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Bodgies and Widgies — Youth Cultures in the 1950s*

Jon Stratton

In Britain since the 1976 publication of S. Hall and T. Jefferson's edited book *Resistance through Rituals*¹ there has been what might be called a revolution in the sociological study of youth. Previous to the publication of this volume the conventional academic approach had been, in the main, based on the paradigm of juvenile delinquency. The period of adolescence was viewed predominantly as a time of socialization, where, for reasons which sociologists set themselves to discover, this socialization was imperfect. The resultant deviance was classified as juvenile delinquency. In Britain one of the later, and best, books in this tradition was D. Downes, *The Delinquent Solution*.² In America there existed a minor theme counterpointing the dominant juvenile delinquency approach which was based in the Chicago School originated ethnographic tradition. This approach argued for youth as a classifiably separate period of life which had its own youth culture. The culmination of this tradition was a book by E. A. Smith published in 1962 called *American Youth Culture*.³ Although Smith saw minor differences in that culture as being caused by class the dominant assumption was that there was a generalizable culture based on age.

The approach adopted by the British group who are identified under the rubric of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was radically distinct from either of these two approaches. In *Resistance through Rituals* the members of this group argue that rather than examining individuals as juvenile delinquents it is possible to see that many young people identify themselves as members of a particular subculture. This membership depends on mobilizing the appropriate 'dress, music, argot and ritual'.⁴ The argument put forward is that these groups who are mainly of working class origin, such as teddy-boys, mods and rockers and the like are class based phenomena and represent attempts at producing 'magical solutions' to contradictory ideological pressures. These contradictory pressures are themselves a product of middle-class attempts to incorporate hegemonically working class behaviour. The effect of the Birmingham Centre's position is that the resulting subculture can be decoded in order to understand the 'solution' being articulated as a practice. This article will make some use of this approach. However, one other underlying theme will be the production of youth as a consumer category in the post-war period. J. Gillis in *Youth and History*⁵ has given a useful outline of the nineteenth-

* I would like to thank Lyn Finch for her help in the editing of this article.

1. S. Hall and T. Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals*, London, 1976.

2. D. Downes, *The Delinquent Solution*, London, 1966.

3. E. A. Smith, *American Youth Culture*, New York, 1962.

4. P. Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community' in S. Hall et al. eds., *Culture, Media, Language*, London, 1981, p.83.

5. J. Gillis, *Youth and History*, New York, 1974.

century production of the category of youth. A background suggestion will be that the types of subculture discussed by the members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies require the existence of a segmented youth consumer market in order to exist.

The article is the consolidation of information from research in progress on post-war Australian youth cultures. The facts about bodgies and widgies have been distilled from twelve interviews (eight males and four females) and thirteen letters (eight males and five females). The letters varied in length from half a page to eight A4 size pages. The interviews lasted up to about four hours. Unfortunately this research has been, and is, greatly hindered by the stigma still attaching to the labels bodgie and widgie. This has had two major effects. First, it has kept down the number of people prepared to reply to my public requests for information. Second, it has meant that much of the information has either been received anonymously — in the form of unsigned letters or unidentified telephone calls — or has only been given with the request that the identity of the informant is not revealed. One further consequence has been that it has not been advisable to tape interviews; already wary respondents would have become even more so and some might have been frightened off completely. The consequence of all this is that many of the established conventions of oral and social history have had to be ignored. Except where indicated, all the information here presented has appeared in at least two independent responses.

All the respondents were self-selected, replying to letters and articles in local and national newspapers. Their reasons for replying range from a wish to clear the name of bodgies and widgies (this only applies to some of the first generation) to a concern that an important part of post-war social history might be lost if this research is not done. Whilst over half of the respondents from the first generation have moved from upper-working class to lower middle-class and middle-class jobs and life-styles, those from the second generation have tended to remain working class. This may or may not be a generalizable phenomenon. For reasons too complicated to pursue here but which have to do with a loss of opportunity and a corresponding ossification in the Australian class structure during the late 1950s and 1960s, this is probably the pattern. The majority of replies were concerned with the earlier and less stigmatized period. All of the people interviewed have indicated a present day support for the Labor Party. This may either suggest an institutionalization of a critique of the social order or simply be a manifestation of the homogeneity of concerns of people who self-select in this kind of research.

Very little has been written on youth culture in post-war Australia. In the light of this, the aim of this article is to present a brief historical outline of Australian youth cultures from the end of the war to about 1960. The interviews were carried out with people who were participants in these cultures in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. These findings cannot be generalized to the other major centres in Australia because there were significant differences between these places. Moreover, for reasons which will become clear the first culture seems to have predominated along the East coast, although there are reports of a small presence in Adelaide. The aim is to show that bodgies and widgies who are generally considered to be a single group during the 1950s can, in fact, be broken down into two distinct youth cultures. Because the principal aim is historical reconstitution, theoretical concerns about the origin and meaning of these youth cultures will be left in the background.

The first work on youth culture in post-war Australia was A. E. Manning's *The Bodgie: A Study in Psychological Abnormality* published in 1959.⁶ This was not concerned

6. A. E. Manning, *The Bodgie: A Study in Psychological Abnormality*, Wellington, 1959. This book is concerned with what I have called the second generation of bodgies and widgies. Perhaps its most useful contribution to a study of youth culture is its indication that the terms bodgie and widgie were taken up in New Zealand to identify an analogous phenomenon.

with boddies and wiggies, as a youth group, but rather saw membership of this group as a sign of juvenile delinquency, the most useful answer to which was psychiatric treatment. As a consequence Manning attempted to locate the origins of the boddies' and wiggies' 'disturbed' behaviour in what he considers to be 'problems', such as broken marriages, in the individual's childhood. Apart from a short section called 'cults' in Craig McGregor's *Profile of Australia*,⁷ which looks briefly at surfies, and some information on rockers and jazzers which is given in passing by Dunphy in *Cliques, Crowds and Gangs*,⁸ the only other piece of academic writing to be concerned with youth cultures in Australia is an article by Braithwaite and Barker entitled 'Boddies and Wiggies: Folk Devils of the Fifties'.⁹ This article attempts to apply to press coverage of the boddies and wiggies the theories worked out by S. Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in relation to the British media's reporting of mods and rockers. Pearson's *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand*¹⁰ provides some useful background material, but is concerned with surfing and surfers, rather than the youth culture of surfies.

