

Writing Oz pop: An insider's account of Australian popular culture making and historiography: An interview with Clinton J Walker

Thesis Eleven
109(1) 89–114
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DOI: 10.1177/0725513612447233
the.sagepub.com

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Abstract

This interview – conducted by Peter Beilharz and Trevor Hogan with Clinton Walker over the course of three months (July to September 2011) between Melbourne and Sydney via email and Skype – explores the questions of Australian popular culture writing with, against, and of the culture industries themselves. Walker is a leading freelance Australian cultural historian and rock music journalist. He is the author of seven books, five about Australian music. He has been a radio DJ and TV presenter. He compiled and produced four double CD album collections of Australian music – *Inner City Sound*, *Buried Country*, *Long Way to the Top*, and *Studio 22*. He has been a key writer in several multimedia projects, including the Powerhouse Museum *Real Wild Child* exhibition and CD-Rom (1995) and ABC TV's hit documentary series/CD/DVD *Long Way to the Top* (2001). In 2006, a new US edition of his first book *Inner City Sound* (with soundtrack CD) was published. His *Golden Miles: Sex, Speed and the Australian Muscle Car* (2005) has been published in a revised edition in 2009. In 2012, his eighth book, *The Wizard of Oz*, will be published. Walker is currently writing with Beilharz and Hogan a book called *The Vinyl Age: The History of Australian Rock Music, 1945–1995*. The interviewers invited

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Walker to reflect critically on his 35-year 'career' as pop avatar, independent writer and critic in the post-war to post-modern Australian popular culture industries. Going from journalism to his path-finding books and television documentaries, the article traces this work's development both in personal terms and as a symptom of the broader cultural evolution, from the suburbs to pop to art and rock and back again; between London and the provincial cultures of Oz; from one-way American consumerism to local DIY egalitarianism, analogue to digital to global dialogue, youth culture to multi-culturalism, and from the putative low brow to the legitimization process itself of popular culture.

Keywords

Australian cultural history, Australian popular culture, criticism, rock music, journalism, pop art, Clinton J. Walker

TH and PB: You have tried out many occupations, many of them involved in the production of popular cultural forms, some as an employee of the popular cultural industries themselves, but most of all as a freelance writer across the genres. How do you describe yourself? Is there a title that encapsulates the many faces, occupations and identities of CJW? What is your occupation? Is it an avocation?

CJW: To the tax office, and on my passport, my occupation is given as 'Writer', or 'Author'. If you search my name in the big electric mist out there, once past any confusion with Clint Walker the cowboy star (with whom, consequently, I've had to identify all my life like it or not), you will find me linked to a number of book publications and TV and CD productions.

Wikipedia (and I don't know how my entry got there, I didn't do it, honest!) describes me as 'best known for his works on popular music but with a broader interest in social and cultural history and theory'. That's fair enough I suppose, though I'd hasten to add, as a theorist I'm a much better storyteller.

The way I like to put it, my work is what you might expect from an art school drop-out and recovering rock critic. I haven't really trodden the beaten path. I suppose I am a bit of an outrider is the best way I can think of to describe it, or iconoclast. I'm too old to be an *enfant terrible*. For 40 years I've patrolled the perimeters, hovered on the fringes of intellectual respectability, somewhere between the barricades and the out-house, and to be honest, it remains a matter of grateful wonder to me that I've survived at all.

I am not an academic, obviously. But I am a scholar. 'Literary non-fiction' is the generic box I'm supposed to tick on grant applications that never succeed, but I loathe that term's sense of superiority. I never joined the AJA [Australian Journalists' Association] because I never had a staff job and the AJA didn't protect freelancers, and I'm not a member of the ASA [Australian Society of Authors] or the AWG [Australian Writers' Guild] either. You might say I'm not much of a 'joiner', but I'm certainly signed up for the cheques from PLR [Public Lending Right], ELR [Educational Lending Right] and CAL [Copyright Agency Limited]!

I'm sometimes still mistaken for a practising rock journalist. In fact, I haven't done any sustained journalism – freelance, rock or otherwise – for nigh on two decades now. I wouldn't like to say I've gone beyond both rock and journalism, because that implies a hierarchical inferiority I don't want to imply either. That's why I like the term 'recovering rock journalist' – because it suggests a more complex relationship. Like a habit you've kicked but which will always be in your blood. What I will say is that after journalism and I just seemed to grow apart in the early 1990s, longer-form writing and a widening of scope just became part of the same process.

As someone who fell into journalism in the first place partly because I couldn't see why you couldn't write about contemporary music the same way I read about art and its history (couldn't see why 'high' art was indeed supposed to be higher than 'low' popular culture; or why that of the two great 20th-century popular culture industries – movies and music – music seemed to be the poor cousin), it is largely thanks to the founding principles of accuracy, insight and entertainment that journalism inculcated in me that I've been able to make the transition I think I have towards more fully realizing my aspirations.

Really, I'm just an aesthete, a tragic style queen in never-ending pursuit of the next best thing!

TH and PB: Let's begin at the beginning, with the young art school dropout in Brisbane writing up backyard fanzines on the happenings and bands in the late '70s. What happened? And what was your part in the scene? Are fanzines important?

CJW: In a weird way I can look back now on growing up in Brisbane in the '70s and see some good in it. I mean, it was obviously pretty oppressive, and rough and ready. The Bjelke-Petersen state government was notoriously right-wing, culturally conservative, parochial, and corrupt. It was anything but democratic in spirit and was intolerant of youth cultures. For one thing, live music was virtually non-existent. And getting locked up for a night in the watchhouse was quite a common occurrence, none of all that is exaggerated. But I think because there was this sort of us-and-them siege mentality, it just meant you had to do-it-yourself because no-one else was going to do it for you. I'd seen my mates and idols the Saints do it themselves and get rocket-propelled out of Brisbane – and getting out of Brisbane back then was part of it. We didn't realize then that the Saints were forging a new sound and attitude that would cut across cultures and worlds afar. We just knew they were pathfinding out of our suburbs. The bands couldn't play in bars or pubs in those days so we had to make do in church and community halls, schools, etc., and we advertised on street posts and walls and handout leaflets, etc. It was their DIY ethos that got us going, not just their music. So I suppose I was inspired to think I could do it myself too, and so I did a fanzine. It was easy to photocopy a hundred issues and take them around the record shops – that was the great beauty of fanzines, they were like just updated broadsides.

I was 20 and with Andrew McMillan, who was the same age as me, and already, I was mightily impressed, stringing for *RAM*, Australia's then-leading rock rag. We put out one issue of *Suicide Alley*, arguably Australia's first punk fanzine¹ and certainly the worst-named. We thought we were inventing the wheel and that punk rock was going to change the world; in a small way, it did. Like many people probably, I can see my life

as subject to my times. I didn't get into print out of any great desire to be a writer so much as I had a story to tell. I had no conception of 'forward planning'. I wasn't after any sort of career. In fact, I was trying to avoid getting a real job. I fell into writing. It was instinctive, people would later say 'passion-driven'. I had a head full of art and rock'n'roll, along with an inchoate political sensibility forged under Joh Bjelke-Petersen's jackboots, and all I wanted to do, at first, was tell people what records they should be listening to and, more crucially, what records they shouldn't be wasting their life on. Because it seemed to me that the records everyone was listening to were the worst, the ones I hated most. Did I mention there was a bit of anger involved? It was all opinion, of course. I was an angry young man. It's not an uncommon beginning.

TH and PB: But how did you move from being a fan and a participant in a particular scene to being a paid up freelance journalist?

