

# Perth punk and the construction of urbanity in a suburban city<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*As a musical form, punk is often associated with urbanity, as embodied in the scenes in both London and New York, and in an Australian national context by the scenes in Melbourne and Sydney. In Perth, Western Australia – a primarily middle-class suburban city without a distinct inner city – punk was expressed differently. While the music itself exemplified many of the stylistic traits associated with the genre, punk in Perth was articulated through the city's isolation, its affluence and its suburban nature. Utilising interviews with key players in the Perth punk scene of the late 1970s, this paper seeks to illustrate the ways in which urbanity was constructed and voiced through Perth punk, in a city that constructed itself in opposition to traditional notions of the inner city's urban lived environment.*

## Perth and punk

Punk is often associated with the city. Urbanity is a construct through which the music speaks lyrically and thematically, and cities are often cited as the environments that give rise to punk scenes and other alternative music scenes. These forms identify as both bohemian and cosmopolitan, often embracing the tension that feeds from the high-density sociocultural experience of the lived environments of cities. This is certainly the case with the two most readily identified foundational sites for punk: New York and London. In a veneration of the stereotypical assertion that it was the grimy urbanity of New York that gave rise to punk, Tony Rettman (2014) asserts that the music 'derives from the stank of the Lower East Side, the swagger that comes from the Burrough of Queens and all the various fucked-up miscreants that have dwelled there'. However, punk has and does exist outside large cosmopolitan cities. In his discussion of provincial punk in Wigan, Paul Copley (1999) critiques the construction of UK punk as being London-centric. In Australia, punk is thought of in similarly reductive terms. To borrow a phrase from Clinton Walker's (1982) chronicle of the style, it is an 'inner city sound'. And yet, in Perth, on the west coast of Australia, punk emerged away from the grit and depravity of urban bohemia,

<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to the memory of Professor Niall Lucy who was an investigator on the research grant that has facilitated the work on this paper, and who conducted many of the interviews that have contributed to the research from which this paper developed. The research for this paper was funded by the Australian Research Council under the Discovery Grant, 'A Cultural History of West Australian Popular Music, 1945–2011', with Professor Jon Stratton as Chief Investigator.

springing from the brightness and cleanness of the suburban middle class, as a music just as entrenched in a new form of identity politics, but voiced through a different set of social circumstances.

Perth is the state capital and the largest city in Western Australia, located almost 4,000 km west of Australia's largest city, Sydney. As such, Perth is the second most isolated capital city in the world (after Honolulu), an aspect that has characterised its sense of identity from settlement to the present. Although the area surrounding Perth has been inhabited for 40,000 years, the city itself was founded in 1829 as the Swan River Colony and joined the Australian Federation in 1901. Perth had a small population until the postwar period, when substantial immigration, primarily from the UK but also from other European countries, brought about significant population growth that has continued sporadically ever since. These spurts of population growth have related to various resources booms that have seen both Western Australia and Perth, as the business centre for resource development, become particularly affluent – another factor that has shaped Perth's cultural identity. Because of its small size, up until the postwar period Perth did not have the kind of urban density that characterises the centres of other Australian cities such as Sydney and Melbourne. As a condition of the population growth that took place in the postwar period, Perth instead grew outwards as a suburban city, sprawling up and down the coast of the Indian Ocean, bordered by the Darling Scarp some 30 km inland. It is also wrongly perceived as a small city. In the late 1970s Perth's population was approximately 800,000, significantly smaller than both Sydney and Melbourne, but certainly larger than the average US or European city. However, it was and is Perth's isolation from other cities and its low population density that spreads its metropolitan population across a large land mass of almost 6,500 km<sup>2</sup>, which gives Perth the impression of being a small city despite its sprawl.

These various geographical, economic and cultural influences have had a number of implications for Perth's popular musical infrastructure and we shall see these in the ways punk was received and expressed in the city when it arrived there in the late 1970s. While very little of the first wave of Perth punk actually made it out of the city at the time either through touring or recording, a number of key players in Perth's punk scene enjoyed both national and international success subsequent to leaving Perth, namely Kim Salmon of The Scientists and Dave Faulkner of The Victims. Arguably, Perth's best-known punk band is The Scientists, who released several singles and a full-length album of punk-influenced rock'n'roll while in Perth, and enjoyed greater success under an augmented line-up and with a significantly different sound while located in Sydney and later London. Indeed, much has been made of the later-period Scientists' influence on grunge (Stratton 2007), but while in Perth they were heavily influenced by 1960s pop, mutating it through extreme volume and wilful musical aggression.

The band's only constant member, Kim Salmon, also played in the band considered Perth's first self-identified punk act, The Cheap Nasties. Although never releasing any recordings and existing for just over a year, The Cheap Nasties laid the foundations for punk in Perth, playing a raw and unpolished brand of rock'n'roll influenced by US proto-punk and garage rock bands such as The Flamin' Groovies and The New York Dolls. When Salmon left The Cheap Nasties the rest of the band continued as The Manikins, whose sound subsequently moved in a more melodic direction with a strong new-wave influence. Indeed, Manikins tracks such as 'I Never Thought I'd Find' (1978) echo the more aggressive end of the power pop sound of the late 1970s.

Formed at a similar time to The Cheap Nasties but never playing live were The Geeks. Similarly influenced by US garage rock, The Geeks wrote a number of songs that drummer James Baker would take with him to his next band, The Victims. Although they formed and dissolved within under a year, The Victims are arguably Perth's first proponents of punk as a distinctly self-identified musical genre. Reminiscent of the aggressive and rough-edged rock'n'roll of UK punk acts such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash, their single 'Television Addict' (1978) was an underground hit, selling out its 1,000-copy pressing, and solidifying the band's reputation as prime exemplars of the genre. These were the bands around which the city's nascent punk scene of the late 1970s formed and congealed. However, reflective of the city's distinct geographical and socio-economic circumstances, in Perth punk was articulated through a distinct and divergent subcultural moment – one forged in response to and often rejection of the city's sense of place.

