



# The Birthday Party and The Scientists: Nihilism, suburbia, and the importance of class

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## Abstract

This article compares two of the groups generally regarded by critics as the most important in Australia in the post-punk period, The Birthday Party and The Scientists. While they had much in common – each was governed by the vision of one man, Nick Cave for The Birthday Party and Kim Salmon for The Scientists, both had record deals in Australia and both went to London – The Birthday Party became a cult success while The Scientists are only now, 30 years after their heyday, receiving the popular credit due them as a foundational noise group. There were important differences between the groups. The Birthday Party came from Melbourne and their members were middle-class. The Scientists came from Perth, at that time a small city remote from the cultural centres of Australia, and Salmon and his associates were working-class. The Birthday Party was self-consciously in a High Art tradition of nihilism going back to Dada while The Scientists' music was an existential critique of the values of the middle-class suburbia that dominated Perth.

## Keywords

Australia, class, post-punk, The Birthday Party, The Scientists

Two groups stand out in Australia's post-punk era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. They are often considered to be the most significant innovators of the Australian inner-city, alternative rock movement. The Birthday Party, based in Melbourne, were the renamed Boys Next Door after the addition of Roland S Howard, and the Scientists,

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formed in Perth, where they had played a punked-up type of power pop before a rather different version of the group moved to Sydney in 1981. There The Scientists' music continued a devolution begun on the other side of the continent, becoming increasingly minimalist and broken down with the use of distortion, feedback, and reverb. I want to consider the importance of class in each band's success and in the concerns evinced in each's music. The members of The Birthday Party came from middle-class Melbourne and were easily integrated into the hipster alternative rock scene. Influenced by Dada, they made a nihilistic performance art. Kim Salmon, the founder of The Scientists, was from a working-class background in Perth and had a harder time negotiating the middle-class networks on which the Sydney and Melbourne music scenes were built. The Scientists made a music which challenged the normative forms of rock music, introducing what would usually at that time have been considered noise into what they played, and in the process making a music which critiqued suburban conservatism (see Stratton, 2007b: 1–42).

In the early 1980s Perth and Melbourne were very different cities. Melbourne was a metropolitan centre with a population of just under three million. It was long-established and had a dense inner-city urban environment in which, like Sydney, an alternative arts scene began to flourish in the late 1970s (Turner, 1992: 11–24). Perth, by contrast, had a population of around a million at that time. It had little built environment that could be called inner city because its major population increases occurred after the Second World War, at which time Melbourne's population was already over a million. Unlike Melbourne and Sydney there was little opportunity for the development of the kind of arts scene in Perth that in Melbourne supported The Birthday Party. Nevertheless, an inner-city alternative rock scene did develop in Perth in the late 1970s, roughly consonant with the advent of punk (see Stratton, 2005: 36–60; Trainer, 2016: 100–17). Perth was, as it remains today, a fundamentally suburban city dominated by conservative, middle-class values. The focus of punk in Perth was an attack on those values. Because of the lack of an inner city, and the small population size that, in turn, meant that the alternative arts movement was also small, many artists packed up and headed for the east coast cities of Melbourne and Sydney. Kim Salmon was by no means alone in his move.

The Birthday Party and The Scientists had quite different relationships with record companies. What helped The Birthday Party was their connection with Keith Glass and his independent record label Missing Link. Glass managed The Boys Next Door and persuaded Michael Gudinski, who had started Mushroom Records in 1972, to release their album *Door, Door* in 1979. However, 'after the single "Shivers" was banned from *Countdown* (for mentioning suicide), the label dropped the band' (Walker, 2009: 40). Glass had begun Missing Link in 1977, and after the Mushroom experience released on his own label all three of The Birthday Party's studio albums, made after the group had relocated to England, (*The Birthday Party*, 1980; *Prayers on Fire*, 1981; *Junkyard*, 1982) and their live album (*It's Still Living*, 1985) released after the group broke up. The Scientists' material has a more complicated and less coherent history. The Scientists came from Perth, and at that time Perth – the only major city on Australia's west coast – was regarded as isolated, far away from the mainstream of Australian society (see Whish-Wilson, 2013). The Scientists' first releases were a single and an EP on different local labels. The first album, initially called *The Scientists* but later better known as the

*Pink* album because of the colour of its cover, was released in 1981 on EMI Custom Records. In 1986 it was rereleased on the Perth-based independent label Easter Records. However, the material for which the group is best known began to be released in 1983 with the *Blood Red River* mini-album. By this time, The Scientists had moved to Sydney, and Kim Salmon was the only original member. The group had been discovered by Melbourne-based Bruce Milne of Au Go Go Records. Milne put out the foundational 'Swampland' single in 1982. After the release of *Blood Red River*, Au Go Go released a further mini-album called *This Heart Doesn't Run on Blood, This Heart Doesn't Run on Love*.