CJW: It was all about aesthetics. I loathed hippies because the day was well passed for beads and flares and peace and love. Time was overdue to return to the short, sharp attack. I was into the Bauhaus, not Buckminster Fuller. I was equating rock'n'roll to the art history I was getting more into, and I couldn't understand why rock wasn't regarded on the same level. At a time when information was hard to get, I pored over *Rock Dreams* and *The Story of Pop*, and more so than *Rolling Stone*, *Rock Scene* magazine. It was all gloriously trashy. But then rock betrayed me. I always used to say, it was a great time to be 15 in 1972, but a bummer to be 18 in '75. Rod Stewart's 1975 album *Atlantic Crossing* was symptomatic of the problem: Everyone was going West Coast soft rock. It was all Fleetwood Mac, Peter Frampton and the Eagles. This is punk pre-history 101. Punk was the enema rock had to have, yin to disco's yang. It was anti-social, semi-intellectual and totally non-commercial. And yet the number of interviews I do these days on the subject of those days is a measure of the significance they've by now attained.

1977 was a new sort of Year Zero, the Tipping Point for a push driven by critics as much as anything else including the general zeitgeist. The outspoken advocacy of the likes of Lester Bangs (1987) and Nick Kent (1994) spread the word when the land was barren, and inspired as many young musicians of my generation as critics like myself. It is impossible to underestimate the impact Iggy and the Stooges' second album *Funhouse* had, not so much upon its release in 1970 as a few years later. Again, many of my peers will say the same thing. When the Ramones and Brisbane band the Saints came along long before the Sex Pistols, it did for rock, the way I was seeing it, what Coltrane did for jazz or Pollock did for painting: wiped the slate clean, if at opposite ends of the scale. I was developing precocious theories like these. Gideon Haigh, contemplating Lillian Roxon's legacy, wondered if she had a 'coherent aesthetic sensibility', the mark presumably of any good critic or writer (2002). Well, I know I certainly had an aesthetic sensibility, and I don't think it was entirely incoherent either, equating, as I did, say, the Ramones with Mondrian, if Coltrane was Pollock. I reckon you could still get a PhD thesis out of that! I was instinctively making the sort of connections that rock writing I wasn't reading at that early stage, like Greil Marcus, was starting to make in a book like *Mystery Train* (1976).

My lead piece in the one and only issue of *Suicide Alley* was a review of Television's debut album *Marquee Moon*. I liked the album a lot but with some qualifications. My

other feature piece immediately caused an enmity that endures in some ways to this day – an equivocal review of Radio Birdman’s debut, the *Burn My Eye* EP – which only goes to show that fanzines, despite the suggestion of their name, aren’t all fawning and gushing. Their only commonality, perhaps, is passion, which can equally amount to vitriol as praise. I might have been a bit down on Birdman but I believed more broadly in the DIY-punk cause.

I was editing, designing and printing my own writing for a while before I started doing some record reviews for *Semper*, which definitely wasn’t self-publishing. *Semper* was and still is the University of Queensland students’ paper, which has a long and venerable tradition of kick-starting the careers of writers from David Malouf to John Birmingham. In 1977/78, the paper started a push off campus, ultimately laying the foundations for Australia’s first sustainable or longest-lived free weekly, *Time Off* (Sennett and Groth, 2010; Dickson, 2008; Stockwell, 1998). I was its resident iconoclastic punk record reviewer. Basically it was record reviews I cut my teeth on. That’s how most rock writers start. I wasn’t getting paid but I got free records, and again, many rock writers will tell you, it was just, FREE records?! Where do I sign up? I was a collector as so many of us were, and I’m still a firm believer that ‘crate digging’ is the anthropology of rock scholarship.

TH and PB: So you were an enthusiast, an advocate, and you were involved in cultural wars over meaning, value, and aesthetics, etc. You were a record collector and a punter at the live performances – but none of these things in themselves make you a rock journalist. What happened that enabled you to shift from being a reviewer and fanzine writer to become a full time, freelance journalist?

CJW: Getting paid was the real breakthrough, of course, and that took a little longer. I co-edited a second punkzine, *Pulp*, with Bruce Milne in Melbourne in 1978, before we joined forces with another crew in Adelaide to launch a new national paper called *Roadrunner*. At the same time I was a volunteer announcer on 3RRR-FM. I didn’t get paid till I moved to Sydney in 1980. Sydney was then taking over from Melbourne as Australian rock capital, and certainly, it was home to *RAM* and *Rolling Stone*, both of whom I straight away started working for and getting paid by. I was just following my nose, as I learnt later any good writer should. The early ’80s is one of the most fabled boom times in Australian music alongside the mid-’60s and early ’70s, when pub rock was consummated and punk rock went post-punk and it all merged together anyway and ultimately produced a broad wave of Australian rock that rolled all the way through the ’80s and all around the world, and it was this wave, in effect, I rode as one of its chroniclers.

At first, my stuff was dreadful, the way it reads now: stiff, flat, partisan, declamatory, didactic, at worst preachy; just all-round awful. But I was doing something right. Right from the start, I could get away with being a regular contributor to both *RAM* and *Rolling Stone*, the two big opposition national rock rags. I would go on to become I think the only freelancer to straddle both mastheads during the booming ’80s. It couldn’t have happened in the UK, where you wrote for either *Melody Maker* or the *NME* and that was that. I was getting paid by the word but no retainers, but still I could barely keep up with demand. My prose was leaden, as I said, but I had saving graces. For one, I was actually onto a story. Recently, at a conference, I bumped into Geoff King, who I hadn’t seen for

30 years since I worked under his management at 3RRR, and I said to him, only half-joking, 'The only reason I've stayed in this business so long is to correct all my earlier mistakes.' Geoff laughed, 'But that's why we wanted you at Triple-R!' A bit of that gormless adolescent zeal goes a long way. I am grateful to Anthony O'Grady at *RAM* and the late Paul Gardiner and his first wife Jane at *Rolling Stone* for seeing through my technical ineptitude. I never tried to imitate the grandiloquent gonzo of the revered Bangs or Kent (the archetypal rock writing style) because I was probably having difficulty enough just putting the words on paper, let alone actually marshalling them into even an imitation of a style.

My other great saving grace, I suppose, was that my copy was clean (almost too clean), and again, counter to the wild rock writer image, even though I lived up to that behaviour in my lifestyle, it was always on time. There's no substitute for clean copy on deadline. And on a hot story. *Get the kid to do some more, even if he is still learning to write.*

The thing that first really started knocking me into shape was a gig stringing for the *Adelaide Advertiser*, which must have come about somehow through the *Roadrunner* connection. In 1980/81, I wrote dozens of 700-word previews of touring bands about to hit Adelaide, both local and international. Working for a real newspaper like the *Advertiser*, with its shorter form and so much quicker turnaround, was what started loosening me up and getting some life into my prose. It was sink or swim and I dog-paddled. I was just into the music, a true believer. When Wild & Woolley published *Inner City Sound* at the end of 1981, it wasn't so much that I wanted to be an author or editor as I could see a story that needed telling. *Inner City Sound* was a scrapbook and a manifesto, a sort of pre-history-as-it-happened of a cultural revolution and a call to arms for post-punk independent Australian music. With a cover design by Philip Brophy, it stuck out in Wild & Woolley's catalogue of dope growing guides and Ron Cobb comics like a new wave twist on an old tradition. It was presented like an art book, and I retain a dedication to the visual that's really only now finding full flower in a book like *Golden Miles* (but which, again, only adds to my persecution complex: a book's literary merit obviously declines in direct proportion to the number of illustrations it contains).