### Punk and class

One of the defining characteristics of punk's cultural pervasiveness in the late 1970s was its merging of art with the concerns of the working classes, most notably in Britain in an era when – as suggested by Dick Hebdige (1979), Jon Savage (1992) and Greil Marcus (1989) – such preoccupations were particularly resonant. This fusion was arguably not as pronounced in other locations where punk emerged, but even British punk moved beyond this specific relationship with class politics. David Simonelli suggests that:

[t]he working-class punk was unemployed because he could not find work, and punk was his angry protest against his lot in life. Middle-class punks claimed that they understood the capitalist values behind work and that they would not adhere to them. (Simonelli 2002, p. 126)

In Australia, punk may have been part of a cultural movement that was concerned with resistance, or at the very least a new and somewhat antagonistic communication of subcultural identity politics, but it was not so strongly steeped in the concerns of the working class. In part, this was due to Australia's significantly less historically defined expression of class politics. However, it was arguably also due to the fact that through its strong resources and agricultural industries, Australia weathered economic uncertainty in a more robust manner, which made for a financially assured and relaxed working and middle class. At this time Australia was also undergoing something of a cultural renaissance in terms of the arts, which assisted in dispelling what was often referred to as the country's 'cultural cringe' (Minogue 1995, p. 21), through which it viewed home-grown cultural products as inferior to those from more established, cosmopolitan hubs such as the US and Europe. Although referring to an exodus of Australian creatives and intellectuals in the late 1970s, Stephen Alomes discusses 'the cultural efflorescence of the 1970s', suggesting that through it 'a deeper and more sophisticated national culture had been created' (Alomes 1999, p. 5). In Western Australia in particular, this cultural growth was facilitated by a strong economic position.

Although national unemployment and inflation rates rose throughout the decade and GDP growth slowed (Pitchford 1983) mirroring economic circumstances globally, Western Australia in particular was reasonably insulated from this. Under the

control of Charles Court's conservative Liberal government<sup>2</sup> from 1974 to 1982 Western Australia's mining and resources industry received significant support, and the state underwent a fundamental economic shift from requiring Commonwealth assistance to generating significant income (Jamieson 2011). As discussed by both Jenny Gregory (2003, p. 193) and Jon Stratton (2013, p. 273), Court's government was unpopular due to a range of public policy decisions that impinged on civil liberties such as the banning of public demonstrations without police approval and the outlawing of strikes in certain industries. Concurrently, however, as a result of the government's aggressive investment in resources, the state flourished economically, providing a comfortable standard of living for most West Australians throughout the 1970s.

Additionally, throughout the decade Australia's sense of cultural identity grew significantly. Having benefited from the Whitlam federal Labor government's investment in Australian cultural production (Carroll 2011, p. 124), the country began to see more of its own cinema, television and popular music represented alongside imported culture (Arrow 2009). Subsequently, the nation viewed itself as capable of independence from the cultural influence of both British colonisation (Ward 2005), and of postwar US cultural imperialism. Nonetheless, Australian popular culture was still steeped in a cultural cringe, and indeed the first wave of Australian punk can be viewed as an extension of such a cringe – as well as an attempt to facilitate what might be thought of as a musical culture that offered an alternative to it.

In the introduction to his book, *Inner City Sound* (1982), which in its title paints Australian punk and post-punk as inherently urban, Clinton Walker speaks of punk being ignored by mainstream Australia in favour of 'bland pop and putrid boogie' (Walker 1982, p. 5), suggesting that the cultural cringe thrived in the fringes, finding solace in the difference and distinction of alternative music culture. If this cringe was fundamentally spurred on by Australia's increasing cultural awareness, part of that awareness was a recognition of the country's large middle class, who were predominantly a product of suburban conservatism and a socio-economic situation produced by almost two decades of postwar prosperity. This cringe was magnified in Perth, a city without the established cultural infrastructure of Sydney or Melbourne and which was, even in the 1970s, still viewed by many including its residents as a large country town. Andrew Saw, who reviewed *The Cheap Nasties* in *The Australian*, referred to Perth while writing in the *Daily News* as 'a cultural concentration camp' (quoted in Gregory 2003, p. 187). The city's punks embraced the perception of Perth as boring, but this image – and punk's relationship to it – was connected to histories of urban development and social class that characterise Perth as inherently middle class and suburban. This status had further implications for the practise of identity politics as connected to the city's broader social and political climate.

In the 1970s there were few broad sociopolitical or economic problems in Perth – it was for the most part an affluent city being transformed by a conservative government into a leisure-focused, middle-class utopia. As such, Perth punk expressed itself less through specific antagonistic statements and more through a broader sensibility of resistance. Ross Buncle was a musician in early Perth punk bands *The Geeks*, *Hitler Youth* and *The Orphans*, and subsequently wrote about Perth punk history on his website, [perthpunk.com](http://perthpunk.com). Buncle refers to the 'generally apolitical and self-focused

<sup>2</sup> In Australian federal politics and West Australian state politics the Liberal party is a conservative political party.

nature of the early punk song lyrics' (Buncle 2005c) that came from Perth. Although songs (which Buncle acknowledges) like The Victims' 'Perth is a Culture Shock' (recorded in 1978 but not released until 1989) and pre-Scientists outfit The Exterminators' 'Arsehole of the Universe' (1977) take aim at Perth's mundanity and cultural blandness, for the most part Perth punk's politics was a politics of the self. It was an attack on the cultural cringe from a broad categorical perspective as opposed to a direct attack on any specific sociopolitical circumstance. As such, the politics of the genre took root more in fashion, dress and behaviour than in any specific lyrical or issue-based distillation of politics. Early member of The Cheap Nasties and later frontman of The Victims, Dave Faulkner, suggests that:

[W]e wanted to stop [the world] being boring and also conservative. The idea of dressing outrageously – that should arouse anger and hatred was nonsense to us, but that's why we did it – to kind of shit people, but to make them not take it for granted that only one style of behavior or look is acceptable to the world, and that they have the right to impose that on you. (Lucy 2013a)

Indeed the most overtly political Perth songwriter of the era was Dave Warner, who took several opportunities to attack the mediocrity of Charles Court's conservative Liberal state government. Although positioned musically from within the realm of hook-laden and blues-derived pop rock as opposed to punk, Warner tapped into a sense of anti-authoritarianism and a challenging of social structures that connected his music thematically to punk's anti-authoritarianism. Before forming From the Suburbs – the band with which he would have greatest commercial success – Warner founded Pus in 1973, which is referred to both by Warner himself (2007) and also by Mark Demetrius (Buncle 2005b) as a contender for Perth's first punk band. This label is arguably more reflective of the band's tone and intent than their sound or style, as they mostly played covers of Troggs and Fugs songs, lending their music a bohemian anti-authoritarianism. Politics was a strong aspect of Warner's music. In discussing Warner's political songwriting, Stratton (2005, p. 46) points to both a live version of Country Joe & the Fish's 'Superbird' (1967), originally written in reference to US president Lyndon Johnson and rewritten by Warner for Pus with reference to Charles Court, and a 1976 composition entitled 'Phantom' (released in 1999), where Court is labelled as both corrupt and focused on economic progress at all costs.

As opposed to its status in Britain as the soundtrack to class warfare, Australian punk offered a rejection of the perceived safety and conservatism of middle-class suburbia. Ross Wilson of Daddy Cool and Mondo Rock perpetuates this notion, positing that prior to punk Australia had already voiced working-class angst through Oz Rock: 'We don't have the kind of culture punk needed. We're quite comfortable. Groups like The Angels and Rose Tattoo transferred that aggression into a macho rock, using better musicianship than the punks' (Walker 1996, p. 25).<sup>3</sup> There are, however, some grounds for Australian punk's working classness. In *Pig City*, his social history of popular music in Brisbane, Andrew Stafford discusses the upbringing of Ed Kuepper and Chris Bailey, founding members of the band generally regarded as Australia's first punk outfit, The Saints. He describes their southwest Brisbane suburbs of Oxley and Inala as 'determinedly pragmatic and blue-collar

<sup>3</sup> For further information on Rose Tattoo and the Angels see Engleheart (2010).

conservative' (Stafford 2006, p. 52), suggesting that The Saints' anarchic and aggressive sound emerged partly as a reaction to the conservatism they were surrounded by in Bjelke-Petersen<sup>4</sup>-era Brisbane, but also on Bailey's part by his father's penchant for left-leaning political activism and protest. When early Perth punk bands such as The Victims and The Scientists started playing publicly in 1977, The Saints, alongside Sydney's Radio Birdman, were the only Australian punk bands that were known in Perth (Baker, in Lucy 2012c). Therefore, it is possible that The Saints working-class origins and aesthetic did have some influence on Perth punk, despite the disparate class origins of Perth punks.

In Perth, punk emerged largely outside the bounds of class politics, drawing participants from both working- and middle-class backgrounds who were arguably interested in the aesthetics and broader cultural politics of the genre. Ross Buncle's website compiles numerous recollections of Perth's fledgling punk scene. On it The Geeks' vocalist, known only as Lloyd, suggests that the conflation of punk with the working class does not ring true for the Perth scene:

Official History asserts that the Punk movement was a case of the Proletariat finally reclaiming its Rock 'n' Roll Heritage from the effete bourgeoisie, which had inveigled rock away from its working-man origins and turned it into such middle-class aberrations as art-rock, progressive rock and generalised blandness. If Perth was typical, then this is complete BS. The truth is it was an avant-garde affair with a mere handful of prime movers and a few hangers-on. (Buncle 2005a; author's capitalisation)

Elsewhere Buncle discusses the fact that some members of early Perth punk bands such as The Cheap Nasties, The Victims and one member of his own bands came from middle-class backgrounds and attended private schools. Buncle hastens to add that the unnamed member of his own bands who received a private school education 'despised his private school and all it stood for' (Buncle 2005c), suggesting a rejection of middle-class privilege and an adherence to punk's anti-establishment rhetoric. Similarly, members of Blok Musik, formed in 1978 in the midst of Perth punk's first wave and subsequently renamed the Triffids, all went to Christchurch Grammar School in Nedlands. Both Phil Kakulas and Allan (Alsy) Macdonald lived in that suburb, while David McComb came from the affluent suburb of Peppermint Grove on the southern bank of the Swan River. Kakulas recounts that his band were invited onto the bill of the Leederville New Wave Festival because they had invited the organisers to watch the band play at a rehearsal at McComb's parents'<sup>5</sup> historical residence The Cliffe, located on a property large enough for their playing not to disturb their neighbours (Lucy 2012b).

With class not being a defining characteristic of the punk scene in Perth, it is possible to see the emergence of the first wave of Perth punk as representative of a more pervasive subcultural shift that was taking place around music and art at the time. In this instance the Perth punk scene might be compared to that which developed in New York in the mid-to-late 1970s – not around a specific set of sociopolitical circumstances but as an expression of a creative aesthetic that drew on a broader

<sup>4</sup> Joh Bjelke-Petersen was the conservative premier of Queensland from 1968 to 1987 who, similarly to Charles Court, significantly improved his state's economic status through investment in resource development while restricting various civil liberties.