The only other works which deal in any sense directly with youth cultures in Australia are three novels. Of these easily the most useful from a sociologist's point of view is William Dick's story of bodge life in Melbourne in the early 1950s called *A Bunch of Ratbags*.¹¹ What makes this book so potentially useful — bearing in mind the problems inherent in utilizing fictional accounts — is the attention Dick pays to material details such as clothing and entertainments and to social behaviour. *The Delinquents*¹² by Ciena Rohan, set mostly in Brisbane in the mid 1950s, is principally concerned with generating sympathy for the star-crossed lovers whose lives are continually misunderstood by the older generation epitomized by such standard groups as parents and police. Nevertheless, interwoven in this romance are a number of interesting vignettes of life for non-conforming youth during this period. The third novel is *Puberty Blues*¹³ which is primarily a series of cameos of surfer life in Sydney's south-eastern suburbs during the early 1970s.

Only with the establishment of the category of youth can youth cultures be perceived as special cases within that category. The opportunity, in consumption oriented society, for identification first of all as part of youth — a teenager — and, second, as part of a particular youth culture occurs through the utilization of certain industries. The production of a youth culture rests upon the appropriation and utilization of certain products to articulate meanings which are not present within the dominant cultural continuum, including youth as a segmented part of that continuum. The institutionalization of youth cultures, their establishment as part of the natural, lived order, is a function of their presentation within the mass media and their utilization of certain segmented industries. The most important of these are clothing and music. One function of mass production is the possibility of a diversity of mass produced goods. Youth cultures exist in an ambiguous relationship to these industries which both contribute to the possibility of their existence and, by virtue of their status within the economy, contribute to their co-optation.

There is one more theme running through this article. The Braithwaite and Barker article made use of Cohen's argument¹⁴ that in the post-war period societies have tended

7. C. McGregor, *Profile of Australia*, London, 1966.

8. D. Dunphy, *Cliques, Crowds and Gangs*, Melbourne, 1969.

9. J. Braithwaite and M. Barker, 'Boddies and Wiggies: Folk Devils of the Fifties' in P. Wilson and J. Braithwaite eds., *Two Faces of Deviance*, St. Lucia, 1978. Braithwaite and Barker's research is focused almost entirely on the Brisbane *Truth*. One reason for this may be that the Brisbane *Courier Mail* did not start a subject index in its library until 1964.

10. K. Pearson, *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand*, St. Lucia, 1979.

11. W. Dick, *A Bunch of Ratbags*, Sydney, 1965; reprinted Melbourne, 1984.

12. C. Rohan, *The Delinquents*, London, 1962.

13. G. Carey and K. Lette, *Puberty Blues*, Melbourne, 1979.

14. This argument is best expressed in S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, London, 1972.

to stigmatize youth subcultures as 'folk devils' incarnating all that could be considered a threat to those societies and, as a consequence, reasserting the existing order of those societies. Braithwaite and Barker show how bodgies and widgies became just such a folk devil for Australia. In this article historical research demonstrates that Braithwaite and Barker nevertheless internalized the assertion of their newspaper sources that there was only one subculture of bodgies and widgies. In this they were mistaken. Research shows quite clearly that there were two groups. Moreover it is questionable the extent to which the second group may be classified as a unitary phenomenon anyway. The folk devil labelling procedure seems to have been so successful that any young person buying into the fantasy provided by the youth oriented consumer industries was automatically labelled by the conservative Australian society of the mid 1950s. All these themes, however, may be understood as sub-texts in this article.

* * *

Strictly speaking, post-war Australian youth culture began, unlike in Britain, in the immediate post-war period before the development of the mass production of consumer goods. The first group called themselves bodgies and widgies and are referred to herein as first generation bodgies and widgies to distinguish them from the later group who had their beginnings about 1954 and who are also known as bodgies and widgies. This latter group, which lasted until c. 1959 are referred to as second generation bodgies and widgies. The blurring of titles appears to have occurred through the press, which, seeing a range of non-normative behaviour appearing amongst young people in the period c. 1954-55, cast around for terms to describe these people. They chose terms which already had a currency as a label for non-conformist youths. However, whereas first generation bodgies and widgies used these terms themselves, the second generation had them thrust upon them at the same time that the media was stigmatizing the group. Thus the terms bodgie and widgie came to have a semantic loading similar to the term juvenile delinquent.

The recycling of the terms blurred the possibility of distinction between the two youth cultures. For example the *Sydney Morning Herald* in a feature in 1956 explained how bodgies and widgies developed during the Second World War under the impact of American influence. It was headed:

'Bodgies Cliques Break with Old Australian Habits, But . . . What is a bodgie? During the present wave of juvenile violence, the word has come to mean "juvenile delinquent".'¹⁵

In this way, even whilst producing an account of academic research carried out at the University of Sydney the paper was affirming a continuity between the two groups whilst at the same time acknowledging the stigmatizing effect of the terms.¹⁶ In fact by 1954 the original bodgie and widgie culture was all but dead.

The culture appears to have had its origins in Sydney during the Second World War. It was, originally, neither a culture nor made up of young people. The first Australian bodgies, seem, in their behaviour, to have been analogous to the British spivs or wide-boys. The *Sydney Morning Herald* article is, in fact, a precis of some parts of an undergraduate dissertation written by John McDonald. The newspaper article describes the origin of the term like this:

15. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January, 1956.