The Scientists then headed for London. While there Salmon tried to get The Scientists released from their contract with Au Go Go. The subsequent legal battle limited further releases by the group (see Walker, 1996: 177–8). Another mini-album, *Demolition Derby*, was recorded for the small Belgian label Soundwork in 1985. Au Go Go released an album which included all but one track of the *Demolition Derby* material later the same year, plus some earlier material including a session for the ABC radio station Triple J from 1983. The real impact of the Au Go Go litigation was the release of two albums of roughly similar material later in 1985, *Atom Bomb Baby* on Au Go Go and *You Get What You Deserve* on the UK independent label Karbon. In 1986 the group, now with Leanne Chock on drums, rerecorded 11 of their earlier tracks with one new track (with Phillip Hertz on drums) for Karbon, who released the album as *Weird Science*. The last major release by The Scientists during this period was *The Human Jukebox* on Karbon in 1987.

The point of this account of the complex history of Scientists' releases – and I have only told here half the story – is to show how, compared to The Birthday Party, the work of The Scientists is disordered, has been historically hard to access, and indeed has contained rerecordings, all of which muddy the attempt to show a coherent body of work. Further, during the period of existence of these groups, where The Birthday Party's records were readily available during the early 1980s, those of The Scientists were not. The Scientists had little chance of developing the kind of growing cult audience that The Birthday Party attracted. Consequently, The Scientists have remained less known and their work less critically examined than the work of The Birthday Party.

At the same time, both groups are credited with being highly influential. The Birthday Party's music played an important role in the development of Goth as a genre, and both My Bloody Valentine and LCD Soundsystem have cited the group as an influence. Similarly, The Scientists have been acknowledged as an important force in the evolution of grunge, and bands such as The John Spencer Blues Explosion, Sonic Youth, Mudhoney, and The White Stripes have referenced them. It is said that Kurt Cobain said: 'Grunge doesn't exist, but if it did, Kim Salmon would be its high priest' (see Munday, 2016). As time has gone on so the recognition of The Scientists has increased. The Scientists have reformed and appeared three times at the prestigious All Tomorrow's Parties event, the first time curated by Mudhoney in 2006, the second time in 2007 and in 2010 when The Scientists played *Blood Red River* on the same day as Mudhoney played *Superfuzz Bigmuff* and Iggy and the Stooges played *Raw Power*.

The core member of Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party was Nick Cave, who went on to increasing respect and renown as the driving force behind Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Cave signed this group to the highly regarded independent UK label Mute,

which released all his albums up to the second decade of the 2000s. In contrast, after he broke up The Scientists, Kim Salmon first formed Kim Salmon and the Surrealists and subsequently Kim Salmon and the Business. At the same time Salmon played with The Beasts of Bourbon and briefly formed Antenna with Dave Faulkner, whom Salmon had known since they both played in punk bands in Perth and who is now best known for his group the Hoodoo Gurus. Salmon's records have appeared on a variety of labels including Half a Cow, Low Transit Industries, and Mushroom. Where Cave has evolved a brand by staying with the same named group and the same record company, Salmon has constantly changed the name of his group and the label which has released his records.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, where Cave's reputation has built on his work in The Birthday Party and, in turn, has kept The Birthday Party culturally visible, Salmon's career after The Scientists has mostly been in the shadows.

The groups did have a certain amount in common. Each was driven primarily by the musical vision of one man, Nick Cave in The Birthday Party and Kim Salmon in The Scientists. Both groups moved to London, the Boys Next Door/The Birthday Party in 1980 and The Scientists four years later in March 1984. In London each group developed a cult following and the superficial musical similarities between the two groups meant that they were often compared. Salmon has noted that:

The Birthday Party had gone, and had got some success. . . . But by the time we got there [England] I think the NME [*New Musical Express*] had reached their quota of 'Antipodean' noise merchants. We got lumped into the thing of either being flatout Birthday Party plagiarists, which we weren't, but they couldn't see it – or else we were kinda like dumb Stooges rock, which was sort of what we were [laughs] – but we weren't either, really. (Goldberg, 1999)

As we shall see, the fundamental preoccupation of each group was very different. It was not only The Scientists who were influenced by The Stooges – so were The Birthday Party. However, each group took something different from that foundational Detroit group. For The Birthday Party it was The Stooges' second album that was the more important. As Julian Marszalek (2012) comments, specifically in relation to The Birthday Party's third album *Junkyard*: 'Harnessing the power of The Stooges' *Funhouse* with the limitless possibilities offered by Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*, The Birthday Party were a product of the uncertain times that created them.' Indeed, live albums of The Birthday Party include covers of both 'Loose' and 'Funhouse' from the Stooges *Funhouse* album.<sup>2</sup> What The Birthday Party heard in *Funhouse* was the album's aggressive nihilism. Salmon and The Scientists heard the existential boredom and implicit criticism of suburbia that drives The Stooges first, eponymously titled album.