Inner City Sound was the triumphant conclusion of the first chapter of my semi-professional life. As much as a lot about it embarrasses me, I take pride that when it was finally got back in print out of the US in 2005, the back cover blurb proclaimed it 'a lost classic, so sought after it has been bootlegged like the rare singles listed in its discography, so seminal it actually helped shape the Australian indie rock scene of the following decade'. And so then what did I do the minute it made the social pages of Sydney's Sunday papers after a launch that had the Birthday Party playing? I hightailed it overseas. Any band will tell you to never turn your back on a hit, but I was still playing out my rites of passage of a young Australian. You have to go and see what's on the other side of the hill. For Australians, London was the metropolis – this was still the centre of the pop cultural universe for us antipodeans.

TH and PB: And London is where all your indie muso mates were going at the time also, weren't they? Why to London? Why not LA? Or NYC? And what happened there? How did you survive? Did you keep writing? If so, did you write for UK music magazines as well?

CJW: My time in England was like one very long long weekend. I didn't do any writing, although I did record a number of interviews that were run in Bruce Milne's then-pioneering cassette magazine *Fast Forward*. People went to England I suppose due to that same old Imperial thing. I mean, many people had some sort of patriality there, and there was always the belief you could get on the dole there. There were Australian bands that were going to the US, this was the whole era of INXS and all that, but the US seemed just so vast, so foreign, and really also so square, you know, those bands were the major label bands that were going for the whole chart pop success. England was supposedly hipper, had the independent scene. I got a job in the London record shop in which Nick Hornby set *High Fidelity* (1995). I witnessed first-hand the encroachment of Australian independent acts like Nick Cave and the GoBetweens on the European circuit. I came home with nothing but a heroin habit and several tea-chests full of books, records and clothing. Going overseas was like that back in those days. But then the '80s became quite an opening up itself, with multi-culturalism and feminism, and in music and media the rise up from the underground of what became known as 'alternative', through independent record labels, independent press, public radio – it was the emergence of the idea of niche markets.

TH and PB: The '80s are often typecast as the 'me decade', of identity politics and the break-up of coherent popular culture narratives and music scenes. Yet when we listen afresh to the indie rock music scenes this doesn't seem to capture that period at all. The '80s was your decade of intense freelance rock music journalism. Tell us about it. What did you do and how?

CJW: When I returned to Sydney from London in 1983, this was when I started my real education as a writer, which, again, I did on my feet. I got onto a treadmill, freelance journalism, and I didn't get off it for the best part of a decade to follow.

When I got back, I picked up where I left off with *Rolling Stone*, now under Toby Creswell's editorship, and at *RAM* when Phil Stafford took over. There was a boom in independent magazine publishing to rival the peak of the underground press in the early '70s. There was a time in the early '80s when there were as many as five competing national rock papers not including *Countdown* magazine, plus a growth industry in fashion-culture crossover start-ups, plus the beginnings of a sustainable, regionalized free weekly street press, plus a ripe fanzine scene. I set it up so I wasn't just limited to writing about music. I did mainly independent music for the music mags and for the *Age*, stringing for Richard Guilliat's new *EG* pre-weekend section in much the same way I had for the *Advertiser*. But for *Stiletto* and *Follow Me*, the two sustainable new Sydney fashion-culture crossover titles which were like less cool or intellectual versions of Melbourne's *Virgin Press*, *Crowd* or *Tension*, I did different sorts of features as well, on art, travel, writing, sport. I wrote film reviews for the *Countdown* magazine. I edited my second book, *The Next Thing*. I was so anti-gonzo it was a collection of straight Q&A interviews accompanied by photos taken by my usual shooting-partner, Francine McDougall. When I look back now, I am astonished at the amount of good, clean copy I turned out during this period, even despite an escalating drug habit. I took it as a point of pride that even as I descended to the depths, I never missed a deadline. I was a reliable

junkie. As my workload increased my writing improved and vice versa. It was the best teacher I could have had, the discipline of consistently having to hit deadlines, and keep it snappy. I mean, when you're calling a story through to a copytaker from a public phone in a thunderstorm, it'd want to be clear! I enjoyed the work and the lifestyle and I kept doing it because I could. I kept pushing myself forward. I was taking writing itself a bit more seriously, and so I had to take reading a bit more seriously too. I set myself on an autodidact's course to find out what I was really interested in. Very aware of the high/low divide, I explored academic writing and all the more big 'L' literature. There is not another lifetime to go through all the things I've loved and perhaps more than anything just tried to will myself to be influenced by, and the things I've hated and very consciously tried to react against – and that's a process that never ends anyway. If you want to call what I do 'lowbrow', I could see a greater need for me to do that because there was so much work yet to be done in the field. It was wide open. I'd always listened to blues and jazz and soul and now I got into hip-hop and country music. Country music was everywhere in Sydney's inner city in the '80s with psychobilly and gothic swamp rock rising, and its songwriting mores had as much impact on me as New Journalism, the Beats, pulp and crime fiction and the then-new, so-called 'Dirty Realism'.

War stories? I got a million of 'em. Like the time I went to the Sebel Townhouse to interview Elvis Costello after he'd just read a bagging I'd given him in *Stiletto*, and he gave me a spray for our allotted hour and I didn't have to say anything and it became a cover story for American magazine *Exposure*. Or the time I cooked backstage for the Ramones and they said it was the best chilli they'd ever eaten outside the continental USA. Or the time I crashed the Violent Femmes' tour bus. Or got punched out for a bad notice (that happened a couple of times, actually). Or took Texan cowboy singer Guy Clark to a test match at the SCG. Or got fired by Lou Reed. Or nodded out on camera on *Donnie Sutherland's After Dark*, complete with cigarette ash drooping. Or was refused entry – well, look, I could go on. I loved it all, the lifestyle, as they say, the sex and drugs and rock'n'roll. I didn't so much live day to day as night to night – until I turned 30 in 1987, and a lot of things started to change.

TH and PB: So turning 30 was a watershed year for you? What prompted the changes?

CJW: I think the whole world changed in the late '80s, with the fall of Wall Street and the Berlin Wall, and the rise of computers and CDs. It's uncanny that the timespan of rock's classic vinyl era was the same as that of the Cold War. Certainly my world had to change. In the pit of my stomach I was starting to feel that if I didn't stop living the way I was, I'd be dead. So I got off drugs. I did a geographical. I went to the US for the first time in '87. I went cold turkey on a coast-to-coast drive, the pilgrimage through Vegas, New Orleans, Nashville, Memphis, and I spent an extended stay in New York; then I spent a good chunk of '88 in LA, courtesy of an air ticket from INXS or the *Bulletin* or someone. It all seems, again, like a punctuation mark, like England was in '82.

Back in Sydney to settle in '89, having kicked the gear (and indeed never to touch it again), I met my future wife. Through all this, I didn't let a foot slip off the treadmill. I don't suppose I could have afforded to.

TH and PB: You made some changes to your personal lifestyle which meant that you could live to see middle age, but what about your freelance rock music writing? What did you do when you returned from America?

CJW: Two of my core writing gigs, *Stiletto* and especially sadly *RAM*, both died in the late '80s, unable to make the transition from inky newsprint to glossy colour. New English magazines like *The Face* and *Smash Hits* changed the face of the pop press in the '80s. After *Rolling Stone*, *NME* and *RAM* in Australia codified rock journalism, as inky, in the '70s, in the '80s printing technology leapt ahead making glossy colour cheaper, quicker and better, and *The Face* and *Smash Hits* took advantage of this to herald a shift in magazine formatting. It was going back to shorter form, and decorative design. I replaced *Stiletto* and *RAM* with new regular gigs with the *Bulletin* and *New Woman*, and I did more, bigger stuff for *Stone*. I knew how to adjust for different types of pieces and readers. The critic's place, I would loftily pronounce, is exactly half way between the artist and audience. I fell into a job, an actual staff job, Features Editor for a new magazine called the *Edge*, a sort of boyish version of *Dolly* (a lads' mag before its time) headed up by my old pal Stuart Coupe and this then-wife and former *Dolly* editor Julie Ogden, and backed by Century Publishing. I'd never before scored any sort of staff gig because, I'd always presumed, I was too much of a loose cannon to be trusted. Maybe now I could. The job lasted six months till the title went down. I walked across the street, Mclaughlin Avenue in Rushcutters Bay, and into the office of Mason-Stewart and got a gig as Features Editor at *Playboy*.