16. The piece of research referred to is an undergraduate dissertation by J. McDonald entitled *The Bodgie*. It was presented in 1951 and is held by the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney. As a piece of contemporary ethnographic research carried out by means of interviews and observations it represents the most important documentation we have on first generation bodgies in Sydney. It is of interest to note that the *Sydney Morning Herald* report indicates no conception of the possibility of relatively short lived youth cultures. It takes a 1951 academic study and applies it to circumstances six years later.

'Bodgie' or 'bodger' is a Darlinghurst slang word meaning 'spurious'. During World War II, it was applied to blackmarketeers, many of whom impersonated American seamen, and who sold Australian cloth.¹⁷

Bodge, with the meaning of false or counterfeit — or spurious — was no doubt a Darlinghurst slang term; the word has a history which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can be dated back to 1552. However, the fact that the term is here attributed to Darlinghurst is significant. In 1942 the Special Services Division of the United States army issued a fifty page booklet to explain Australia to visiting army personnel. This guide included a list of Australian slang terms and their meanings. In this list Woolloomooloo Yank and Fitzroy Yank are both given as terms used to mean a 'flashy dresser'.¹⁸ Woolloomooloo and Fitzroy, as well as Darlinghurst, were, at that time working class suburbs.

The style of dress these bodgie precursors adopted was the zoot-suit, a style originating in New York's Harlem and associated with jazz. By 1943 the style had gained a strong enough hold in Los Angeles, particularly it would seem among the Mexican community, for outbreaks of hostility against zoot-suit wearers to be termed the zoot-suit riots.¹⁹ Turner and Surace define the Los Angeles zoot-suiters as looking like this:

First, zoot-suits consisted of long suit coats and trousers extremely pegged at the cuff, draped full around the knees, and terminating in deep pleats at the waist. Second, the zooters wore their hair long, full, and well greased.²⁰

The zoot-suit style may have travelled to Australia by sea by way of the American West Coast to Sydney shipping routes. One other suggestion was that it was imported by the surfer Jack 'Bluey' Mayes from Honolulu where he had gone with the Australian lifesaving team in 1938. Whilst it is futile to look for a single point of origin, the importance of the surf clubs in the spread of the style should be acknowledged. The clubs around Bondi provided a base for the consolidation and elaboration of the bodgie style. It can be seen then that some young males were wearing the style before the war. However, its adoption by a significant section of young working class males was undoubtedly precipitated by the presence of over 100,000 American servicemen during the war. It was only after the war that bodgies became a common sight.

Moore, in his book on American servicemen in Australia, asserts that American G.I.'s were able to exert this influence because:

Better pay, handsome uniforms, and ready access to many luxury goods in short supply — liquor, silk stockings, chocolate, as well as hard to get staples — enhanced his appeal.²¹

Because of this the attempts to compete with the American servicemen was one of the major factors in the spread of the zoot-suit and jazz to a more general group beyond blackmarketeers. However, with the end of the war and the return of those American servicemen to the United States the competition had disappeared. Those males who were bodgies during the war were, by 1947, at the youngest well into their late teens and early

17. *Sydney Morning Herald*, *loc.cit.*

18. Extracts from this guide may be found in J. Hammond-Moore, *Over-sexed, Over-paid and Over Here*, St. Lucia, 1981, Appendix 1.

19. Unfortunately these riots do not appear to be well documented. The best account I can find is contained in R. Turner and S. Surace 'Zoot-suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behaviour', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, pp. 14-20. The main concern of this study is to document the relationship between unfavourable images and crowd hostility.

20. Turner and Surace, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

21. Hammond-Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

twenties. They were not part of the first generation of bodgies and widgies. Youths five years younger who, as children, remembered the structure of war time society but had not been involved in coping with that structure formed the basis of the first youth group.

Whilst the development of the bodgie has been traced back into the Second World War no such background can be found for his female counterpart, the widgie. Patridge, in his *Dictionary of Unconventional English*, suggests that it is a corruption of wigeon, an Australian colloquial term of affection which, in turn was derived from pigeon. An alternative explanation is that the term was made up by a reporter on the Sydney *Sun* who ran a story, in 1949, on the people who went to the Gaiety dance club (its full name was the Gaiety Studio Music Club) and needed a name for the women.²² Both the term and style which went with it seem to be post-war phenomena. Widgie does not seem to have become standard usage until the post-war period — in fact, not until the development of the bodgie and widgie youth culture. Moreover, it was only during the youth culture, not before, that Australian girls evolved a specific, individual style which was not identifiable as a variation on the dominant fashion. During the war young women were not subject to the same pressure as males when it came to finding a partner. The imbalance in the sex ratio caused by the large number of young Australian males who had been posted abroad as members of the armed forces was exacerbated by the presence of large numbers of male American forces personnel. Australian women were thus in such demand that their dress styles, were relatively unimportant. In addition there was no identifiable American subcultural fashion for women comparable with the zoot-suit style for men which the women could have adopted. The only changes that occurred were the product of general influence from American mass culture. For example many girls dyed their hair platinum blond in imitation of Rita Hayworth at the behest of G.I.s.

During the immediate post-war period whilst the original bodgies were wearing and modifying zoot-suits, the well dressed, conventional Australian male of any post school age was wearing a double-breasted suit and had a short back and sides haircut. However, whilst the early bodgie style was distinctive, it did not constitute a fashion. Our modern ideas of clothes fashions are allied to notions of mass production, the institutionalization of design and differential consumer access based on spending power. The development of popular fashions as an industry in relation to youth culture is, outside of America, a part of post-war history, as is the development of a youth oriented music industry. Bodgie suits were tailor made but then so were most suits in Australia during this period. However, by about 1952 when 'off the peg' suits started to become common, the real bodgies still had theirs made for them at, relatively, great expense. Early bodgie styles were not perceived as a special case within the consumer category of youth, but rather were seen as a deviation within the continuum of Australian male clothing.