There are also similarities, and crucial differences, especially in class, in the lives of Cave and Salmon. Both went to art school. Cave studied for a diploma in Art and Design at Caulfield Institute of Technology and Salmon for a degree in Fine Art at the Western Australian Institute of Technology. Neither completed their respective course. Nevertheless, the music of both The Birthday Party and The Scientists was much influenced by the ideas and attitudes Cave and Salmon picked up at art school. Salmon (2004) writes about 'waiting for the non-stop drugged-out free love-in that I'd heard about as a nipper

in the sixties, only to get patronised by a bunch of ageing hippies (actually 20 something fellow art students'. Implicit here is a class difference between Salmon and the other art students. Salmon had a working-class background first in small-town Bunbury which was, and to an extent still is, a mining and agricultural town, and then in Perth, where he went to what he describes in Goldberg (1999) as 'a pretty rough high school, it was sort of part of a high-rise housing complex thing, I think we had the first skinheads in Australia there!' That school was Hampton Senior High in what was then the working-class suburb of Morley. Salmon's description of the other art students as 'aging hippies' carries an unspoken class criticism. Cave's background was middle class. His father, Colin Cave, was a teacher of English Literature and Drama. He was also a key figure in establishing the Wangaratta Centre for Adult and Community Education. At the time of his death in a car accident in 1978, Colin Cave was Director of the Victorian Council of Adult Education (see Welberry, 2009: 58–9). Cave's mother was a school librarian. Cave became a boarder at the prestigious Caulfield Grammar School. The Boys Next Door was formed with his school friends.

This class difference was crucial in what each took from their art school experiences. The Birthday Party's music was deeply informed by the ideas Cave found at art school, the books he read, the art movements he learnt about, and The Birthday Party was located in this avant-garde tradition. For Salmon, the outsider in middle-class society, art school offered a focus for his alienation, a way of thinking and a set of techniques through which that alienation could be mediated in the music of The Scientists. Where The Birthday Party's music was founded, as we shall see, in an early 20th-century nihilism, an effect of a disillusionment with the consequences of Enlightenment values, the music of The Scientists was an attack on the stultification of middle-class suburban life and a rejection of a lived environment which contributed to an experience of oppression and social immobility.

Patrick Emery (n/a) suggests that on *Blood Red River*, 'some of the tunes – "Burnout" and "Revhead" especially – give a clue to the members' backgrounds in Perth. "We were all from the suburbs of Perth," Salmon says, "not from Caulfield Grammar".' Not just any suburbs, the kind of working-class suburbs where young men drove big old cars, preferably V8 s, and revved the engines loudly, then performed burnouts – where the engine is revved while the car is held stationary and the wheels spin producing a large amount of smoke and burning through the rubber on the tyres. In a personal communication, Salmon (2017) has explained his family history:

My father was a union organiser who went through the ranks of that system to become a secretary for various unions – electrical trades, metal trades, hospital workers, miscellaneous and then progressed onto the bench of the Board of Arbitration. You could say that I came from a working class background and certainly the public school system even if my families [sic] income rose to something approaching upper middle class.

Salmon's point is that even though his family's earnings increased greatly over time, their fundamental values remained working class aided by the kind of job his father did. Focusing on the second version of *The Scientists*, Brett Rixon's father was a tradesman possibly, Salmon thinks, in plumbing or something kindred. One of his grandfathers was

a policeman. Rixon played drums. The Rixons were respectable working class. Tony Thewlis, guitarist, was the son of English migrants. His father worked as a mechanic in the wheatbelt town of Kulin nearly 300 km from Perth. Boris Sujdovic, who played bass, had, Salmon writes, a Serbian father and a Croatian mother. His background was similar to that of Roddy Radalj, who had Croatian parents. Radalj was born in Kalgoorlie and, as he says, 'was being groomed to be a fitter and turner' (Patrick, 2009). Radalj played guitar in the first version of The Scientists in Perth. In the late 1970s he and Sujdovic, and Salmon, had played together in the punk group The Invaders, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s Radalj and Sujdovic played together again in The Dubrovniks.<sup>3</sup>

We can speculate that the different class backgrounds of Cave and Salmon may also have played an important part in the very different recording histories of The Birthday Party and The Scientists that I have outlined above. Gudinski, who released *Door, Door*, was the son of well-off Jewish migrants who sent him to Mount Scopus Memorial College and then to Melbourne High School, an elite public school.<sup>4</sup> Living in Caulfield, Gudinski knew Cave as a musician (Coupe, 2015: 'Growing Up'). Glass, who started Missing Link, and who in addition managed the Boys Next Door, also had a middle-class background, having been brought up in affluent Brighton (MILESAGO, n/a) and going to Brighton High School, which Georgina Murray (2006: 78) describes as an 'elite public school'. He subsequently dropped out of a law degree at the University of Melbourne and enrolled in a Design course at RMIT. Clearly Cave, and the other Caulfield Grammar boys in Boys Next Door/The Birthday Party, would have had much in common with Glass, and this is reflected in the lengthy continuity of their working relationship.