Playboy was the beginning of the end. The gig lasted, again, merely six months. Maybe I was still too much of a loose cannon, I don't know. But I thought *Playboy* was a joke and it was a bad experience (later I found out a string of short-lived Features Editors felt the same way). *Playboy* was just the first of a couple more bad experiences that finally cruelled me on journalism. I went back to the *Bulletin* again, got a regular pop review column, and started doing some major music features for the *Weekend Australian Colour Magazine*, but both those experiences ended in tears too. I always kept on doing a bit for *Rolling Stone*, and after Toby Creswell left to form *Juice*, it too, and I did a bit for the late, great Greg Hunter when *Inside Sport* started up, but I had to leave it up to the young ones, who were out there living the Life I no longer was, to cover the new grunge and techno I couldn't much relate to anyway (there is nothing sadder, I knew, than an aging rock critic past his use-by date).

But it was clear by now that if I wanted to advance any further as journalist, I would have to sell out my integrity or credibility as a music critic: this was the middlebrow-mediocritization of music writing as it made the transition to the arts pages. I was quite happy, say, to write a feature for the *Bulletin* on stiff-as-a-board country singer James Blundell because there was a news angle (he was rumoured at the time to be dallying with the National Party), but when the arts editor scoffed at the mere suggestion of an obituary on Miles Davis, let alone ever gave me the rope to do anything pro-active, the stuff I really enjoyed and, I think, excelled at, I knew there wasn't enough percentage left for me in journalism. Even when I could still do some good stuff for *Stone* or *Juice* (the two defining youth/music magazines of the '90s; and again, I was able to get away with straddling this divide as no-one else could), it all boiled down to the same old routine anyway, a lot of the

same old faces every year with a new album and the same old touring schedule. Whether I jumped off the treadmill or was pushed I'm still not sure. I was just trusting again that I'd land on my feet as I'd somehow always seemed to do in the past.

TH and PB: With the benefit of hindsight we can see that you not only survived the switch from freelance journalism to writing books but you positively thrived in the '90s. What happened? You didn't seem to plan it.

CJW: Even before I careened off the harried treadmill of freelance journalism, I edited two books: 1981's *Inner City Sound*, and 1984's *The Next Thing*.

Since I started pulling back from journalism, I've published five more books under my own name that have been pretty successful by any measure: *Highway to Hell* (1994), *Stranded* (1997), *Football Life* (1998), *Buried Country* (2000), and *Golden Miles* (2005). Most of these have sold very respectably; by the standards of, say, the great god of Australian capital-L Literature, they were best-sellers. *Highway to Hell* was and remains a genuine best-seller: Since it was first published in 1994, it's sold 100,000 copies in this country alone, and it's still in print and still selling; plus it has been through several American and English editions, and translated into three foreign language editions (French, Italian and Bulgarian).

Selling books is important to me because as neither a tenured academic nor a member of the state-funded literati, my writing has always had to somehow financially justify itself. Turning it into films is just another way to extend the potential creatively as well as financially.

But just as important to me as selling is not selling out, or dumbing down. My work may not be overtly 'Literature' or academic-scholarly, but, well, again, in my defence, I can only but offer up my list. It does not behove any writer to quote his own (good) reviews. Perhaps more important is that the work has proven to have legs. If I had a dollar for every journalist, student, curator or film crew that's beaten a path to my door over the last good few years our mortgage would be a lot better off. And these people don't want to talk to me about me as any sort of celebrity-author, it's all about the sheer content of my work and the original research it's based on. Of course, it would allow any author to indulge in feeling a fair amount of told-you-so vindication if he had a 25-year-old book got back in print and it was received rapturously all round the world – and that's what happened to me when in 2005 Verse Chorus Press in the US put out a new, expanded edition of *Inner City Sound*.

Each of my titles has had some sort of varying relationship with film treatments and multi-platform integrations, though so far, only *Buried Country*, my secret history of Aboriginal hillbilly music, has made it onto the screen. In 2000, *Buried Country* became something of a juggernaut with an accompanying CD I produced as well as the book and the documentary. Ironically, the book has probably been my poorest selling to date, even as the juggernaut as a whole provided me with something of a breakthrough. *Buried Country* generated a press clips file almost bigger than all my other projects put together, but crucially among the tearsheets were many glowing reviews from academic journals, from overseas as well as Australia, and this was notice I'd never gotten before.

Around the same time I was wrapping up *Buried Country*, I was also working as principal interviewer and co-writer on the ABC-TV series on the history of Australian

rock called *Long Way to the Top*, and when it was broadcast the following year, it was a hit so big as to be one of those rare television ‘water-cooler’ phenomena. Both it and *Buried Country* have been widely used as teaching aids in universities and high schools, and all this, in turn, in short, can explain how I come to be here now.

TH and PB: You say turning books into films is just a good way to make money, but perhaps this is a good moment to ask you to reflect about the multi-media nature of some of your work over the decades – first as a volunteer DJ on community radio station 3RRR in Melbourne, then as a TV documentary scriptwriter, but also as a presenter of live performance shows on TV, etc. Then there are the CD-Rom and CD tie-ins with your books. It seems to us that it makes you the resident anthropologist of Australian rock music – a participant-observer researcher as it were. How did it come to pass that you have worked in so many different aspects of the popular culture industry in Australia and where do you see yourself working in these media again in the near future? Money never seems to have been the primary motivation for your work even though you have always had to worry about connecting your interests to markets.

CJW: I think if you go into any creative game with the objective of making money, you’re almost certainly going to be disappointed. You know, there are many called but few chosen. And without wishing to get too mystical or egotistical, I do feel as if I’ve just been dragged along by the muse quite a lot – and happen-stance. I’ve always somehow seemed to make just enough to get by. I never stopped to think about it for a long time because I always kept busy and something always seemed to turn up. But it was really just like this organic development. I mean, play records on the radio? I do that at home anyway, you wouldn’t have to pay me to impose my taste on other listeners! But actually, DJ-ing was something I did back then and really feel like I’d like to have done more. I did a bit of DJ-ing in clubs in Sydney in the early ’90s especially – and I got paid for it – but I’m a real believer in and consumer of public radio and I’d love to do more in that field. I became a rogue journalist who shifted to writing rogue books, and so then it was only natural to try and move into film, other things. I’d published a few books and it was like, if you’re lucky, here’s a couple of thousand dollars advance, see you in two years. Whereas I could see people I knew working in films and getting paid wages! Lots of people working in fact – film and TV is very labour intensive, lots of money around, from the government not least of all, so I thought I could get a piece of that action too, and get my stories out through this much more immediate, contemporary medium. People these days talk about cross-platform synergies; well, as soon as I was doing *Buried Country*, it was something holistically conceived as a book, a film and soundtrack album, long before people were talking about this approach, and I pulled it off. Funny thing is though, by now I’ve virtually had to withdraw from the film scene because after I did a couple more major projects, like *Long Way to the Top*, which was also immensely successful, after that, for reasons I still can’t quite understand, I couldn’t get arrested. Worse still I’ve been ripped off by producers, which is something you just have to try not to let make you feel bitter. But as I say, I’ve always somehow managed to land on my feet and so if I felt squeezed out of film and TV, I’ve fallen into this more academic realm now and it’s great. Ultimately though I love books most and I fall back on doing that not least of all because it’s up to me and me alone to do it, and I can and do do it because no-one can stop

me. Next to no money in it but I've got a list that's growing and in that sense it sort of pays me some residuals and so I figure the bigger I build my list, as well as get all my backlist in print, which I'm in the process of doing, the better my income becomes. And if any film-makers are interested in adapting my stuff, well and good, but I won't be actively seeking it.