In Australia the original adoption of the bodgie style was not within the context of an ideology of fashion. Its utilization by bodgies, though, shows a progression towards such an ideology. The bodgie ideal was to have a drape suit for every day of the week. The term drape suit became more usual than zoot-suit in Australia (and Britain for that matter) though tailors sometimes generalized even further and advertised 'American style suits'.²³ The well dressed bodgie's suit would be powder blue or grey with a single

22. The fullest version of this origin is contained in a letter I received: '... the unwanted reporters picked up on [the term bodgie], and then intentionally or not, misinterpreted the word 'weakie' [a weakie was a poseuse]. Somehow, a reporter lit on this word and twisted it into widgie...'

23. Bennett's of Newtown, Sydney, for example, advertised in the programmes for jazz concerts at Sydney Town Hall. In one I have found for 26 November, 1951 Bennett's describes itself as 'The American Men's Wear Style Centre in Australia', and claims to sell 'Authentic American Style Suits'. The prices, £18-18s to £22-10s, indicate that these are not tailor made.

breasted drape jacket which, at the height of fashion, plunged down to a single button on the front. The jacket should stretch down as far as the fingers when the arms were at the side and the fingers curled inwards. The trousers were full in the rear opening out to baggy knees and then pegged to narrow, turned-up, cuffs. The more fashionable within the culture one was, the looser the trousers would be at the knees and the tighter at the cuffs; twenty-seven inch knees to fifteen inch bottom were not uncommon (a common joke was to say that such trousers were snake-proof). In the later period of the culture the trousers tended to get tighter in the rear, presaging and showing stylistic continuity with the tight trousers preferred by the second generation of bodgies. These suits could cost anywhere between £45 and £60 at a time when working class males' take home pay averaged around £10-10s a week and sometimes considerably less. For widgies the ratio between the cost of clothes and wages was similar, however it must be remembered that girls at this time received much lower wages, £2 to £3 a week would not have been unusual. In October 1950 the basic wage for males was raised from £7-2s a week to £8-2s a week. At work, bodgies and widgies were usually factory or office workers, or apprentices.

Innovations in the style tended to originate in Sydney and travel up the East coast. One example was the vogue, round about 1951, for sports jackets without lapels. Under the suit the bodgie wore an imported American made Country Club shirt in a plain colour, though mustard was preferred. This shirt cost in the region of 63 shillings. The tie would be a Scottish silk knitted one.²⁴ The socks were usually blue or fawn and made of cotton or one of the new man-made fibres and the shoes were generally either made by Packards or Halls golf shoes. One advantage of these was that they could be used for jiving, unlike the crepe soled shoes which became fashionable towards the end of the youth culture.

The early bodgie hair style would seem to have derived from the style worn by Cornel Wilde in the 1945 King Vidor film of Chopin's life titled *A Song to Remember*. This involved the hair being swept back without a parting with a quiff at the front. It is suggested that this style was first copied from the film by life-savers at Tamarama and North Bondi and this idea is a reasonable one given the upper working class/lower middle class nature of these suburbs at the time. Once again, the importance of the surf life-savers in the elaboration of the youth culture evolving in the postwar period is highlighted as it acquires its styles from different sources. Other bodgie hair-cuts included the crew-cut which is an obvious influence from the American troops, and a style derived from Tony Curtis in *The Prince who was a Thief* (1951) and, very occasionally, the mohawk, a hair style which has a long underground tradition in cultures influenced by Britain and America. One more hair style which gained favour was that of Jack Kramer, the American tennis star who pioneered professional tennis. He wore his hair in a semi-crew cut which increased in length down the back of his head.

At this time most women were wearing frocks which were often belted with slightly flared skirts which came to the bottom of their calfs and were often in floral or check prints. Women's mass fashions, still heavily influenced by the styles of Haute Couture, were, at this time, showing a varying degree of reference to the New Look first shown by Dior in 1947. Formal dresses were still the norm at dances. Widgies, by contrast, wore round-neck, sleeveless blouses together with straight gaberdine skirts, pegged at the waist with reverse pleats and, often, a six inch split up the back. The usefulness of this split, like the baggy knees of bodgie's trousers was immediately apparent when they danced. Around the top of the skirt went a narrow belt, or, on more

24. One respondent said that, when he wanted to look flash he would wear a tight grey suit with a black shirt and a yellow tie with a Windsor knot.

showy occasions, a kind of watch chain which looped down on the left hand side. Around the neck and tied on the right was often placed a patterned silk scarf. White bobby sox tended to be worn with flat shoes that, again, made for ease of dancing. One thing to be noted here is a new idea of the formal as requiring the subscription to a subcultural fashion norm. On less formal occasions widgies would wear loose fitting slacks or peddle pushers. Towards the end of the youth culture, and again under American influence, the slacks gradually became more close fitting until they were replaced by Toredor pants. This, however, occurred about 1954 and represents another point of meeting with second generation bodgie and widgie culture. Sheer 'skinny-jim' pullovers were also worn, a style which continued into second generation widgie fashion. There were a variety of hair styles ranging from a more conventional one which was short at the front on the forehead, shoulder length elsewhere and lightly permed, to a hair-cut known as the wedge which involved a parting on the left with the hair combed over the forehead and to the right. In addition the hair was cut to just below the level of the ears. This style, considered the epitomy of widgie hair fashion in the early 1950s, was, nevertheless, seldom worn because it was considered so unconventional.

Apart from clothes the other fundamental interest of the youth culture was music and dancing. Here, again, the influence was American and was, in the main, the product of the war-time impact of American service personnel. With popular music still not an age or interest segmented industry, the only popular music to which the public had access was listened to by *all* the society who wished to hear popular music. In Australia in the post-war period this consisted of American songs produced from Tin Pan Alley by such singers as Frankie Lane, Teresa Brewer and Perry Como.

In America, however, there was already a clearly segmented (or perhaps one should say segregated) music industry. In addition to the white, commercial Tin Pan Alley music, there was a black tradition of jazz and blues. It is well known how, from the early part of this century, the white music industry appropriated aspects of the black tradition. Before rock'n'roll the most obvious example is the appropriation and modification of New Orleans jazz along with its dance forms during the so-called 'Jazz Age' of the 1920s. With the limited possibilities for recording during this period, little of this music appears to have reached Australia and, where it did, along with the black dance style of the jitterbug, it remained the property of the young rich and those, such as seamen, who, for other reasons, could gain access to the music.