Bruce Milne's mother, Rosemary Milne, was an early childhood educator and developmental psychologist who also worked on ABC television's *Play School* (Tickell and Clarke, 2010). Milne's father was an architect. Milne went to Swinburne Community School along with Rowland S Howard and Anita Lane, who collaborated with Cave on the lyrics for a number of The Birthday Party's songs. Milne worked with Glass at Missing Link before starting Au Go Go in 1979. Salmon not only came from a different, and in those days more provincial, city without the lengthy connections that Cave, Glass and Milne had in Melbourne, he was also from a different class. It is perhaps not surprising that his relationship with Milne became fraught. Unlike Cave, Salmon would have had little to do with contracts, and in particular recording contracts, and lacked the informal, middle-class connections to back up his music. Milne's comment on Salmon's attempt to break The Scientists' contract with Au Go Go was: 'I lost all trust in bands after that. Because Kim and I had been close friends' (Walker, 1996: 178). I would suggest that for Milne there was a middle-class sense that friendship reinforces a binding legal document whereas for Salmon there was a working-class belief in opportunity.<sup>5</sup> The Scientists were in London, they had a new manager; there was a feeling they could make it big if only they could move on from their connection with what must have seemed from the UK like a provincial label – Melbourne could have seemed to London what previously Perth seemed like to Melbourne. Salmon's comment to Clinton Walker (1996: 178) looking back around ten years later was: 'I think lack of design really fucked things up for us. We were classic foot-shooters.' Salmon's regret seems to be founded in his inability at that time to see the larger picture, to see, we might say, how middle-class agreements function as part of long-term support networks. This was something that

Cave simply took for granted. We need to bear in mind the class difference between Cave and Salmon as we look at the impact of the two groups.

### **Cave, The Birthday Party and the avant-garde**

Michel Faber (Snow, 2011: 18) asked Howard and Cave why they called their first group the Boys Next Door. Howard, who was not a member when the name was chosen, answers: ‘Oh, you know, we were just the clean-cut, normal looking boy-next-door people.’ The pre-Howard Boys Next Door were schoolboys. Perhaps Howard was being ironic, for while the members of the Boys Next Door may have been clean-cut – after all, they were still at school – they were not normal. They went to an expensive private school and Howard had been to a private alternative school patronized by middle-class children whose parents for some reason felt they were better suited to a non-standard education. Cave’s answer reinforces the elitism: ‘It was a reaction against the names that were going round at the time. The more vulgar names’ (Snow, 2011: 18). Cave’s reference to vulgarity may also have been ironic but it nevertheless betrays the middle-class sensibility of his background. One can almost hear his father talking through him – Colin Cave had sat on the Theatre Board of the Australian Council for the Arts in 1973. Faber interprets Cave’s reference to vulgar names in relation to the names of some of the British punk groups ‘such as Slaughter & the Dogs, the Buzzcocks and of course the Sex Pistols’ (Snow, 2011: 18). Cave’s answer can be read as a rejection of British punk, many of whose members came from working-class backgrounds and whose use of ‘vulgar’ names was a deliberate attempt to scandalize the middle classes or, as Dave Laing (1985: 62) puts it, ‘punk names . . . aimed to signal some kind of overturning of established meanings and hierarchies of values’.

As I have already noted, the Boys Next Door changed their name to The Birthday Party around the time the group moved to London. There are a number of suggestions as to where the new name came from. One theory is that it was a consequence of Cave misremembering the existence of a birthday party in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. While this idea fits well with Cave’s literary preoccupations it seems more likely that the name was drawn from Harold Pinter’s play *The Birthday Party*, first performed in 1957. Cave may well have been familiar with Pinter’s work from his father’s interest in drama. Pinter’s play centres on the character of Stanley Webber, who boards with Petey and Meg. Meg is organizing a birthday party for Stanley, though it may not be his birthday, when two men, Goldberg and McCann, ask to stay the night. Goldberg and McCann appear to have some sinister interest in Stanley and the play develops around their increasingly menacing behaviour. Finally, the two take Stanley away – where to and for what purpose we do not know. Quite who Goldberg and McCann are, and indeed who Stanley really is, is lost in shifting memories, questionable intentions and different interpretations of what is taking place. The play is suffused with an unsettling dread. The most incisive review of the play when it was first performed came from Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times*. He wrote that:

Mr Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster. . . . There is terror everywhere. Meanwhile, it is best to make jokes (Mr Pinter’s

jokes are very good), and to play blind man's buff, and to bang on a toy drum, anything to forget the slow approach of doom. *The Birthday Party* is a Grand Guignol of the susceptibilities. (Billington, 2008)

It would have been the play's sense of menace and underlying terror which would have attracted Cave. Michael Billington, who has written a biography of Pinter, asked him about *The Birthday Party* in 2008:

Pinter is notoriously reluctant to analyse his own work. But, when I ask him why *The Birthday Party* has endured, he offers both a political and personal explanation. 'It's possible to say,' he tentatively admits, 'that two people knocking at the door of someone's residence and terrorising them and taking them away has become more and more actual in our lives. It happens all the time. It's happening more today than it did yesterday, and that may be a reason for the play's long life. It's not fantasy. It just becomes more and more real.' (Billington, 2008)

Cave and his group's members' choice of name signalled the underlying terror of everyday life in modernity which was becoming increasingly apparent in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the post-war political consensus was unravelling, and which Pinter had so presciently recognized in 1957 (see Lefebvre, 2000).