TH and PB: It is one thing to be a rock music journalist but quite another to be a popular cultural historian that you now call yourself, and for good reason given your books such as *Buried Country* and *Golden Miles*, but how is it possible to get a fix on the cultural lie of the land when it is contemporary – when we are living in the midst of it?

CJW: Good taste! The history I'm interested in is the history that happened in our own backyard yesterday. When it soon enough dawned on me in the early '90s to write a book about Bon Scott, the original AC/DC singer who died in 1980, I sometimes felt like I should be looking over my shoulder. At the time, Scott, the great modern Australian larrikin icon, was a decade dead and untouched; I couldn't believe I had such rich material all to myself. It was the start of the rest of my life. As it happened, *Highway to Hell* was published the same year my first child was born, 1994. I was 37. The story was a gift. Bon Scott is still the most mythical of all Australian rock stars. I would have had to have worked hard to fuck it up. And even as I cringe now to read a lot of it, I can also get caught up in something that so many readers have obviously also got caught up in – call it a force of character so great it could survive even my inadequacies as a writer. From a distance now though I can see my stamp as a noble foot-soldier in the long march of rock writing. *Highway to Hell* is as rough as guts but the texture and tempo and tone is entirely appropriate to the material, it is rich in well-researched detail, and it builds an inexorable momentum and drama. I am proud it is still selling and touching new readers, and grateful for the entrée it provided me to longer-form, broader-based non-fiction writing generally.

I felt another sense of urgency when I started on *Buried Country*, but this time the race wasn't so much against other writers but against time itself, to reach many of these aging characters before they were no longer alive to tell their story. Both these stories, books, I can now only consider the sort of gifts that most writers don't get twice in a lifetime. The history unearthed in *Buried Country* is very recent, but it was already being lost when I started trying to reverse that trend.

It's history so recent sometimes as to be almost as it's happening, either way so near yet so far that often it tends to get overlooked or undervalued. I have ventured into this cultural no-man's land – 'Boganvillia' I sometimes like to joke it's called, where the Grecian urns are hotted-up Holden Monaro muscle cars – and I've started mapping it out. What I look for are true stories that maybe haven't been told before and that have an existing and strong a) narrative shape, and b) symbiotic relationship with their broader political, social and cultural contexts.

The broader and daresay important or groundbreaking social and cultural history that was recognized in *Buried Country* and *Long Way to the Top* is what I thought I was doing all along, whether writing about music or other subjects like the decline of community sporting cultures in the face of corporate super leagues (*Football Life*), or suburban

Australian car culture (*Golden Miles*); or, as in my forthcoming book *The Wizard of Oz*, the forgotten folk hero Norman ‘Wizard’ Smith, a 1920s speed ace whose star-crossed career makes him one of the unsung pioneers of machine-age Australian modernism generally.

The patterns and connections I am always looking for in these narratives I can only now see in reflecting back across my own life and career and see that they are my stories also. Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised to find myself recurrently identifying with the underdog. It is a great Australian trait apparently. But I’ve always just found myself drawn not to politics or the institutions of power nor the apparently official highbrow culture that happens in art galleries and opera houses, but the stuff of everyday real-life culture, and perhaps most especially the outlaws and the fringe-dwellers, or prophets.

More than once I have been told (by people in the book business) that I write books for people who don’t buy books. To which I have the standard reply: Yes, but since my books actually usually sell pretty well, might it not be more precise to say I write books about people and subjects that the people who do buy books aren’t interested in? And I wonder, why not?

TH and PB: Rock journalists seem to cop criticism from two quarters – from musicians themselves and from the high culture industry avatars that propagate the hoary old romantic myths of high and low culture that go back two centuries and are perpetrated in literary scenes by the likes of T.S. Eliot and Leavis on the right and Adorno on the left. Has this been your experience?

CJW: In 1967, the late Lillian Roxon, the ‘insufficiently legendary’ (Christgau, 2004) Australian who published the world’s first rock encyclopaedia in 1969 (Roxon, 1969), complained of the *Sydney Morning Herald*: ‘They won’t give me a byline of course as my image is too dizzy for the responsible, serious stuff.’² A decade after that in 1978, when I was first just getting into the game myself and Roxon was already longish dead, the late Annie Burton, another of the great unsung women of Australian rock journalism, wrote in *Roadrunner* magazine: ‘A rock writer is acknowledged as the lowest form of journalistic life’ (Burton, 1978). It wasn’t just me. Or *us*. We were constantly reminded how low we were. Right from the beginning, there was Dylan’s ‘Mr Jones’, who knew something was happening but didn’t know what it was (1965); two decades later it gets no better, with Nick Cave’s ‘Scum’ (1986).³

But if none of us were ever so naïve as to expect our quarry to like us (what artist doesn’t loathe his critics? – or read their every word?), we might have hoped for some respect if not solidarity from fellow writers and critics. But that would have been naïve too. In the first throes of post-modernism in the ’80s, after British sociologist Simon Frith paved the way (1979), the academic world started to take an interest in rock, and in 1987 Marcus Breen edited a book called *Missing in Action: Australian Popular Music in Perspective*, in which in a chapter called ‘Rock Journalism: Betraying the Impulse’, he wrote of ‘the great pretenders’ who deal only in ‘failure, death and stupidity’. This was an attack of such hostility it’s hard to imagine it wasn’t somehow personal, as if Breen had had a few record reviews knocked back or something, and as such it was exceptional. But, again, it wasn’t the only one (Botsman and Harley, 1982), it was just symptomatic

of a broader, general attitude of contempt the Australian rock writer was made to buckle under, part of what Graeme Turner called 'the conventional establishment contempt for the popular in all its forms' (1989).⁴ This was the climate I grew up in, in which my admittedly perhaps self-defeating self-image was inculcated.

So, I had a bit to get over. But which I think I have by now. In my middle years I have been given pause to reflect on my anti-career as a writer. On another project, I've been doing some research into the papers of Lillian Roxon held at the Mitchell Library in Sydney. For both, in order to most effectively tell the story, I have to set the appropriate background, and so I have had to reconstruct the story of rock writing generally. And it's been in doing this that's made it so much easier to shed the shame, because in digging back through all those back pages, I've found so much to like. That's why I'm hung on this 'recovering rock journalist' thing. It's a reclamation of pride the same way terms like 'queer' are now being thrown back in the face of their oppressors.

TH and PB: What about the writing itself? What do you think is the value and place of rock music writing in wider cultural terms? Does it have a future?

CJW: In his second novel, 1999's *Stay Away from Lightning Girl*, recovering rock star Stephen Cummings has his protagonist, recovering rock star Robert Moore, feeling ambivalent about getting his old band back together to cash in on one of their old songs coming back as a hit ad jingle. Moore protests to a record company executive that at least his solo albums get good reviews, and the A&R man, Kellogs, sneers: 'Rock music died when it attracted critics and was placed in the arts pages along with other dead movements like dance and classical music and literature'.