In America the white appropriation of the music took the form of giving it a slightly slower, strict tempo, increasing the size of the band, using written arrangement and confining improvisation to specifically allocated slots within the arrangement. The final product became known as swing music. This was the music played by bands led by, for example, Woody Herman, Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey.²⁵

By the time the Americans flooded into Australia swing was an — if not the — accepted popular music form among all classes in America. Its following was mainly among young people and it was clearly associated with the development of youth in America. In Australia at the outbreak of war there was little dancing other than that taught by dancing studios. Even the 'traditional' progressive dances were taught as Old Time Dancing. In 1925 the Charleston, a jazz dance, was appropriated and formalized by the American Arthur Murrey who operated a chain of dance studios. This formalization, no doubt, aided its spread to the more 'advanced' sections of Australian society and helped to make it more acceptable as a formal rather than an expressive dance. In the immediate post-war period square dancing, also imported from America, became pop-

25. On the development of swing music see M. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*, New York, 1950. It is an invidious task to seek out one example from such a large musical genre but the album 'Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert' by Benny Goodman (Columbia OSL-160) recorded in 1938 gives a good idea of the style of the music.

ular in Australia as dance studios promoted it in an attempt to eradicate the jive which, with its expressive black-jazz background, was considered improper. In addition at this time the jive was not a codified dance and, therefore, represented a threat to the livelihood of the dance studios.

Along with the importation of swing, Americans brought the white, toned-down version of the jitterbug. There are, for example, photographs of G.I.'s teaching the dance style to local girls.²⁶ Whereas, in the twenties, the Charleston had been the disapproved prerogative of the moneyed now it had penetrated to the working class. The Americans left behind a pile of swing records and a dance style which many in Australia considered to have evolved out of the Charleston rather than being another variation on jazz dancing. There are many examples of young Australian males who were taught jitterbugging — or swing as it became known by girls who had been taught it by Americans at dance halls such as Cloudland. In Sydney American servicemen had danced with Australian girls at such places as the Trocadero. After the war, when the Gaiety opened floorspace was always made available for American servicemen; black G.I.'s were made especially welcome.

When Americans left, their leaving re-introduced Australia's musical isolation. Bob Rogers, who was a disc jockey during this period writes:

Stringent Customs regulations prohibited privately imported records. The Federal Government of the day was the great protector of our morality. All recorded foreign music had first to go through a Public Service cleansing bath in case it might contain anything which might contaminate us.²⁷

In Australia swing rapidly became accepted as the sort of music to which one could quick-step. At the same time what, in America, was a mass cultural form with the accent on 'youth' in Australia became the property of a minority of young people. In isolated, conservative Australia swing music and jitterbugging, which already represented a white American middle class watering down of elements of black American culture, were considered highly questionable remnants of American influence.²⁸ The majority of Australians, including young people, returned to their pre-war music and dances. Nevertheless, in Sydney, where there were most bodgies and widgies, one dance club, the Gaiety in Oxford Street, Redfern, was run solely on swing music; indeed it was set up by a group of bodgies and widgies just so that they could have access to swing music to jive to. Not only were there a large number of bodgies and widgies in Sydney but, at least partly no doubt because of the culture's origin, they were a more diverse group including a small criminal element. This influenced the nature of the culture in Sydney giving it a touch of dubiousness, and an attraction which was not present in Brisbane. The Gaiety became a place of pilgrimage from, for example, Brisbane where bodgies and widgies and their contemporaries not only shared the same dance-halls but the same swing music and 40 per cent music for old time dancing.²⁹ In the end the Gaiety burned down after the police had made several attempts to close it and some say the fire was not accidental.

In Brisbane dances to swing bands such as Jack Brockinshaw's occurred at Cloudland, the City Hall, the Blind Institute, and the Riverside at New Farm which the Americans constructed during the war. With a smaller population pool, all these halls catered for both bodgies and widgies and 'squares' (some American slang remained as well) by roping off an area of the dance floor for the use of the jitterbug and jive dancers.

26. Hammond-Moore *op.cit.*, reproduces one in which, whilst one G.I. teaches a girl to jitterbug another is shown ballroom dancing.

27. B. Rogers with D. O'Brien, *Rock'n'Roll Australia*, Sydney, 1975. p.1

28. On the evolution of jazz in Australia see B. Clunies-Ross, 'An Australian Sound' in P. Spearritt and D. Walker eds., *Australian Popular Culture*, Sydney, 1979.

29. Jim Burke, a musician throughout this period claims to have originated the term '60/40' for dances where two musical styles were played. See J. Burke, *Wobbly Boots*, Brisbane, 1983. p.10.

This occurred as well in places like the Sydney Trocadero. The jive became a part of the dance studio repertoires and became highly codified. In Brisbane Jack Busted, who ran a dance studio in Adelaide Street, started employing bodgies and widgies to teach jive. Subsequently his dance studio became an important centre for the group who used to hold dances there on Sunday evenings under the guise of classes in order to get round Sunday observance law.

Although there were bodgies who sometimes used benzedrine, no other drugs were used. Most were quite conservative in their attitudes to alcohol and sex.³⁰ Dances were unlicensed and drinking illegal under 21 but often cheap wine or spirits would be smuggled into dance-halls inside coats and then placed in the orange juice on the table. However, drinking to excess was less common than amongst the general population for whom drinking was legal.

Display and consumption were of great importance to this first generation of bodgies and widgies. When talking to these people now, thirty years on, there is one refrain which keeps recurring; the culture was about dressing up and about dancing. However, in Sydney the youth culture tended to form into gangs based on suburbs, and occasionally gangs would fight each other. By far the biggest group used to gather around Burts milk bar in King Cross, though this group was in decline by the time the young people in the suburbs started taking up the style. In Brisbane, whilst there were gangs in the suburbs from which bodgies and widgies came, bodgies and widgies were not members of gangs. It seems likely that in Sydney the influence of the style's origin meant that it continued to be utilized by the working class and semi-criminal gang groupings as well as by other young people as a subcultural style. In Brisbane the split was much more obvious and lone bodgies might be beaten up by a gang.