Salmon has argued that negative energy was central to the performance practice of both *The Birthday Party* and *The Scientists*. In 1989 he explained:

The *Scientists*, like *The Birthday Party*, were fueled on negative energy – a very negative sort of group. A bit like the Stooges, the way the group worked is very similar. There's not many groups that have worked that way. I think the result is intense energy, but rather than force things out dynamically and theatrically like *The Birthday Party* did, we tend to basically unleash. The momentum is there, and we're able to pick up on it and let it loose. (Mills, 2016)

By negative energy Salmon means the kind of interaction with the group's audience that can provoke sentiments like aggression and anger. His point is that *The Birthday Party* on stage offered a performance which generated a particular, antagonistic response from the audience. Mick Harvey, a member of *The Birthday Party* and also of the later *Bad Seeds*, has commented on *The Birthday Party*'s act that: 'It seemed to have this ability to become this weird crossover cathartic art event or something . . . for a lot of people it was an important experience' (Wray, 2014). *The Birthday Party* claimed to be a rock act but they performed as performance artists.

The best way to approach *The Birthday Party*'s stage act is as performance art. The modern history of performance art links it closely with the avant-garde. Roselee Goldberg (2001) argues that performance art began with the Futurist experiments in 1909. However, it was not the Futurists but the Dadaists who fascinated the young Cave. In an interview with Phil Sutcliffe (Snow, 2011: 210), when asked about the influences on *The Birthday Party* track 'Zoo-Music Girl', on *The Birthday Party*'s *Prayers on Fire* album, Cave replies:



That's a more literary thing, coming out of Dada literature, the Alfred Jarry plays, the Ubu plays – the spirit of it, the abstractedness and heavy imagery. It wasn't coming from other people's music, it was founded in what I was reading at the time.

Cave continues, explaining the importance of Dada to him at that time:

Isn't that always the way, though? Seventeen or eighteen and certain things happened that totally influenced me. Certain people. They were painters, people at art school. The people at art school had a huge impact on me because they were really about fuckin' everything up. (Snow, 2011: 210)

Where Salmon saw his fellow art students as aging hippies, Cave felt fully at home in the middle-class art school environment. One thing he took away from the art school experience is that it is okay to deliberately fuck everything up.

Cave's version of Dada descends from its Zurich origins. R Bruce Elder (2013: 75) reminds us that: 'DADA was founded to protest the civilization that had produced the Great War. . . . There was a strong streak of moral and aesthetic nihilism to DADA.' The Cabaret Voltaire was opened by the Dadists Hugo Ball and Emmy Hemmings in 1916. Its aim was to provoke the bourgeois audience by confronting them with the meaninglessness of modern art in the context of the horrors of the Great War. The performances included music and dance as well as poetry made up of sounds and vocalizations that were not linguistically meaningful. The Dada performances deliberately antagonized the audiences who, in return, often shouted, threw things, and walked out. The Birthday Party's work, both musical, on recordings, and in performance, updated this nihilism for the post-punk era.

The body is central to performance art. Nelly Richard (2005: 188) tells us that:

Because the body is at the boundary between biology and society, between drives and discourse, between the sexual and its categorization in terms of power, biography and history, it is the site par excellence for transgressing the constraints of meaning or what social discourse prescribes as normal.

Remembering that the Stooges were an important influence on The Birthday Party, here we can find a way of understanding Iggy Pop's propensity for exposing his body on stage and for quite seriously harming himself. Alan Vega, of the post-punk duo Suicide, describes Iggy at a Stooges gig:

He was wild-looking – staring at the crowd and going, 'Fuck you! Fuck you!' Then the Stooges launched into one of their songs, and the next thing you knew, Iggy was diving off the stage onto the concrete, and cutting himself up with a broken guitar. It wasn't theatrical. It was theatre. (McNeil and McCain, 2016: 63)

At other gigs Iggy would cut himself with broken glass or smear himself with peanut butter and dive into the audience.

Like the Dadaists, and like Cave and The Birthday Party later, Iggy attacked the audience as well as attacking himself. At The Stooges' final gig this dual focus reached its apotheosis. Lester Bangs (1988: 206) describes it as 'the Iggy holocaust at its most

nihilistically out of control'. The audience was primarily composed of a bikie gang. Iggy antagonized them before wading in to attack physically a bikie much larger than himself. Iggy was so badly beaten up the rest of the gig was cancelled and Iggy returned to his motel room in need of a doctor. Here we have the negative energy discussed by Salmon taken to a limit in a physical confrontation between artist and audience where the performance becomes impossible. The transgression on the constraints of meaning have resulted in a nihilistic apocalypse in which the body which abused the audience and the body which abused itself are united in a destruction which ends the performance.

