so on. If there is a risk in rock music becoming another ideological apparatus for the state, this needs to be weighed against the risk of it being entirely silenced by commercial imperatives.

There are three main points I want to use to suggest the kinds of objectives a cultural policy for the Australian rock music industry might pursue. The first point is a product of the recognition that rock music, like other forms of communication and culture in Australia, is dominated by non-Australian interests. Irrespective of whether these interests may or may not now be benign, it must be accepted that a nation state culturally colonised by another is not just in danger of boring radio, but in severe political danger too. The problem of the explosion of the communication industries from America and Europe into the Second and Third worlds has been widely canvassed. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's (ABT) own 1986 report on Australian music and broadcasting put it this way:

At an international level, there has been growing recognition of the importance of individual nations being able to express and maintain their cultures. This recognition has been heightened by the proliferation of communications technologies which, now more than at any time in the past, carry the potential for some cultures to exert a significant influence on others ...²

There is, then, a strategic, geopolitical crisis recognised by UNESCO in its attempt to create a new order in the dissemination and control of information and the export of culture, of meanings and ideologies. Australia needs such a "new order" in many of its culture industries, not only rock music.

The second point involves asking how we go about justifying the protection of rock music as part of our national culture. The ABT has accepted the importance of "popular forms of creative expression —

for example, poster art, video clips, or rock music", which merit inclusion under the general heading of "culture". While this may not kill off elitist resistance to the popular, it is significant that the ABT should see rock music as having a cultural value, "as a way of reflecting the concerns, interests, and aspirations of Australian society, as well as celebrating the creativity of that society".

A further strategy of justification has sidestepped the prejudice against the popular in order to demonstrate the intrinsic cultural importance of indigenous rock music through the proposition of an "Australian sound", an identifiable cultural accent in our music that is unique and therefore demands protection. This can be something of a blind alley,³ and one we don't really need to go down.

For a start, there is no denying that rock music is a global industry. Whatever we produce here takes place in an industrial and musical context which is in no way confined to Australia. Rock music is not an indigenous musical form; the performance of Australian rock music can be produced from an experience of records heard in Australia but not performed by Australians. However, it is not necessary to define the characteristics of a unique indigenous sound in order to argue that our culture must produce its own specific inflections, its own accents, in rock music as it has in spoken English, in film, or many other language-like activities. So without getting into arguments about national identity, about what constitutes or signifies it, one can accept that rock music is subject to the regime of pleasures and meaning we call "our" culture. Exactly how it is subject to that regime, and how clearly its accent can be heard, is just the kind of issue the formation of some kind of cultural policy should address — and local content regulations *are* addressing.

My third point, and a key objective, flows from this. A cultural policy for the rock industry must aim at being able to guarantee that Australians are able to gain access to



The export article: pubescent Bee Gees.

the industries producing, broadcasting, and disseminating music for the culture; and to maintain minority interests in a commercial market-driven industry in order to recognise, if not serve, the interests of all members of the culture — whatever their class, gender or subcultural group.

It is important to remember, despite all this discussion of culture and nation, that rock music is not only a set of musical texts; it is also a set of industrial and institutional structures and work practices which affect people's daily working lives, not just their occasional pleasures. The industrial interests of Australian rock musicians have very few champions. In a business context which argues that non-viable or non-commercial industries should be allowed to go to the wall, Australian record producers have a hard time

defending their existence against the obvious supremacy of the multinationals. Musicians themselves have to fight for equity and access at every point of the industrial structure: they have to combat videos and tape players in order to perform live; they have to accept that the scale of the Australian market may necessitate the attempt to break into one of the larger markets and ultimately America, and this may usher in the "love the singer, but fire the band" syndrome.

Once records are made, bands have to tour to promote them, but often their tour takings underwrite the cost of promoting the album for the company rather than produce returns for themselves; and at all points their interests are situated so as to be in opposition to those of, at varying junctures, the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters, and

the Industries Assistance Commission. Against this we have the Musicians Union, Actors Equity and ARIA but, it should be said, these do not always constitute a unified force. Without mediation of some kind, commercial logic would have wiped out even these divided forces by now, but the intervention of cultural policy — and in particular, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal — has done enough to, at least, sustain the conflict. So, albeit precarious and embattled, there is an industry out there producing Australian music in competition with music from elsewhere, and often convincing the Australian public to buy it in preference to foreign music. But if the industry is to continue, it will require more political support.

Before I finish, I would like to cash these general points in by outlining some of the areas where such support might usefully occur. A shopping list of problems with the industry and its effects might include the following:

- the domination of radio music programming by two major FM networks — Austereo and Hoyts Media — should be causing the kind of concern customarily if ineffectually expressed about Murdoch's pre-eminence in the press and television. As the FM airwaves are now going to be sold off to AM stations, there is a golden chance for an effective cultural policy to regulate this. The likely result if this does not occur is for the two FM networks to spread even further (and/or to be joined by others) and for the entire radio spectrum to be locked up.
- Music broadcasting formats have narrowed and become more conservative in recent years. The golden oldies, 'seventies revival, lists have exercised an increasingly rigid control over what new records make it to air. Radio stations in many markets are now reversing the dominant trend of the post-television years in aiming at mass markets, rather than segmenting, localising and targetting specialised markets

and thus offering a wide range of alternatives for radio listeners.

- In the recording industry, the major companies are American-owned and hold crucial advantages over local and independent producers. Independents are locked out of pressing plants, promotion and distribution networks, informal networks of obligation to the radio stations enforced by the supply of chart-topping American product, and so on. The cost of promoting a record has been increased by the institutionalisation of the promotion video. Videos have also threatened to function as substitutes for live performers, "increasing the dependency of rock consumers on privatised domestic technology".
- For video clip makers, conversely, there is little recognition, and their work is rendered invisible to radio and TV audiences by the formats used and their case needs to be put, too.
- Non-commercial music, rock music aimed at subcultures which fill pubs and clubs every weekend in every city in the country, cannot survive the cost of recording without assistance. Subsidies for such productions should be analagous to those given to experimental filmmakers or poets, and it is hoped that this will be a major activity for the new Contemporary Music Development Company.
- The verbal contracts between musicians and venue owners should be formalised in order to protect the musician. Despite the union, musicians are frequently short-changed at the end of the gig and made to bear all the commercial risk of their own performances while only minimally participating in the profits.
- Specialised marketing assistance, like that offered by the Australian Film Commission, should be available to bands and companies wanting to export their products.
- The institutionalisation of

discriminatory work practices which make rock music one of the strongest bastions of sexism won't change simply as a result of commercial pressures. Robert Palmer's latest clip for his song *Addicted to Love* suggests that they will only get worse.

Cultural policy can be used as a means of preserving differences; at one level that means the difference between Australian national culture and other national cultures, and at another level it means the differences between subcultures, groups, or interests within the national culture. Capitalist culture both produces and smoothes over these differences, so there needs to be some political intervention in cultural and economic processes if the common culture and its internal divisions are to be recognised and understood. Further, since Australia is a culture which is generally dominated by economic and political interests based outside its shores, whose specific objectives may well now and later be against the very survival of this culture, there are good arguments against leaving the production of national culture entirely to market forces. Cultural policy must be explicitly interventionist. In short, the point of having a cultural policy on rock music would not be to work within normal market forces, but to circumvent and subvert them. The result could be that Australia continues to produce, not only consume, its own culture.

NOTES:

1. John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. 19.
2. *Australian Music on Radio*, Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, Sydney, 1986, p. 15.
3. See Lawrence Zion's "The Sound of 'Australian Music'" in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds) *Constructing a Culture*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988, pp 209-222

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