Now, many may argue that rock's not dead at all, just spread a lot thinner and turning ever more quickly in concentric circles, but few, it seems, would disagree with a less harsh variation on Kellogs' riff, that rock writing died, or at least lost something, or part of it died, when it 'graduated' to the arts pages. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, on the weekend of 11–12 July 2009, ran a two-page feature in its *Spectrum* arts review section under the cover line 'Music Writing – Hitting the Wrong Notes' (Harris, 2009). Naturally, the story was imported, from the *Guardian* in the UK; in it, English writer John Harris was ostensibly celebrating the launch of yet another serious journal on rock and its past and present (the quarterly *Loop*, published by Faber), but actually lamenting that the emphasis in rock writing now is on the past, and that the form has been going downhill ever since the 1980s with its 'swerve towards cultural studies and cod philosophy, resulting in endless references to Barthes and Baudrillard and worse'. If I'd said that as a member of the late baby-boomer Blank Generation who pre-dated post-modernism, I could reasonably be accused of nostalgia or being a curmudgeon. But Harris is Generation X, born in 1969 and coming of age at the height of the post-structuralist paradigm in the '90s; he's got a right to rebel. And I find it hard to disagree with him. When rock critics started needing university qualifications, it was the beginning of the end. The next phase of the end was the internet. The internet has decimated the traditional role of the music writer as a classic gatekeeper in the same way it's destroying the classic, late-capitalist model of the music industry as a whole. Who needs any sort of mediator when the music in question is only a click away? That's why the hottest debate

among the still legions of music writers today – of which the *Herald's* story was one symptom – is not unsurprisingly as to their own ongoing relevance.⁵ Which of itself of course suggests there is still some sort of passion out there, albeit online. What's definitely dying is music magazines. Longstanding titles are folding at a rate of knots. Really only *Rolling Stone* and the *NME* remain, and *Stone*, in Australia, was recently acquired by ACP. All the action is online. The rest is history, in books, literally. Contemporary music writing, as Harris says, seems to be best on the subject of the past. This might account for the survival, so far, of music magazines that have a history or retro angle, like *Mojo* and others. The sad part for Australian music writing is that even if it *was* dead, it would only be all the more reason its history doesn't remain as secret as its present too was inevitably absent from Harris's story in the *Herald*.

TH and PB: Rock music writing in Australia like the music itself has a history that is typical of regional, provincial cultures linked to major metropolitan centres of production – lots of copying of received ideas and an intense interest and awareness of what is happening in London and NYC and LA, even as the centres themselves are full of ambitious young things from the antipodes making it up as they go. Lillian Roxon in NY, Richard Neville and company with *Oz* magazine, Germaine Greer, and so forth in London and myriad others since. The story is never one way but nonetheless the flagships of modern rock writing seem to us to have two or three main traditions and sources. On the one hand, the entertainment industry rags that in turn seem to be variations of fanzines manipulated by the industry avatars themselves to create bigger markets for their stables of artists that transmute into something quite other than this in becoming countercultural voices of the new generation who are making the new music scenes – and here we are thinking of such magazines as *Melody Maker* and *NME* in England. Then there is the new journalism inspired and mythologized by the likes of Ken Kesey and Tom Wolfe who were part of the wider countercultural revolutions of the '60s. They seem to be the direct connection to the emergence of Ralf Gleason's *Rolling Stone* in San Francisco. Then there is *Crawdaddy* and *Creem*. Yet were these magazines readily available on the streets of cities in Australia in the late '60s and in the '70s? I [TH] don't recall seeing these American magazines in Perth. If it was not for the creative collecting of one Grant Stone at Murdoch University I would never have had the opportunity to read them. They were kept under lock and key in a special collections room so I not only enjoyed the creative writing of such folks as Lester Bangs, Charles Shaar Murray, Nick Kent, Nick Cohn, etc., but felt that I was holding sacred texts in a special sanctuary. Looking back on your younger self in the late '70s, did you get to read these magazines and writers then? At what point did you read them? What did you think of them? How did you receive these writers and magazines and what influences did they have on your own sense of the writing task and the possibilities of the genre?

CJW: I started out stranded in the suburbs of Brisbane, I suppose a kid with a pretty active mind who was just trying to find some connections at a time when the world wasn't connected and it was even more oppressive in Bjelke's Brisbane. I was too young for that '60s' baby-boomer underground press. I started out reading *RAM*, Australian *Rolling Stone*, the *NME*, which was available months late via seamount, and a few other

imported American magazines like *Circus*, *Creem*, and *Rock Scene*, which would pop up in city newsagents. I listened to radio, Chris Winter's *Room to Move*, even jazz on *Music to Midnight*. I wrote to America to buy albums by the Stooges and the MC5, holy grails that were not then available in Australia. As I've suggested, I was seeing or trying to see rock music as art. And so really, very quickly, I became completely immersed in every bit of literature I could scrape up. Those two pillars, Bangs and Kent, were enormously influential on everyone in the game. But even before I found myself a functioning freelance journalist, I was smitten by the new journalism, of course – everybody read and loved Wolfe and all those writers. I suppose a lot of it was still connected to some idea of the underground press, the way I started doing fanzines. And when I started doing that, I'd probably only seen a couple of the English punk zines, like *Sniffin' Glue*. It just made sense to me.

Technically, in terms of style, I never even really tried to do that gonzo thing, but I shared a lot of the same interests, in terms of subjects. The way my work developed, I think my style was partly a result of how my interests veered into a very local, almost secret Australian thing. And so the language has to go that way. For example, an influence that springs to mind, that might seem unexpected, has to be Peter Corris. When I read my first Cliff Hardy detective novel, *The Empty Beach* (1983), which was about the third I think, it blew me away. And not only that, Corris also wrote *Lords of the Ring* (1980), a history of Australian boxing that I loved. There was quite a bit of sports writing that I liked actually, Mailer's *The Fight* (1976), stuff like that, and Garrie Hutchinson, who wrote about football for the *Age* in Melbourne. Because I was a Sydney stringer for the *Age*, I was always reading the Melbourne papers. I lived in Kings Cross and the big newsagent there got them in every day by mid-morning. Plus I followed the then-VFL/now-AFL [Australian Football League]. Hutchinson revolutionized sports writing in Australian newspapers (1984), because he was a bit gonzo basically. You wouldn't call Peter Corris gonzo though, and I especially liked his terse, unvarnished prose. He really was a little pointer for me into the Australia I wanted to explore.

TH and PB: So if rock music writing's era is over – is that the next step to write up the history of rock music writing? What of your own place in this story – are you still a rock music journalist?

CJW: I'm a recovering rock journalist! Writing about rock music in Australia is common enough, but writing about that writing is much less so, especially writing that puts a case *for* rock writing. Even as the literature of Australian rock exploded in the 1990s (in terms of books alone, from less than half a dozen releases in the '60s, to around a dozen in the '70s, the same again in the '80s, then up to at least 70 in the '90s⁶), the historiography still remains thin. The music always moved so fast, after all, the writing had its work cut out just keeping up with that, let alone picking apart its own form. Besides, if it had any ideas along those lines they were immediately pressed into action. That was always one of rock writing's great beauties, its urgency. Annie Burton's 1978 *Roadrunner* piece was almost a valedictory, although it was fairly typical of the day-in-the-life type stories of their reporters the music press always occasionally ran. My friend Stuart Coupe wrote a couple of those, plus also a couple of pieces on aspects

of the history of the Australian music press (1978, 1981, 1994). There are a couple of other articles, by Brown (1980), Brown (1981) and Doyle (1999), a PhD thesis on *Go-Set* by David Kent (2002), and Robert Milliken's biography of Lillian Roxon, *Mother of Rock* (2002). But that's about it.⁷