Marszalek (2012) provides a description of a performance by The Birthday Party in London at the Venue in August 1982:

As the pair [Cave and Tracy Pew] grapple on stage, Cave launches a second violent front as his booted foot lashes out and connects with bone, cartilage and teeth at the lip of the stage. Immediately, several sets of hands reach out from the melee and grab both the howling singer, his face contorted in a mixture of rage and confusion, and his twisting cohort. The music, an unholy collision of blues, rock & roll and free jazz seemingly fuelled by the nastiest variant of bathtub speed cut with cheap scouring powder, plays relentlessly on.

Cave is channelling Iggy from 1974, though the rapturous gestures in his dancing do not compare to Iggy's self-harm, but Cave knows, from what he learnt at art school, that behind Iggy are the performers at the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire. Marszalek (2012) comments that:

The Birthday Party were a product of the uncertain times that created them. With Thatcher and Reagan only just getting into the stride that would alter society, culture and economics beyond recognition, the tumultuous and apocalyptic music of The Birthday Party – though never making any reference to the outside world that existed beyond their own universe – was the unwitting soundtrack to a time of death, darkness and decay.

The original Dadaists offered a nihilistic response to the horror of the First World War and the recognition of the terroristic consequences of the Enlightenment. The Birthday Party did not know what was to come but the seeds were already sown. Thatcher had been prime minister of the UK since 1979. The protests of punk had prefigured the election of a Conservative prime minister who would usher in social destruction founded in the ideological claims of economic neoliberalism and who, in 1987, four years after The Birthday Party had left for West Berlin and their own dissolution, would notoriously claim that there is no such thing as society.

## **The Scientists and suburban critique**

In Sydney, The Scientists found a niche with the inner-city alternative rock audience. Salmon remembers:

But even back in Australia, things were pretty good, this booking agency called Dirty Pool, who at the time were booking big Aussie pub-rock acts like the Angels and INXS, wanted us on their books, and had this idea of hooking us up with the Angels and touring around to the suburbs of Sydney, just to demonstrate what they could do. (Goldberg, 1999)

Having The Scientists open for The Angels was a marriage of two different musical forms. The Angels were one of the finest Oz Rock groups. Their first hit, in 1976, was 'Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again', which climbed to no. 56 on the Australian chart. It was produced by Harry Vanda and George Young, who had been members of the Easybeats and now worked in house for the long-standing Australian music publishing and production company Alberts. They produced AC/DC's early albums – the band was formed by George's younger brothers Malcolm and Angus. By 1983 the question in the song's title was being answered by the audience: 'No way, get fucked, fuck off.' Far from being antagonized, The Angels' audience enjoyed the group's music and even felt a part of the community generated by the group's playing. In 1988 a live version of the song, complete with audience response, reached no. 11 on the chart.

The Scientists did not play Oz Rock. Rather, as Fred Mills (2016) puts it, 'the scabbily hirsute, silk-shirt adorned Scientists assaulted frequently unprepared audiences with the demented, unfiltered glee of, yes, a mad scientist, charting paranoia, decay, and bad love against a thundering, howling backdrop of swamp-twang and dissonance'. One night in 1983, the year The Angels released their sixth album, Dirty Pool had The Scientists and The Angels play the Parramatta Leagues Club in suburban Sydney. This was Oz Rock territory. In 1984 Salmon remembered the gig:

The floor was littered with beer cans and bottles of whatever. We got one full bottle thrown – it sailed by my head, missing by about a foot. We had to sneak out of that gig without getting paid, because there were so many people there that really hated us. There was so much hatred. When I say it was common for people to throw bottles at us, I should say we did set ourselves up for it a bit: We tended to work off it, working off negative energy. (Mills, 2016)

It was five years later that Salmon was able to expand on his idea of negative energy in the comparison between The Scientists and The Birthday Party that I quoted earlier. Salmon says of The Scientists that 'we tend to basically unleash. The momentum is there, and we're able to pick up on it and let it loose' (Mills, 2016). For Salmon, where The Birthday Party was theatrical and limited by the nature of performance, The Scientists' relationship with their instruments and their music meant they were able to challenge the restrictions of the musical form in ways that, ironically, The Birthday Party could not because, due to their music's underlying nihilism, they had no limits to transgress.

When Salmon says that The Scientists used to work off negative energy he means that the group bounced off the emotions the music generated in the audience. However, at the Parramatta Leagues Club gig the aggression was not something with which the group could work. It was, in this sense, closer to the aggression generated by Iggy at the notorious Detroit Michigan Palace gig and, as Bangs pointed out, the Stooges, at least by this time, were nihilistic. The Parramatta audience did not want the limits to their understanding of rock music challenged. In an interview with Walker (1996: 141), Salmon comments:

When you hear a tape of that show you can hear our last song before we had to curtail the performance and then the abuse in between and then the Angels and God, they sound so

tame. Everything's been tamed. . . It's all blended nicely for these people whose idea of having a social conscience is going to see Midnight Oil. What we play is threatening to their idea of rock'n'roll.