<sup>5</sup> McCombs' parents were both doctors. His father, Dr Harold McComb, was a prominent plastic surgeon and his mother, Dr Athel Hockey, was a renowned geneticist.

sensibility and distillation of identity politics. The range of class backgrounds of key participants in the New York scene was equally mixed. For example, while Patti Smith and The Ramones came from working-class origins, Tom Verlaine of Television and Richard Hell went to the same private boarding school in Delaware. Although the same was true for some members of the UK punk scene, in that country the genre and its connected subculture became representative of a sociopolitically specific distillation of working-class aggression. Oppositionally, New York acted like a melting pot – as it had done historically – drawing like-minded individuals together and providing the space for musical coalescence. While Perth was certainly too isolated and provincial a city to draw anyone in, its scene can be viewed as less representative of a distinct politically shaped and class-influenced social circumstance and more a convergence of a small group of individuals with a shared musical and subcultural aesthetic.

### Punk and subculture

In Perth, punk as a musical form drew from both UK and US stylistic iterations, with various bands and individuals leaning in various directions in terms of their influences. While The Geeks primarily based their sound on that of US garage-punk precursors such as The Stooges and MC5, The Victims and The Manikins had a sound more reminiscent of UK punk bands. Blok Musik claimed influence from the ‘so-called literate bands’ (Kakulas, in Lucy 2012b) that emerged from New York such as Television and Patti Smith. Punk was also a merging of previous styles in a new form, and this was encapsulated in particular by the musical approach of James Baker, who had played in two bands prior to joining The Geeks and subsequently helping to form both The Victims and The Scientists. Black Sun were primarily a garage-rock band, playing covers of MC5 and Stooges songs, while The Slick City Boys drew their inspiration from The New York Dolls, including requisite make-up and glam-influenced clothing. Partly due to his legacy in these bands, Baker became an influential figure in the Perth scene. Kim Salmon describes Baker’s magnetism, and its impact on others:

James had constructed a real great mythology around the whole idea of being a fuck up. How people like Arthur Harold Kane from the Dolls were complete fuck ups but somehow have incredible style while doing it. There was a whole perverse mystique about being a complete and utter loser. ... He had an understanding of where he was at that I trusted anyway, and all of us did. We all looked up to him in a lot of ways. (Lucy 2013b)

The self-awareness and guile of punk’s primitivism was a key aspect of Baker’s bands, and it reflected punk’s proclivity for the renegotiation of hierarchies of meaning and value. Saints guitarist Ed Kuepper, too, comments on this self-awareness in reference to The Stooges’ *Funhouse*, suggesting that: ‘They were like cavemen, and yet obviously they weren’t stupid’ (Stafford 2006, p. 54). While aware of the correlations being made between art and music by UK punk, Baker and others were attracted by the arch simplicity of the legacy of US garage rock. Similarly, the transformation of glam-rock from the UK art-rock tradition, and through American garage rock via the New York Dolls into punk was, for people like James Baker, part of a shifting yet constant process of musical and aesthetic development. Faulkner suggests that, for Baker and those who had previously been interested in glam rock and garage rock, ‘Punk was for them a natural progression. For me it was a beginning’ (Lucy 2013a).

There was a strong sense of self-identification with the concept of punk, with the term used by those in the scene to describe themselves and their music. Many individuals in the Perth scene expressed themselves through punk fashion in a style similar to that initiated in the UK; leather jackets, safety pins, dog collars and spiked hair were all popular. Sue Edmonds, keyboard player and backing vocalist in Billy Orphan's Tears, comments that 'it was like being in a club, you had to fit in – the clothes, the hair, the car you drove, where you lived, you had to be a rebel and reject authority' (Trainer 2014). Kim Salmon echoes this, suggesting that the formulaic nature of punk fashion worked against its politics of autonomy:

To me a lot of it was about copying something anyway, which seemed to me anyway not to be the point of it. In The Cheap Nasties we tried hard . . . to not do a formulaic thing, but it seemed to be very prescribed, the look. I found as soon as there was a scene it seemed very regimented, quite the opposite of what punk was meant to be. (Lucy 2013b)

As a distillation of personal and musical politics, although punk created a lasting legacy, its initial iteration of subcultural style did not last long in Perth. Dave Faulkner explains:

I mean it was all over in 1978. . . . At that time we were a lot less de rigeur ourselves – like the idea of it being some kind of SS to change the world, you know what I mean, was over. That notion was like 'Oh God' – 'cause the punk scene quite quickly became a series of clichés, and people were kind of going 'Well we're not part of that' and that wasn't what we wanted – we didn't want to join the boy scouts. (Lucy 2013a)

While punk as a specific subcultural moment may have been fleeting, the changes that took place in the music culture in Perth surrounding it had implications that were felt for decades. The establishment of an alternative music culture in Perth where original music was privileged and promoted began with punk which, although similar musically to that which was being produced in the east as well as overseas, was integrated into the city culture far differently from how it was integrated in Perth. Musical iterations of that difference related to the structure of the city, and its volatile relationship with the notion of urbanity.

## Punk and urbanity

In the more populated and developed cities of Melbourne and Sydney, in which large inner city areas facilitated cultural growth, punk scenes emerged as an urbanised expression of alternative music cultures. Graeme Turner has written about urban Australian cities in relation to both the cultivation of cosmopolitanism primarily through multiculturalism (Turner 2008), and also in relation to the establishment of alternative rock scenes in urban locations that exist in opposition to suburban music culture. In the latter instance he suggests, in relation to Dave Warner's construction of suburban identity, that in Perth 'there is nothing *but* suburbs – no urban blight, no ghettos, no inner city bohemian areas' (Turner 1992, p. 23). Turner does, however, mention alternative music scenes as a product of inner urban areas such as Sydney's inner suburbs like Glebe and Darlinghurst. In Sydney, Radio Birdman took over management of the Oxford Tavern in Taylor Square in the inner city area of Darlinghurst in 1977 – an area renowned as a night-time entertainment precinct and the centre of Sydney's queer community. Renaming



the venue the Funhouse, it became a haven for emerging acts such as the Hellcats and The Psychosurgeons, facilitated by its location in the centre of Australia's largest urban night-time entertainment precinct. Similarly, Shane Homan (2003, p. 14) cites the Sussex Hotel in the city's CBD as central to the emergence of punk in the city.