Highway to Hell came near the beginning of an explosion of Australian music books, what was in fact a real coming of age for Australian rock writing. When I started out on it, my models weren't Australian. The bibliography of Australian rock at that time still only numbered about 40 books. That list included a little bit of everything – photo books (Morris, 1976; Webber, 1976; King, 1981), a couple of encyclopaedias (McGrath, 1978; McFarlane, 1999; Baker and Coupe, 1980), a few biographies (Brown, 1975; Bryden-Brown, 1982) and memoirs (Taylor, 1970) and personal histories (Rogers, 1975), plus a few anthologies and compendiums (Higham, 1961; Neville, 1970; Talbot, 1977) – but what it lacked was narrative. As soon as the writing started to get good, as it did in, say, *Colin Talbot's Greatest Hits*, it ended, because the book was a collection of journalism. Everything was all very fragmented, discontinuous, charges to which my own two titles of that time (1982, 1984) could only plead guilty. I was impressed by my old sparring partner Andrew McMillan's *Strict Rules* (1988) because it had a sustained narrative arc and authorial voice, which I don't think an Australian rock book had had till that time. I liked Vivien Johnson's *Radio Birdman* (1990) for its almost perverse blend of art theory and hagiography. I loved *Glad All Over* (1992) for Peter Wilmoth's courage to step back and just let the oral history do the talking. For me, for Bon, all I knew for starters was I didn't know much till I did a bit of research. You can only then start to discern the contours of the narrative. I was learning on my feet as I ever have. Narrative, characters, drama, themes, ideas, a resolution – these were what I wanted, and got.

In a way, I supplanted print with TV work. This sort of cultural and social history just feels like a natural extension of what I started out doing in rock journalism. I feel privileged to have played however small a part during if not the golden era then certainly the back half of the classic vinyl era of rock writing. I take special pride in my books like *Football Life* (1998), *Buried Country* (2001) and *Golden Miles* (2005), that have gotten away from my comfort zone in Australian rock. A lot of my drive is still just not to be bored, to keep on finding things that keep me interested, whether music or otherwise.

The rock press was already fading (neither *Melody Maker* nor *Juke* survived the '90s, and *Juice* too died in 2003 after the e-bubble burst), not only because rock itself had ceased to be the fulcrum it once was, and not only because the internet with its downloading, webzines and blogs had come along too, but also because rock stars now were celebrities like all the rest of them, and not just in music magazines. Criticism was reduced to the capsule review, and before you know it a mere consumer guide has morphed invisibly into advertorial.

Yet even as rock writing now is near death as it attains respectability, a bit like a football commentator trying to describe the action in the fifth quarter, the contempt, remarkably, is still alive. Even as, say, former GoBetween and my friend Robert Forster can win the prestigious Pascall Prize in 2006 for critical writing for his music column in the dull-but-worthy *Monthly* magazine, there is still the whiff of tokenism about it, of second-guesswork and unknowingness. Peter Craven, capital 'l' Literary critic, Pascall judge and former winner himself, let his slip show not once but twice in the

two-paragraph Judges' Report: he said that Forster's readers 'may not know the work of the particular artist under review', and also that Forster's 'work can be read with pleasure (and instruction) by people who are not especially interested in his subject'. As much as two years after that, in 2008, the *Monthly's* editor, Sally Warhaft, still didn't seem to have learnt much: 'He can make you interested in things about which you know nothing and previously didn't care', she told John Birmingham (2008). Which all just gives me rise to ask: Was or is there anyone in this Melbourne mafia who doesn't so clearly hold rock itself in contempt, let alone know anything about rock writing? Has the world still not caught up with it even as it can be pronounced dead and even then start winning awards? But I just try to let things like this wash over me nowadays.

I take pride that *Highway to Hell* set a sort of benchmark: that of the dozens of Australian music books unleashed in the mid-'90s, it is one of only a handful still in print, and it has been outsold by only one other author, Billy Thorpe, and he across his two volumes of confabulation. Books like these proved there was a market for Australian rock history. I take further pride that *Highway to Hell*, like its subject, took an Australian rock missive to the world. I followed *Hell* up with a companion pair of personal histories, *Stranded* (1996) and *Football Life* (1998), only one of which, obviously, was about music; the other one was about one of my other great passions, Australian Rules football. They both had a similar format, a blend of reportage, memoir and oral history, all put in the service of a distinct narrative arc and/or thesis. It's funny how often in life you don't know what you're looking for till you find it. Long-form, broad-based, narrative non-fiction was where I was always heading. I was finding stories that seemed to be overlooked because they happened in our own backyard yesterday. I wanted to write stuff that was entertaining and accessible but not without substance, stories that reveal something we might not have known before. I wanted to be plain-speaking, unvarnished, and with scepticism and, yet, hopefully, with insight, empathy and a sense of humour also. I still just keep finding true stories that seem more important to me than anything I could make up – I suppose this is just the journalist that's still at the bottom of me.

Buried Country (2001) was another gift, the secret history of Aboriginal hillbilly music, another incredibly rich story I couldn't believe hadn't already been unearthed. It was an honour to be the mere messenger for several generations of extraordinary Aboriginal musicians, singers and songwriters, whose existence most Australians were completely unaware of. And so how does the critic take to his own critics? Well, how could I begrudge them when, say, on *Buried Country*, they wanted to compare me to Peter Guralnik, the Lomax family, or Harry Smith? So when I could be doing stuff like this, why would I waste my time battling with dullard arts editors who couldn't see the worth in Miles Davis?

Golden Miles sold out of a pretty healthy print run in a couple of months in 2005 and with next to no promotion, before its publisher Lothian sold out to Time-Warner who in turn sold out to Hachette Livre. That I've managed by now, though, to get the book back in print through a new publisher is testament, surely, to its relevance.

TH and PB: Where to from here? What are you working on at present?

CJW: I'm actually researching forming a publishing imprint – and this at a time when everyone's saying the book is dead! But I don't think it is anywhere near dead for very

specialist publishers with good taste. This is connected to a turn I seem to be undertaking in what I do. I've started going back to the art that I left behind when I dropped out of art school to become a writer. I've started drawing again – illustration was always a big part of my art base – and so I'm working on a couple of graphic novels that I'll likely publish myself in a hook-up under the umbrella of my American publisher, Verse Chorus Press. I say 'graphic novels' because that's the currently fashionable term and maybe I could get in on something right at the height of mass trendiness for once, but I have to qualify that and say they'll be non-fiction. So, in addition to having just finished *The Wizard of Oz*, and to writing a little book on live music as part of the Platform Papers series of quarterly essays on issues in the performing arts published by Currency House, I'm working on a book on the great black women of Australian music that's like a follow-up or companion piece to *Buried Country*, and I'm working on another non-fiction comic about the late Lionel Rose, who I had the great pleasure and privilege to meet a few times before he died in 2011. I'm also working on another old-fashioned book, but because this idea feels a bit like my Bon Scott biography did when I started it – that it's amazing it hasn't been done yet, especially given its major, world-wide potential – I don't want to talk too much about it yet.

I take pride that I'm still standing at all, really. So I just continue to struggle, somewhere on the fringes, between the barricades and the outhouse, and I try not to feel too sorry for myself because I know that all independent writers in this country struggle.