Midnight Oil, who also have sometimes been generically classed in Oz Rock, are usually considered to be the most politically committed Australian rock group of the late 20th century. They supported indigenous land rights, pointed out the consequences of colonization, and campaigned on issues related to conservation. While their lyrics were confronting to conservatives, their music was hard rock. Salmon sees the music of The Scientists as being more radical than that played by The Angels or Midnight Oil; that is, the meaning was not embedded in the lyrics but in the totality of the music where the lyrics counted more as vocalization.

Andrew McCann (1998: vii) writes that:

Suburbia has been a neuralgic point in debates about Australian culture and Australian identity since the end of the nineteenth century. Louis Esson's 1911 diatribe against the 'vaunted purity of the suburban home' captured what is still a pervasive anxiety about suburban life. The suburban home, wrote Esson, 'stifles the devil-may-care spirit, the Dionysean, the creative spirit. It denounces Art, enthusiasm, heroic virtue. The Muses are immolated on the altar of respectability' (91). In the period since the end of the Second World War this anxiety about suburbia has become a staple of Australian cultural and intellectual life.

Suburbia is middle-class in its outlook. The key word here is respectability. McCann, following Esson, is more concerned with the levelling effect of suburbia which prefers the banality of beauty to the disturbance of the sublime. However, it is the class impact which oppresses the working class whose traditions, among others, of community, immediate gratification over the deferred gratification of middle-class ideology, and an emphasis on the body over the life of the mind, are devalued in the suburban built environment. In Australia it is the pervasive privileging of middle-class respectability that has led to the construction of the working-class bogan as a folk devil (see Nichols, 2011).

In Britain many people who identified as punks grew up in suburbia and much of punk's political critique was aimed at suburbia. As Andy Medhurst (1997: 265) puts it: 'Punk's response to suburbia was characteristically ruthless – it was the enemy.' I have already noted Cave's middle-class disdain for punk. In the same interview Cave amplified his position:

We did not understand, being Australian, except in the most basic terms what was going on in England – even what the Sex Pistols were about, the politics of punk, it meant nothing to us. We came from a private school. All that meant nothing. (Snow, 2011: 211)

Here Cave is very clear about his, and the group's, position. Being middle-class, private school educated young men, punk, and by implication its working-class politics, was irrelevant to them. It was class not national difference that Cave considered most important. Rather, as we have seen, The Birthday Party engaged with High Art, the avant-garde

tradition, and saw themselves as following in the footsteps of the Dadaists, making a statement about the bankruptcy of bourgeois art and of the values of modern life.

As time has gone on The Scientists' position as a forerunner of grunge has become clearer. Mark Arm of Seattle foundational grunge group Mudhoney has acknowledged in many interviews his, and the group's, debt to the influence of The Scientists. Keith Cameron (2014: 91) in his biography of Mudhoney offers one narrative about Arm's, and his bandmate Steve Turner's, discovery of The Scientists:

[Tom] Hazelmyer introduced Turner to feedtime, a no-frills Australian trio whose debut album Steve then found in Bellingham's one record store, playing it to Mark Arm on his next weekend visit to Seattle. On another trip home, Turner was browsing in Seattle's Tower Records when he found a cheap import copy of The Scientists' *Blood Red River*. On the basis that any record that looked so much like a Stooges album had to be good, he bought it. Turner played his latest discovery to Arm and both bands became key Mudhoney touchstones.

As Cameron indicates, the Stooges were a common influence for the progenitors of grunge and for The Scientists. However, where The Birthday Party had fed off the nihilism of the second Stooges album, it was the first album that was most important to Turner:

Tellingly, Steve Turner's favorite Stooges album is the self-titled debut, where the performances are primally stark when compared to the turbo-charged mania of *Fun House* and the almost ludicrous pugnacity dealt by the James Williamson-era band on *Raw Power*. 'The first Stooges record sums up that defeated teenage wasteland of suburban America,' says Turner admiringly. 'They can't even put into words how bored they are. They just sound like total wastoids; they have this weird feeling that something's not quite as good as it should be.' (Cameron, 2014: 93)

That first Stooges album was produced by John Cale, who had recently left the Velvet Underground. Cale had played with LaMonte Young, who was connected with the neo-Dada movement and the avant-garde Fluxus group. Cale brought to the Stooges an interest in minimalism and noise. In terms of music it was these things which corresponded with Salmon's and the other Scientists' ideas. Jacques Attali (1984: 6) writes about the political implications of noise and its relationship with the type of music acceptable in totalitarian regimes:

They [the theorists of totalitarianism] have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal – these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature. They are direct translations of the political importance of cultural repression and noise control.