In Melbourne, → ↑ → utilised punk's aesthetic of antagonism and conveyed it not only through music but also through visual art, writing, film-making, live theatre, performance art and multimedia (Brophy 1987). Emerging in 1975, → ↑ → and later bands such as Teenage Radio Stars and The Boys Next Door (later The Birthday Party) realised Melbourne's urban art-rock scene as the fulfilment of punk's situationist tendencies and as part of the lineage of various musical forms to emerge out of art schools.<sup>6</sup> Although many of Perth's early punks were students, the scene was not connected to the wider art scene in the same way as it was in Melbourne, in which punk was the latest embodiment of a pop avant-garde. Perth punk shows took place at both the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the West Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), and Andrew Saw's (1978) article in *The Australian* made mention of Cheap Nasties and Manikins vocalist Robbie Porritt's affiliation with the latter institution and his having won several painting prizes (Walker 1982, p. 25). Dave Faulkner and Dave Warner both studied at UWA, and Kim Salmon and Dave McComb of The Triffids both studied at WAIT.<sup>7</sup> But despite these connections, most Perth punk gigs took place in other venues. More specifically, Melbourne punk connected readily to an already established association between the arts scene and the inner city. There, gigs took place at venues in the city's urban enclaves such as The Tiger Lounge in Richmond, Bananas and the Crystal Ballroom in St Kilda, the Champion Hotel in Fitzroy and the Exford Hotel in the city. A series of events entitled Punk-Gunk also took place in various outdoor locations on streets in Carlton, furthering the notion of punk as an urbanised form of music based around a sensibility that sought to fuse music and art through the lived reality of urban built environments. This was not the case in Perth, as we shall later see.

In *Stranded*, Clinton Walker chronicles the emergence of alternative music culture in Australia as a form of music removed from the established musical modes of traditional pop and rock, favouring instead the aesthetic and identity politics of underground musical forms. This history unsurprisingly begins in punk's year zero – 1977 – with discussions of The Saints and Radio Birdman, and briefly mentioning Perth bands The Cheap Nasties, The Victims and in greater detail the subsequent career away from Perth of The Scientists (Walker 1996, p. 63). Similarly, Stratton (2006, p. 244) connects what he refers to as Alternative Rock both to the 'inner-city' and to the emergence of punk in Australia in the mid- to late 1970s. Stratton contrasts Perth against the scenes that emerged in Melbourne and Sydney in particular, making specific mention of Perth's lack of urbanised spaces and stating that the city:

had little in the way of a built environment that could be appropriated as inner city and what there was was rapidly transformed either by gentrification, in the case of Subiaco, or by a more

<sup>6</sup> The connection between British art school and rock music is explained in Frith and Horne (1987), while the connections between the Melbourne punk and art scenes are chronicled on The History of the Melbourne Punk Scene website, at <http://www.punkjourney.com/art.php>.

<sup>7</sup> WAIT became the Curtin University of Technology in 1987.

radical urban renewal, in the case of north of the line's transformation into the restaurant suburb of Northbridge. (Stratton 2005, p. 55)

Although Northbridge subsequently became a built-up entertainment district, it took some time to develop. The majority of nightclubs in Perth emerged in the early to mid-1960s, located predominantly in the west end of Murray Street in Perth's CBD, although some began to emerge along Northbridge's James Street. However, from 1970 onwards, partly as a result of the lowering of the legal drinking age to 18 and partly as a result of the growing culture of rock in pubs, often propped up by Sunday sessions which thousands would attend, the vast majority of live music events shifted to large suburban hotels referred to as beer barns. In Perth these were scattered across the metropolitan area, which in the mid-1970s stretched some 30 km west to east from the Indian Ocean coastline to the foothills of the Stirling Ranges, and some distance more from its northern to its southern suburbs.

Perth exemplifies the trends that have characterised the development of Australian cities in the postwar era, which Maccallum and Hopkinson (2011, p. 491) describe as 'strong population growth, the low-density living "culture" of Australia, and a distinctive property development industry'. As a primarily suburban city, Perth has struggled with the notion of urbanity. Its urban spaces have on the one hand been characterised as lacking in comparison to other urban centres, or to the space and brightness of the suburbs. Alternatively, they are perceived as being dogged by undesirable and harmful elements. Tara Brabazon describes Perth's central business district as a 'dead centre', suggesting that its impact 'is that the suburbs become more important to social cohesion and the building of identity' (Brabazon 2014, p. 53). Brabazon comments that for most residents of Perth the suburbs provide all the requisite modern amenities via commercial and retail developments, as well as the luxury of space. The 72-km-long Kwinana Freeway opened in 1959, connecting Perth's southern suburbs to the city, and in 1973 the 30-km-long Mitchell Freeway did the same for the north. As such, thanks to postwar prosperity and the potential for geospatial expansion, Perth has developed as an especially spread-out and low-density city.