It has been argued³¹ that one understanding of British Teddy Boys can be in terms of the new found affluence of working class youth in the post-war period. It is clear that the same argument can be put forward for bodgies and widgies. But this possibility was produced in Australia by the presence within the culture of a set of alien objects which could be appropriated. On top of the mystique of America already attached to them was layered the display of consumption. This display was also an attempt at wish-fulfilment when affluence seemed to be within the grasp of all Australians. There were more jobs than workers. Young people simply picked the job they preferred.³² America was perceived as the home of consumer goods. In adopting the trappings of American mass culture, including the slang and sometimes an 'American' accent (which was known as 'crokin Stateside') the desire to critique Australia's return to conservatism was reconciled with the desire for access to new consumer goods.

It might be argued that a consumerist youth culture such as bodgies and widgies or mods, for that matter, is necessarily conservative in orientation. Its apparently deviant postures are actually attempts to produce more cultural space in which consumption can

30. McDonald in *The Bodgie, op. cit.*, argues for the development in Sydney of two distinct groupings of bodgies, a more conservative group based around North Bondi and a more deviant group based around Woolloomooloo and Kings Cross. This, latter, group had its roots in seamen and wartime profiteers. Seemingly some members of this group survived by such regular and irregular practices as marihuana dealing, living off immoral earnings, male prostitution and petty theft. They tended to drink more than the norm and were more sexually active than the norm. This group was not typical of the culture as it existed in other places. The question of sexual attitudes and practices needs to be dealt with at length elsewhere. One or two things may be noted however. First, the first group of bodgies and widgies placed sexual relations relatively low on their list of priorities. This was in stark contrast to the visiting Americans who were considered to be 'over-sexed'. Far from simply telling us something about the Australian male's lack of interest in women as compared to, for instance, gambling, this cultural difference may well suggest an insight into the social construction of sexuality. One more point, it was quite common — indeed considered normal — for members of particularly the second group to marry when the women fell pregnant. For both groups contraception, in the form of condoms or foaming tablets (known as fizz-pills) was the responsibility of the male.

31. See, for example, T. Jefferson, 'Cultural responses of the Teds' in S. Hall, et. al., eds, *Resistance through Rituals*, London, 1975.

32. One respondent talked of a female friend who had five jobs in as many weeks, subsequently returning to her first job which she found she preferred.

take place. Paradoxically as society starts to provide the appropriate goods the apparent deviance disappears. By 1954 the roped off jive section of Brisbane dance-halls was bigger than the ballroom dancing section. At the same time more and more males of older age groups were buying suits which carried influences from the bodgie style. 1954 also saw the beginning of touring by American musicians. The first tour, in late 1954, consisted of Ella Fitzgerald, Artie Shaw, Buddy Rich and Jerry Colonna, a comic. Artie Shaw had been in Australia in 1943, brought out as an entertainer for the American troops. Shortly after 1954 Gene Krupa toured. Also in 1954 came a tour by Johnny Ray. Ray's tour epitomizes the cultural lag in which the bodgies and widgees existed for, in America, Ray was losing popularity. His big hit, 'Cry', was in the music charts in 1952 and, in 1954, Bill Haley had his first rock'n'roll success. Through a process which sociologists of the youth culture call diffusion and defusion, all youth cultures have adhered to the dictum 'If it becomes popular, its not interesting any longer'. As an aspect of the youth culture gets taken up by the dominant culture so this weakens the existence of the youth culture, it also increases consumption of that product.

There is one more reason for the demise of bodgies and widgees. Quite simply the youth culture ran out of relevance. All the major components of the culture came from America. Much of their meaning was invested in the connotations produced by Americans during their war-time presence. To youths reaching sixteen in 1954 the war meant little. Equally swing music in Australia had not progressed. In the early 1950s in America black jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie had started to develop a form of music of irregular rhythm and complex melody which could not be appropriated into the swing style. The music, known as re-bop, and later bop, was impossible to jive to. Moreover its phrasings and melodies were incomprehensible to those educated in white Tin Pan Alley/swing music culture. When they finally heard it the bodgies and widgees rejected it. Equally their clothes were the clothes of the war and post-war period. By 1954 one tailor-made suit began to seem much like another to a generation just entering the period of mass produced fashions, especially when elements of bodgie style were being incorporated into the main stream of male fashion.

In an important sense the first generation of bodgies and widgees were before their time, they owed their presence to a singular historical conjuncture and with the decline in meaning of that conjuncture so the youth culture declined. It might even be said that, as a youth culture, bodgies and widgees were produced by default. As the older generations returned to pre-war Australian ways so some of the younger generation continued in ways learnt from America and, in particular, from the war-time American presence. Moreover, by 1954 the dream of a generalized consumer affluence was confronted by the reality of consumer access graded according to purchasing power.

The second generation of bodgies and widgees was not primarily a product of American influence. Rather the culture was already formulating before the advent of American youth fashions and mass cultural forms. As it developed, it incorporated many aspects of these as they arrived from America. The second generation of bodgies and widgees would seem to have been much more securely working class. In the Australian context where, at the socio-cultural level, class distinctions tend to become blurred by the ideology of egalitarianism, first generation bodgies and widgees were affirming consumerist aspirations and the sense of opportunity for material betterment to be found in the newly industrializing Australia of the immediate post-war period. In 1947 the percentage of the labour force engaged in secondary industry had risen to 28 per cent,³³ and there was a general shift in the perception of Australia from a rural country to an urban, manufacturing country. The culture of first generation bodgies and widgees

33. R. White, *Inventing Australia*, Sydney, 1981, p.149.

expressed this; they were, if anything, acting out a fantasy of the new consumerist middle class. The shift into the second generation was a shift away from this dream of affluent embourgeoisment and tended towards a recognition and consolidation of a class structure in which the reality articulated through differential access to the new mass produced consumer goods. By the end of the 1950s the post-war industrialization was well on the way to completion with the establishment of a large white goods industry and a car industry in the shape of General Motors-Holden.