Notes

1. The other likely contenders for the title of Australia's first punkzine are Ian Hartley's *Spurt* and Bruce Milne's *Plastered Press*, but it's difficult to put exact dates on them. *Suicide Alley* is datelined April 1977. The other two I remember being around in the winter of '77. I don't think even I have a copy of *Suicide Alley* any more, and it's certainly not in any libraries. Maybe a collector somewhere has one.
2. Quote derived from notes in the Lillian Roxon archive held at the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Roxon was variously bylined as a special correspondent, Kay Warner or Gillian Yorke, before she was granted use of her own name.
3. Although 'Scum' maybe lets a lot of us off the hook because in it Cave explicitly names only two specific rock writers of his loathing.
4. Turner uses this paper in Bennett (1989) to illustrate how the contempt in question manifests in the way that compared to supposed 'cultural flagships' like films, literature and dance, rock music has received 'very little' government funding or protection, to say the least. Film has always been the popular form deemed serious enough for (enormous) support.
5. See, for example, J. Weiner (2009) 'Spinning in the Grave: The Three Biggest Reasons Music Magazines are Dying', in addition of course to the John Harris piece in the *SMH*, and generally the *Drowned in Sound* webzine 'Music Journalism RIP? Week' pages. The debate over the death or otherwise of music writing took a particularly virulent turn in Australia, after English critic Everett True migrated to Brisbane in 2008 and in August wrote a post on his *Guardian* online blog called 'True Tales: the exiled outbursts of our man in Australia', in which he shot down a few of the sacred cows of Oz rock and blamed the problem on an impotent music press. The posting was quickly picked up on by all sorts of mainstream news media outlets throughout Australia, for example, A. Harris: 'How dare this Pom just lob out here and start telling us what's wrong with the place, that our beloved bands like Silverchair were an abomination!?' The message boards were full of righteous indignation. But True's contentions were proved more True than even he might have imagined. In December 2008, the Australian edition of

Rolling Stone, in only its second issue under the new ownership of ACP, now the only remaining national rock magazine in the country, either disgraced itself or behaved entirely according to plan when its response to the whole storm in a teacup was not to exercise a considered right of reply but rather give True himself four pages to expound further on himself and his theories, thus effectively proving that even right up to the once-revered *Rolling Stone*, the Australian music press was indeed spineless. It was left to local webzine *Mess+Noise* to stand up, with a fine piece by Andrew Ramadge (2009) that if nothing else proved the contention that if music writing is still alive at all, it is most likely to be found online. Everett True, one of the convenors of *Drowned in Sound*, in turn published young Brisbane writer Andrew McMillan's 'An Australian's Input' in the site's 'Music Journalism RIP? Week' pages.

6. These figures are based on an unpublished bibliography of the literature of Australian rock compiled by the author.
7. Although neither of the two general Australian rock encyclopaedias (McGrath, 1978; McFarlane, 1999) and none of the various companions to Australian music (there is no companion to popular music or rock) include entries on much beyond performers alone, the superb Australian rock history website *milesago*, convened by Paul Culnane, includes many informative pages on aspects of the music media and business, including an edited version of David Kent's *Go-Set* history (2002).

References

Clinton J. Walker bibliography

Freelance journalism

- 1977/78 – *Semper, Pulp*
 1978/81 – *Roadrunner*
 1980/81 – *RAM, Adelaide Advertiser, Rolling Stone*
 1982 – *Fast Forward*

Books

- 1981 – *Inner City Sound* (Wild & Woolley) [as Editor]
 1984 – *The Next Thing* (Kangaroo Press) [as Editor]
 1994 – *Highway to Hell* (Sun/Sidgwick & Jackson, UK)
 1997 – *Stranded* (Macmillan)
 1998 – *Football Life* (Pan)
 2000 – *Buried Country* (Pluto Press)
 2001 – *Highway to Hell* (Verse Chorus Press, US)
 2002 – *Highway to Hell* (Picador)
 2005 – *Golden Miles* (Lothian)
 2005 – *Inner City Sound* (Verse Chorus Press)
 2009 – *Golden Miles* (Wakefield Press)
 2012 – *Wizard of Oz* (Wakefield Press)

Documentary film/series (as co-writer/music consultant)

- 2000 – *Buried Country* (Film Australia/SBS)
 2001 – *Long Way to the Top* (ABC)
 2003 – *Love is in the Air* (ABC)

Television series (as presenter)

- 1999/2003 – *Studio 22* (ABC)
2003 – *Rare Grooves* (ABC Fly TV)

CDs (as producer/executive producer)

- 2000 – *Buried Country* (Larrikin-Festival)
2001 – *Long Way to the Top* (ABC)
2002 – *Studio 22* (ABC)
2005 – *Inner City Soundtrack* (Laughing Outlaw)

DVDs (as writer)

- 2005 – *Triple J Archive Collection: 1975, the Year It All Began* (ABC)
2006 – *Triple J Archive Collection: Enter the 80s* (ABC)

Anthologies (as contributor)

- 1995 – The dark stars. In: *Men-Love-Sex*, ed. A Close (Random House).
1996 – This I believe. In: *This I Believe*, ed. J Marsden (Random House).
1996 – Football life. In: *Best Australian Sports Stories 1995* (Reed).
1997 – Tragedy: The perfect designer drug. In: *Great Australian Bites*, ed. D Warner (Fremantle AC Press).
2002 – Life coaches. In: *Footy's Greatest Coaches*, ed. S Holt & G Hutchinson (Coulomb Communications).
2006 – Rock'n'roll music. In: *Sociology: Place, Time and Division*, ed. P Beilharz & T Hogan (Oxford University Press).
2008 – Muscle car. In: *Car Lovers*, ed. J Dale (ABC Books).
2009 – Back to the ballroom. In: *Cultural Seeds: New Perspectives on the Work of Nick Cave*, ed. T Dalziell & K Welberry (Ashgate).

Radio

- 1978/79 – Volunteer announcer, 3RRR-FM

Guidebooks (as contributor)

- 1981 – *Australian Music Directory* (AMD PL)
1985 – *Big Australian Rock Book* (Megabooks)
1988 – *1988 Australian Almanac* (Angus & Robertson)
1989 – *1989 Australian Almanac* (Angus & Robertson)

Publicity

- 1986 – Australian tours by Lou Reed, the Violent Femmes

Editorships

- 1985/91 – Contributing Editor, *Rolling Stone*
1985 – Film Editor, *Countdown Magazine*

- 1986/88 – Music Editor, *Stiletto*
 1988/91 – Music Editor, *New Woman*
 1990 – Features Editor, *The Edge*
 1991 – Features Editor, *Playboy*

Freelance journalism including cover stories

- 1984/87 – *RAM*
 1985/86 – *Age EG*
 1988 – *Bulletin*
 1989 – *Exposure* (US)
 1989/90 – *Rolling Stone*

Television documentaries (as researcher/writer)

- 1987 – *Notes from Home* (ABC)
 1989 – *Sing It in the Music* (ABC)

Albums (as annotator)

- 1986 – *Dogs in Space: Original Soundtrack* (Chase Records)
 1988 – *Complete Studio Recordings*, Whirlywird (Missing Link)
 1989 – *Scarce Saints*, Saints (Raven)
 1989 – *Magic Box*, Loved Ones (Raven)
 1993 – *What Goes On*, Velvet Underground (Raven)
 1996 – *Quiet Girl with a Credit Card*, Lisa Miller (W. Minc)
 1996 – *Birth of Australian Rock'n'Roll*, Johnny O'Keefe (Festival)
 1997 – *Complete Recording Sessions*, Fraternity (Raven)
 2001 – *Wild About You*, Saints (Raven)
 2004 – *A Kind of Love-In*, Julie Driscoll (Raven)
 2009 – *Georgia Lee Sings the Blues Down Under* (Aztec)
 2010 – *Ode to Nothing*, Lighthouse Keepers (Feel)

Recording

- 1988 – 'Wild Down Home', the Killer Sheep (Au-Go-Go Records)

DJ promotions

- 1991 – TCB's at the Site, Piccadilly Hotel, Kings Cross

Museum exhibitions (as consultant/copywriter)

- 1995 – 'Real Wild Child', Powerhouse Museum
 1997 – 'Punkulture', Victorian Museum of the Performing Arts

Fanzines

- Walker C and McMillan A (eds) (1977) *Suicide Alley* fanzine, one issue, April, Brisbane.
 Walker C and Milne B (eds) (1977–1978) *Pulp* fanzine, four issues, Melbourne.

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