Indeed, many of those involved in the early Perth punk scene were drawn from a particularly broad geographical area. Kim Salmon grew up in Lockridge, 15 km northeast of Perth city, before moving to Rivervale, 5 km east of the CBD and separated from the city by the Swan River, where Dave Faulkner also grew up. Early photos of The Cheap Nasties were taken in the northern suburbs of Morley and Innaloo, both approximately 10 km from the city in different directions. James Baker grew up in the working-class suburb of Kenwick, 20 km southeast of Perth city. The Geeks originally rehearsed at Ross Buncle's house in Calais Road, Scarborough, some 15 km northwest. These are all decidedly suburban locations, with none of the built environment one might expect from inner-city urbanity. Although early Perth punk was concentrated within several key spaces, all located in a much smaller geographical area, the practical and lived reality of suburban sprawl still impacted its participants in their need to travel significant distances in order to rehearse and perform.

Perth also has a history of devaluing its urban spaces and privileging suburbia. In a 1918 speech to the Royal Society of Western Australia, William Saw blamed the poor living conditions and ghettoisation that often occurred in urban spaces for a decline in the birth-rate of the industrial working class (Saw 1918, p. 41). Gregory

connects the construction of the suburbs in Australia with a form of social engineering, wherein economic and social progress was achieved through an idealised space for the nurturing of children who, thanks to a clean, spacious environment, would be raised physically and morally healthy (Gregory 1997, p. 78). Of course, this space, and the ability to move through and around it thanks to motorised transportation, was afforded through a distinctly middle-class social positioning. In *Bourgeois Utopias*, Robert Fishman describes the suburbs as a space where the middle class was not only insulated from the undesirable aspects of urbanity, but from its own mediocrity as well. For him, suburbia is 'a partial paradise, a refuge not only from threatening elements in the city but also from discordant elements in bourgeois society itself' (Fishman 1987, p. 4). When placed in the context of anti-conformist punk, suburbia in this instance reflects a deep hypocrisy and paranoia about the forced difference and diversity that urban bohemianism naturalises.

In contrast to the suburban conservatism for which Perth has become renowned, punk attempted to assert itself as oppositionally urban and bohemian. Punk's embrace of urbanity extended to an ideological dismissal of what its participants viewed as suburban mediocrity and the music that soundtracked it: the cover bands that dominated Perth in the late 1970s, which played material by Cold Chisel, Rose Tattoo and other Oz Rock staples. James Baker reflects on the views of most Perth punks about the covers circuit:

We hated that. I still hate that ... Just the bogan mentality of it all. You know, it's just people who are not really interested in rock'n'roll. It's usually lowest common denominator rock. There's a huge difference between the Ramones and the Angels but only smart people can pick it. Just the whole attitude behind it. ... The people that watch it don't think – they don't like the music, don't listen to it. (Lucy 2012c)

For many in the punk scene, the prevailing attitudes and tastes of the status quo were representative of the complacency that they perceived Perth to exemplify, and which James Baker wrote about in *The Victims' 'Perth is a Culture Shock'* (Stratton and Trainer 2016). Punk fought against suburban blandness, but in a predominantly suburban city few options were available for the expression of a musical style perceived as being inherently of the city. Indeed the first gig by The Cheap Nasties took place at a venue outside of Perth's recognised urban inner city, over the Swan River at the Rivervale Hotel in mid-1977. Dave Faulkner comments that word about the gig spread throughout the small but dedicated audience who were aware of punk as an emerging style:

They were billed as a punk band, which got people, you know – cause there were other people like us out there who were going 'What, someone else likes this music? I thought it was just me.' You know? And that motley group of people all came together at that one gig. ... So that was the real sort of crucial event really, in terms of the Victims and the Perth punk scene, 'cause that was when it gelled, and suddenly there was a scene. And you know, we recognised each other because of the unconventional dress, and also as soon as you started talking to somebody they knew what you're talking about. (Lucy 2013a)

Faulkner met James Baker, with whom he would form The Victims, at the first Cheap Nasties gig – as well as Exterminators' vocalist and subsequent music journalist Mark Demetrius. Demetrius recalls that: 'there were other venues, invariably one-offs as the proprietors always took a dim view of the volume level' (Buncle 2005b), mentioning The Waverley in the southern suburb of Cannington specifically. This recounting

confirms the negative reaction to punk from the wider population, and further consolidates the punk moment as fundamentally urban and bohemian, and antithetical to the conservatism of suburban Australia at the time.

As such, punk in Perth is synonymous with two venues in particular: Hernando's Hideaway and The Governor Broome Hotel. Both were located in built-up inner city locations, the former in East Perth and the latter just north of the city centre on the corner of Roe and William streets in Northbridge. In 1977, Hernando's Hideaway was a run-down cabaret lounge in Perth city's eastern end. The owner agreed for Perth's nascent punk bands to take over the venue once a week and take advantage of the late licence. James Baker recalls:

We created a venue at Hernando's Hideaway, where we played on a Thursday night. And it was great because we were allowed to finish at 2 o'clock in the morning, and we thought that was a good idea. But, I don't know whether it stopped people from coming, but we didn't care – none of us worked so we didn't mind. (Lucy 2012c)

Although they began with a small, dedicated crowd, drawing on many of the same devoted attendees as the Rivervale show, punk nights at Hernando's quickly became popular with Perth's students and subsequently developed a larger audience, with the approximately 200 capacity venue routinely filled. Similarly, The Governor Broome Hotel facilitated a small but dedicated scene that revolved around a handful of bands including The Victims, The Manikins, and shortly thereafter The Scientists. The hotel was subsequently torn down and a gravel car park was built in its place, though the site now houses Perth's State Theatre Centre complex.