The period around 1954 was critical for the emergence in Australia of a new age category fitting between childhood and adulthood. The first generation of bodgies and widges had made inroads here but the second generation articulated a new radical working class critique of Australian society whilst, at the same time, helping to establish the 'teenager' youth period as a real category. The evolution of this category cannot be discussed here but the most important cause lay in the new constitution of the teenager as a worker who could earn significant amounts of money and who could then participate in the new consumer oriented mass production economy. In other words, regardless of whether or not individuals became members of youth cultures young people became visible as members of the category of youth. Mass production, which allows for differentiation in the goods mass produced made this visibility possible and, by the mid-1950s mass production was just taking off in Australia in what were to become two of the key areas of post-war youth, consumption, and youth culture, mass fashion and music. As a consequence whereas first generation bodgies and widges seemed like an idiosyncratic rupture in the seamless movement from child to adult the second generation were experienced as part of a much more fundamental change. From 1954 onwards bodgies and widges seemed to appear not only in the major cities but in the small towns all over Australia. By 1958 every small town in Australia apparently had a bodgie or a widge. In fact what was occurring was the production of youth and, simultaneously, the youth market. Within this category there developed in Australia the youth culture of the second generation bodgies and widges. The distinction, at this time, between those young people taking advantage of the new market segmentation and those producing a new, critical, youth culture is hard to make. For much of this period many young people occupy a grey area, asserting youth as a particular period of segmented consumption and whilst being classified by society with a youth culture utilizing the new category to make a comment on the society in which they live.

The second generation of bodgies and widges constituted a working class youth culture whose members, whilst celebrating their access to a range of new consumer goods, nevertheless had to resolve their recognition that other goods were beyond their purchasing capacities. In turn they, therefore, fell back on an articulation of their class position often found in the assertion of a variety of oppositional values. For example shop-lifting can become acceptable behaviour when class is measured by consumer ownership and when one has no vested interest in preserving company profits and no means of purchasing the good in question. In the media the new bodgies and widges became renowned for shop-lifting, vandalism and unprovoked attacks particularly on New Australians of Mediterranean origin.³⁴

The sense of liberality and opportunity which had permeated the post-war period had by 1954, retreated before the new cultural conservatism. Nowhere was this more apparent than in government where Chifley's Labor Party had been replaced by Menzies' new urban based industrial and middle-class dominated Liberal Party in 1949. Menzies remained in power through the decade. He presided over policies which produced an Americanized consumption oriented society whilst, himself, showing great respect for

34. See, for example, *Sun*, (Sydney) 30 December, 1955, 'Bodgies did this' which reports two gratuitous attacks.

Australia's British heritage. This combination of influences contributed towards the production of a strict class separation and hierarchization within a society which continued to consider itself as fundamentally egalitarian. There is a sense, then, in which because of their middle-class position, it is understandable that the press should turn the second generation of bodgies and widgies into folk devils. In 1953 Menzies succeeded in persuading the Arbitration Court to abandon automatic indexed quarterly adjustments to the basic wage. From then on the purchasing power of the lower income groups declined as compared to middle-class incomes. In this context it is no wonder that recent migrants should become the object of (racist) bashings as increasingly frustrated working class youth saw in their presence a loss of opportunities for themselves. The majority of media reports, however, treated these attacks at face value, as outbreaks of lawlessness.³⁵

From its inception c. 1954 to its fragmentation c. 1959 this second group of bodgies and widgies was never a clear cut youth culture. That it never developed its own name or even accepted the name it was given is evidence of this. For one thing it contained a heterogenous mix of components. There was still, for many, a positive attitude towards consumerism, and, in centres such as Brisbane which were slower to feel the changes, an on-going belief in the possibility of upward mobility which led to the membership of a number of middle-class youths. By contrast in Melbourne, where first generation bodgies and widgies had not been particularly strong, perhaps because of the lesser impact of Americans and American goods, and perhaps also because, unlike Sydney and Brisbane the class nature of its suburbs was much more clearly delineated, the second generation took root in gang formations among the traditional working class suburbs around Altona, Collingwood and Coburg. In Melbourne, in particular, this was grafted onto the well-established tradition of working class gangs. The new gangs wearing the new styles, tended to be centred on roller-skating rinks as the later sharpie gangs would be centred on boxing clubs. In Melbourne fights between these gangs could involve up to about 200 people. In the more gang oriented centres less females tended to be involved. I have heard of a ratio of about 5:1 for Melbourne.³⁶

The ability of the sharp clothes to attract women was often an important side effect. A man who had been a bodgie in Toowoomba remarked — 'The image was a big hit with the girls — you could get a dance anywhere'. Equally one could suggest that women were more likely to wear the female style when they considered it a fashion rather than when it related them to a gang. It is not possible to say where the second generation had its beginning. It simply developed out of working class youth's disillusionment and confusion. It was a working class culture which rejected middle class values and appropriated the new understanding of rebellious youth as an aspect of its rejection.

Its relation to first generation bodgies and widgies is apparent in much of the male costume. This consisted of Country Club or Ivy League shirts, though in brighter colours than the first generation; narrow ties known as Slim Jims; Canadian jackets made of thick wool which zipped up and sports trousers which were pegged at the cuffs to about 16". Later these were pegged at the waist to give a narrow leg. Often, also, drapejackets were worn and, by this period, these too were being mass produced under brand labels such as Mr Fabulous. Socks consisted of brightly coloured man-made fibre varieties, usually black, orange or shocking pink and shoes tended to be winkle-pickers,

35. Some useful newspaper reports are: *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 June, 1956, 'Bodgie crimes worry police'; *Daily Mirror*, 28 August, 1956, 'Bodgie gang wreck shop'; *Truth*, 3 April, 1955, 'Bodgies brawl in city'; *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June, 1956, 'Bodgies bash four men'; *Daily Mirror*, 11 February, 1957, 'Bodgies bash 3 in street'.