Now, I am not suggesting that Australia is totalitarian. Rather, the rejection of The Scientists' music – and its noise – by the punters who wanted an enjoyable evening with The Angels was a conservative, populist attempt to not have their life choices

challenged. In this context noise is whatever has not been integrated into the generally accepted organization of sounds; that is, music. Cat Hope (2008: 57) defines the genre of noise music as:

music often made by what other musicians would call the detritus of the music process. Wrong notes, jarring combinations, unbridled free improvisations, incidentals, electronic artefacts and feedback are generally materials that any other music would eschew. Noise music separates itself from many other musics in its emphasis on sound and texture rather than traditional ideas of musicality, melody, chord progressions or formal structure.

Noise includes the distortion and feedback that characterized the music of The Scientists, whom she mentions, where it was synthesized into structures that included traditional rock forms such as beat and melody.<sup>6</sup>

Implicitly distinguishing The Scientists' music from that of The Birthday Party, and signalling the group's progression from the music of the Stooges, Salmon has described what his group played in the early 1980s in Sydney: 'Although we replaced the mandatory "Detroit" buzzsaw guitar three chords with atonal guitarscapes and two note bass lines our shtick was too "dumb" to be art rock.'<sup>7</sup> It was, Salmon is arguing, not High Art, to be appreciated intellectually and critically, not in the tradition in which Cale was trained and in which The Birthday Party worked. At the same time, noise alienated the suburban audience. Salmon's point, when he comments on the gig with The Angels that what The Scientists played was threatening to the audience's idea of rock'n'roll, is similar to Attali's, that the dislike of noise is conservative – that noise is radical and its acceptance, the acceptance of difference, is more subversive and progressive than listening to, and agreeing with, the lyrics of a left-wing group such as Midnight Oil. At bottom, then, The Scientists' music is, developing Salmon's point, a critique of suburbia and the conservatism which underlies the ideology of suburban life.

## **Brief conclusion**

Where The Birthday Party allied themselves to the western avant-garde tradition, The Scientists were interested in challenging the limits of rock music. The members of The Birthday Party were middle class and saw the world through a middle-class ideological prism. Kim Salmon and the rest of The Scientists had working-class backgrounds and consciously or not developed music which confronted that middle-class ideology, especially as it was articulated in suburban life and the built environment in which suburban life flourished. Where The Birthday Party's nihilism can be understood as a reaction to the gathering clouds of neoliberalism and the destruction of a modern, liberal way of life, The Scientists' work offered a musical critique of suburbia that confronted the premises of middle-class life, its safety in the average and the banal and its pre-occupation with respectability. In Perth, the most enduring work of the punk/post-punk era, aside from that of The Scientists, came from The Triffids, whose members, similar to The Birthday Party in Melbourne, had middle-class backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Punk in Perth was mainly a reaction to suburbia (see Stratton and Trainer, 2016: 34–50). There has, as yet, been little or no class analysis of the members of punk and post-punk groups in Australia.

If Oz Rock could be understood in the aesthetic terms of safe beauty, The Scientists offered the threatening sublime (see Stratton, 2007a: 49–75). At the same time, the middle-class upbringing of Cave and the rest of The Birthday Party, whose music might also be described in terms of the sublime, enabled them to position themselves well for significant cult success where Salmon's and the other Scientists' working-class backgrounds worked against them in the middle-class world of the music business. It is a tribute to the music of The Scientists that, 30 years after the group broke up, they are being increasingly recognized as pathbreakers for perhaps the most important musical genre of the 1990s. From a longer historical perspective, the music of The Scientists shows how sounds previously heard as noise could be integrated successfully into rock music.

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### Notes

1. In 2006 Cave did develop a side project called Grinderman, but it was always clear that this was a side project and in no way replaced Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds.
2. 'Loose' is on *Drunk on the Pope's Blood* and 'Funhouse' is on *The Birthday Party Live 91-82*.
3. James Baker played drums for the first, Perth version of The Scientists. He also wrote the lyrics for their songs. His father worked on the railways and played in the reserves for the Old Easts AFL team of the East Fremantle club. Later, Baker played drums with the Dubrovniks.
4. In his biography of Gudinski, Stuart Coupe (2015, 'Growing Up') writes: 'The Gudinski family home in Caulfield, south-east Melbourne, was rather grand. As he grew up amidst the trappings of a middle-class life, young Michael thrived. The family eventually had a boat. Holidays were frequently spent on the ski fields, and Gudinski would also develop into a more than passible water-skier. Life was not hard or troublesome for the young Gudinski.'
5. I am here extrapolating on the sociological distinction between middle-class and working-class values. Michael Argyle (1994: 238–9) argues that 'middle-class people are more concerned with achievement and promotion' whereas working-class people tend to emphasize 'short-term goals, immediate gratification and fatalism'.
6. To be fair, Hope also mentions The Birthday Party as having an interest in noise.
7. Liner notes to *Blood Red River: 1982–1984* (Citadel).
8. Much the same distinction can be made in Brisbane between the working-class and migrant Saints and the more middle-class Go-Betweens – while Robert Forster's father was a fitter and turner his mother was a teacher. Grant McLennan's father was a doctor and the two met while both attended the University of Queensland.

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