Another iconic Perth punk location was not a venue but a residence: a run-down colonial-era house near East Perth train station referred to as Victim Manor – home to members of The Victims and the location of a number of their earliest live performances in the form of house parties. Faulkner recalls the genesis of The Victims in reference to that space:

We got a very cheap rental in East Perth, which at the time was a bit of a slum area. So we were living there and rehearsing there, and basically, I don't know how long it took – maybe a matter of about six weeks I suppose, maybe less – maybe a month, before we played our first party at the Manor. ... That's all we did, so time was irrelevant. We had nothing else going on in our lives except play, rehearse, get drunk. (Lucy 2013a)

The culture of music and socialisation that surrounded Victim Manor epitomises the bohemian urbanity that Perth punk constructed in opposition to suburban conformity and a conservatism borne from the privileged construction of middle-class wealth and respectability, and the need to protect it. Many in the punk scene were unemployed or students, which aided in both their openness to and their practical opportunity to pursue punk as a distillation of the urban avant-garde and a rejection of dominant social mores and personal politics.

The fact that Victim Manor was located in one of Perth's most infamously decrepit urban areas is also important to the construction of urbanity in the city as inherently inferior and undesirable. Although established as a home to the upper, middle and working classes (Thomas 1974), throughout the 20th century East Perth developed a large transient and working-class population thanks to the development of industrial and manufacturing operations in the suburb. In the postwar era, East Perth was home to large Indigenous and Eastern European immigrant

populations, many of whom lived on the poverty line. The area was also home to a significant proportion of homeless and destitute inhabitants. Joseph Christensen suggests that over the course of the 1960s and 1970s 'the industrial and working-class central region of East Perth went into decline, giving the suburb the appearance and reputation of a blighted inner-city area' (Christensen 2011, p. 37). This was the perfect location for the literal home of punk – a subcultural moment that sought refuge from Perth's safe suburban complacency through urban decay and an aesthetics of cultural detritus.

## Punk and the city

At this time, significant public debate was taking place in Perth about the potential for the city to take on an increasingly urban form. In the mid- to late 1970s, Perth's central business district underwent significant changes in planning and use, aimed at turning Perth city into a more socially focused space. In 1974 a portion of Hay Street between William and Barrack streets became the first fully pedestrianised mall in the country. However, Perth also remained infamously over-regulated, and city by-laws prohibited activities in the mall such as the distribution of pamphlets by demonstrators, the sale of any goods outside a demarcated space, the hanging of signs, and busking. Another by-law gave the council the authority to seize and dispose of offending goods, and charge the offender for their disposal (Gregory 2003, p. 187). The city centre became a contested space, with public opinion often vehemently opposed to Perth city as a socialised urban space in the mould of other cities. One resident in particular suggested that the kind of culture found in night-time entertainment areas such as those in Europe 'is the last thing we want to encourage in our fair city. They soon become hives of catered vice attracting the dregs of society with ideal conditions for peddling drugs, etc.' (Gregory 2003, p. 187). This was the view held by many including city councillors, which, as Stratton notes, ensured that 'the government was in the position to more or less destroy what little inner city Perth had under the guise of slum clearance and urban renewal' (Stratton 2005, p. 41). This is the version of Perth that permeated public discourse for decades since – a clean, overregulated and sprawling suburban city with little in the way of urban space, or the cultural life that comes with its requisite density and diversity.

As opposed to density, on which most punk scenes thrived, Perth is instead spread out and sprawling. The punk scenes in New York, London and Sydney were generally contained within a specific urban area – even the suburbs where punk was concentrated in Melbourne all exist within a 5-km radius of the city centre. Although the sites of punk shows in Perth all occurred within a similar distance from the city centre, they were isolated from each other and separated by varied land use. There is no built environment or urban infrastructure that connects these disparate spaces, and their traditional usage was similarly varied, from the residential Victim Manor to the site of the 1978 'Leederville New Wave Festival' – the Leederville Town Hall. That event's line-up featured a plethora of early Perth punk bands including The Victims in their last live performance, The Invaders (a precursor to The Scientists), Ross Buncle's post-Geeks band The Orphans, and Triffids precursor Blok Musik. James Baker recalls a precedent for his band playing such venues: 'It was just a typical – because we'd done some of those type of gigs – the Victims, anyway – you'd play in an empty echoey hall, except it wasn't empty, it

was pretty much full – about 100 people’ (Lucy 2012c). Nonetheless, for punk – a form of music steeped in a politics that rejected various forms of authority including state-based institutions – actually performing the music in a government sanctioned space offered a certain degree of irony. Phil Kakulas remembers the event, which began in the afternoon, as:

[t]his very odd kind of situation where you’ve got, you know, these young punk rockers out on a beautiful sunny Perth blue day and thinking well, the whole thing was kind of like – the Leederville Town Hall was kind of daggy, and the whole thing was kind of ‘Oh this is how Perth does punk’ kind of thing. (Lucy 2012b)

The Leederville Town Hall on Cambridge Street in West Leederville is reminiscent of many town halls throughout Australia – it is a colonial-era brick building with polished wood floors, high ceilings and numerous windows. As such, it does not provide ideal acoustics for amplified rock music, nor the kind of atmosphere genuinely associated with punk shows. It is a far cry from Victim Manor and Hernando’s Hideaway, let alone any number of urban rock clubs in other cities.

The use of the town hall for a punk (or new wave) gig emphasises Perth’s lack of urban infrastructure and the lack of availability of viable music venues; it also references earlier incarnations of popular music in Perth. In previous decades, dances and hops had been held in town halls because the music that was performed at them was usually oriented towards a youth market and was therefore not recognised as having an audience to facilitate shows in bars or clubs. While most (if not all) of Perth’s early punks were of legal drinking age, the subculture was not accepted at the time by many Perth venues – many of which were at this time bringing in significant revenue from cover bands – as a scene that could bring viable attendance numbers in order to justify booking them. In this sense, Perth’s punk scene – representative as it was at the time of the city’s alternative music culture – was small but vital. Dave Faulkner suggests that in Perth playing original music as opposed to covers was the primary factor in the city’s alternative music scene:

There was no such thing as alternative music. It didn’t exist. The alternative music was in fact playing your own songs, I mean because everyone just did covers. Even The Beagle Boys [a blues-rock band that Faulkner played in shortly before forming The Victims] were a cover band of sorts. Admittedly it was a very scholarly cover band of, you know – blues and R’n’B and stuff that was a very different scene to what was commercial. So it was non-commercial music but it was not self-composed. ... The punk scene was the beginning of that, I mean in terms of literally everyone wrote their own songs and that was all they wanted to do. I mean we did covers for fun – as tribute and also just ... but the bulk of what everyone’s material was was their own songs because that’s all they wanted to play or could play. (Lucy 2013a)

In subsequent years, Perth’s alternative music culture would grow in stature thanks to the dedicated following that punk established from 1977 onwards. In Perth in particular, the shifting political economy of alternative music culture, begun with punk, changed the expectations of music audiences with regards to authenticity and originality.