36. This figure is drawn from a letter. It was worth quoting the paragraph in full as it gives an insight into the power relation implicit in the ratio:

The ratio of bodgies to widgies to the best of my memory was about five to one; consequently the females had a lot of power, and a male standing back and letting the girl be humiliated would bode ill for his future hopes of sex and affection.

sometimes made by the Julious Marlowe firm or else golf shoes with quilted fronts. In this variety of clothing one can see, clearly, the impact of mass production clothes. It is perhaps this more than anything else which enabled the shift away from suits to take place. However one aspect of the variety involved in mass clothing is that some makes are more expensive than other makes. In this range of second generation bodgie clothing there is not only a certain fashion continuity with the first generation but also a gradation of expense. It is at the upper end of the range that we can see the importance of shop-lifting, a common activity amongst this group.³⁷ At the less fashion conscious end, even before the release of *The Wild One* in 1954, RAAF surplus leather flying jackets, white tee-shirts and denim jeans were becoming popular, particularly among those youths who could afford motor-bikes. White tee-shirts had, in fact, been popularized by American servicemen and because in the early 1950s it was hard to buy mass-produced ones in Australia, mothers were often asked to make them.

The female style was most definitely influenced by American styles and consisted of flared skirts often with rope circled petticoats, high heels though by now white bobby sox — indeed any socks — were definitely out of fashion, thrust bras (which had originated on Jane Russell in the Howard Hawks film *The Outlaw*) and white blouses. Alternatively there was a gradual move from slacks to Treador pants. There was also a move into denim jeans among some girls later in the culture's life. Males tended to develop Elvis Presley style hair cuts with a quiff, a duck tail, square back and side-burns. Another fashion which shows the new influence of television (which began in Sydney and Melbourne in 1956), was the 'flat-top' style developed and influenced by the character of Kookie in *77 Sunset Strip*. Some females had a style similar to this, others wore pony-tails.

What is clear from this brief outline is the amazing diversity of clothing styles which were taken up and integrated into the culture at some point in its life, particularly by males. Whilst *The Wild One* (1954), *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) were perceived by this group as important movies they were in no way fundamental to the culture. It is clear that the culture was attempting to yoke together heterogeneous impulses formed from contradictions between the dominant ideology and working class experience. It is possible to see this culture as containing a residue of the first generation's clothing styles coupled with the seeds of sharpie, rocker and bikie cultures. This represents a material articulation of the culture's ideological contradictions.

There is room to say little more about the culture here except to emphasize the importance of rock'n'roll from 1956 onwards — though it nevertheless took a while to oust swing completely from the youth culture. As late as 25 March 1957 an eighteen year old Hobart plumber who became the first man in the world to jive non-stop for more than 14 hours 17 minutes achieved this record by dancing to '... jive, rock'n'roll, jazz and creep music.'³⁸

Creep music had been a term used by first generation bodgies and widgies to refer to Tin Pan Alley 'pop' music. 1958 was a key year for popular music sales in Australia. It was the year that rock'n'roll became established in Australia. This was one year after Bill Haley and the Comets toured and four years after their first American chart success. In fact it was Elvis Presley who was taken up as the key rock'n'roll performer in Australia and his fashions heavily influenced young males, including bodgies. The rise in Australian record sales coincided with the development of an indigenous rock'n'roll tradition. The most important Australian performer of the period was Johnny O'Keefe whose first hit, in 1958, was called 'Wild One' which was a celebration of the Marlon Brando

37. *Sun* (Sydney) 7 May, 1955. 'Bodgies haul'. The report states that two bodgies stole about £2000 of clothing from a menswear shop in Leichhardt. The concern with clothes is demonstrated in their theft as well as in shoplifting.

38. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March, 1957.

figure in the film of the same name.³⁹ The establishment of rock'n'roll as a popular music form for youth represents both a fundamental segmentation in the popular music tradition and one focus for the category constructed as 'youth'.

In Melbourne the evolution of 'bodge' gangs was coupled with an increase in violence and often other behaviour such as rape which the media attached more generally to the culture. Here the culture was much more clearly working class and much more obviously oppositional to the dominant, conservative middle class culture. This opposition was often expressed in a rejection of authority within the community and it evolved with a tradition of such behaviour. What was new was the complicated relationship between the gang and the development of youth as an expressive category based on a segmentation of mass production industries. In other centres where the gang influence was not so prevalent the contradictions of the culture kept it much more conventional. The contradictions were not resolved until the segmentation of youth cultures in the early 1960s when mod was appropriated in Australia, and in Melbourne in particular, by a middle class youth intent on spectacular consumption. Mods found themselves opposed by a range of more or less aggressively working class cultures from bikies through sharpies to rockers. But this is another story.

In this article the main intention has been to discriminate between the two groups produced as a single folk devil under the name bodgies and widgies. By mobilizing the theory developed by the members of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies it has been demonstrated that these groups had very different concerns from one another. In addition it has been indicated how these two groups relate to the development of the category of 'youth' as a segmented consumption group in Australia. Most importantly, however, an attempt has been made to write an oral history of these groups from the point of view of those people who understood themselves to have been bodgies and widgies in their youth and to indicate the problematic existence of the second group.

39. The history of the integration of rock'n'roll music with the ideology of youth rebellion has yet to be written. The best — indeed the only — account of the rise to prominence of films concerned with 'juvenile delinquency' is M. McGee and R. Robertson, *The J. D. Films*, Jefferson, N. Carolina, 1982. It is worth remembering that whilst O'Keefe celebrated Brando in rock'n'roll in *The Wild One* it was swing music which was on the juke box. O'Keefe's song represents one moment in the bringing together of the components of a distinctively 'teenage' culture.