## **Punk and originality**

The misconception that original music did not exist in Perth before punk has persisted largely because pre-punk bands in Perth were often more reliant on cover

material than their originals in order to sustain popularity. While some Perth artists in the 1960s had written the occasional original, and in the early and mid-1970s several Perth acts had some success recording original material, a culture of cover bands dominated the city. This was, in part, due to the migration of music from the city centre to the suburbs and the demands of audiences who wanted to hear music they were familiar with. Prior to punk, no bands in Perth could contemplate playing predominantly, let alone solely, original material. Further to this, though, was the perception surrounding original material and the value of musicians who wrote it. Alternative music shifted perceptions surrounding authenticity in music, with originality valued far more than technical ability. A shift took place thanks to punk's equalising force, whereby the honesty of amateurism was celebrated over virtuosity. As such 'punk was more coherent as an attack on the professionalisation of music' (Simonelli 2002, p. 122). This attack merged an anti-populist politics with a self-awareness that valued musical directness at the expense of technical skill, as well as the need for original self-expression. James Baker recalls:

I always thought you had to write your own songs – I never wanted to be in a cover band. I always knew that was the only way to go, you know, if you can't write your own songs, because all the people I liked wrote their own songs. (Lucy 2012c)

Although Perth punk bands played some covers, and original bands had existed in Perth throughout the 1970s albeit in a limited fashion, punk marked a shift in the point and purpose of engaging with music. Musically primitive but often conceptually loaded, Perth punk bands – like those elsewhere – focused on the mood that was conveyed both through music as well as through the presentation of it. Kim Salmon suggests that in this respect The Scientists were particularly confounding to many audiences. In addition to a florid 1960s-influenced dress sense, which ran in opposition to prevailing punk fashion, the band's musical and aesthetic tendencies were often difficult for audiences to comprehend:

We adopted a very pop, sort of melodic thing in the sound, so that was also seen as being very un-punk. But we felt that was much more punk than to be following what everybody else was doing. And also, we kind of didn't play it very well – there was a certain roughness in the way it was put together. There was sort of like a deconstruction going on, and we were very proud of that. ... We played too loud so that it would become a very isolating experience in the audience. ... We were just really perverse. (Lucy 2013b)

This perverseness did not serve the band well in their hometown. Salmon suggests that the band found a far more responsive audience while on tour in the eastern states: '[W]e were much more popular and much more embraced by all of the scenes there than we ever were in Perth – we were pariahs in Perth' (Lucy 2013b). Although The Scientists completed two national tours during their first incarnation in Perth, they eventually disbanded in 1981, with Salmon reconvening a different line-up in Sydney a year later. It was during this incarnation that the band released the music for which they gained an international reputation, on the back of a sound that moved away from punk's urgent thrash towards a more swampy, blues-influenced aesthetic. The Scientists were only able to create what is considered their finest work away from Perth's culture of cover bands – a culture that, with no sustained urban music scene, was still celebrating the clichés of Oz Rock in suburban

beer barns well into the 1980s. Stratton writes 'it happened in Sydney's inner city where the Scientists found themselves in an environment which enabled them to experiment musically in ways not appreciated in suburban Perth' (Stratton 2005, p. 54). Dave Faulkner, too, left Perth for Sydney, forming Le Hoodoo Gurus with James Baker in 1981. For Faulkner it was not only Perth's isolation but its small size, or more likely the perception of smallness perpetuated by its suburbanness and lack of a sustainable urban arts and music scene that forced him to move:

Anything you form in Perth's gonna eventually implode because there's just no way of sustaining it. Besides a smaller community of people who were interested in original music no one took you seriously. ... And you know, for a whole lot of reasons, so on a music business level, just on a pure cultural level I didn't want to live in a small city like Perth anymore. (Lucy 2012a)

Coupled with its primarily suburban configuration and the anti-urban approach of various city planning and development initiatives, Perth has often been characterised as small despite its relative size as a city. In a primarily middle-class and suburban city, away from the conflation of the genre as inherently urban and working class, Perth punk became a new distillation of identity politics oriented towards seeking alternatives and framed by the resistive potential of popular culture as art and social commentary.

## Conclusion

After the initial subcultural spark was extinguished, with the dissolution of its musical progenitors, the first wave of Perth punk gave way to other emerging styles. These included new wave and post-punk and, subsequently, alternative or indie rock, of which The Triffids, formed out of Blok Musik, were the city's most highly regarded practitioners. However, alternative music culture began in Perth, a city without an inner city, with the punk scene in the late 1970s. Although it was articulated through a desire to celebrate what the city lacked – urban bohemia – punk in Perth galvanised a cultural moment that drew on the lived reality of the city. As middle-class and suburban, as sprawling and sparse as opposed to urban and dense, Perth nonetheless cultivated an alternative to the conservatism and predictability with which it had been most readily associated. Despite the city's perceived lack of an inner city and the urban possibilities associated with that, and perhaps because of it, punk thrived.

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