‘It’s the Bottom of the World and That’s That’

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Melbourne group Boom Crash Opera’s 1987 single ‘City Flat’ is a musically exuberant (though according to at least one critic, lyrically ‘fairly bleak’) single celebrating a sparse inner-Melbourne lifestyle in which limited means enhance and highlight minor pleasures: coffee, kitchens, hanging out. Now just thirty years old, the song celebrates a cheap, recycled, ad hoc city long gone. One of ‘City Flat’s’ co-writers, Peter Farnan, recently opined in the Daily Review that the academy assigns ‘arbitrary cultural values, based on bogus notions of authenticity, to pop and rock’; such assessment is not, he claims, ‘about content. It’s about context.’ This paper strives (regardless of Farnan’s gripe!) to analyse ‘City Flat’ in historical and urban studies context, as a vibrant relic, but also to examine it through a lens of the ways in which a pop song itself may be used as archive, memoir and signpost. While Boom Crash Opera’s Dale Ryder sings of Melbourne as a place in which streets ‘meet at right angles, map out the way’ the record itself is by no means straightforward, much less banal. This paper uses interviews and an extensive overview of both mid-1980s Melbourne and the Australian music scene of the time to posit an analysis of not just ‘City Flat’ but its milieu and the potential for use of pop as artifact in writing urban history.

Keywords — Music history; Boom Crash Opera; Melbourne; Australian music scene; urban history.

INTRODUCTION: “A SNAPSHOT OF MELBOURNE AND MUSIC HISTORY”

This paper seeks to locate a particular consciousness regarding Melbourne and its music scene at a juncture of artistic expression and commercial success in the first half of the 1980s. This is a significant time in Australian popular music, signalling an era in which certain Australian musicians were finding extraordinary international success.

The paper focuses on the story of one song, a minor single by a Melbourne group still fondly remembered (indeed, still extant): ‘City Flat’ by Boom Crash Opera, a song about Melbourne, share houses, being young and expecting better. The value of ‘City Flat’ in this study is that it can serve as a snapshot of a period in both Melbourne’s and Australian music history’s time when perceptions of both were being re-examined. Boom Crash Opera’s two main songwriters and instigators, Peter Farnan and Richard Pleasance, aimed to create a commercially successful entity which retained the power and experimentation of their own origins in experimental and ‘fringe’ music.

Using interviews with two key band members and early press coverage of the group, this paper seeks to contribute to the conversation surrounding the representation of Australia (most specifically, the urban, in fact predominantly inner-urban, Australia of the 1980s) in a song pitched at both a global and a local audience. Such a discussion speaks to the way that Melbournites both regarded and sought to remake their city—en route, hindsight shows us, to its 21st century conception as the ‘world’s most liveable’—for themselves and for a global audience.

‘SOPHISTICATED, CULTURED AND VIBRANT’ MELBOURNE

Over centuries hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Australian ‘boosters’ have pronounced on Australia’s ‘readiness’ to join the world, focusing on its cities’ cosmopolitan nature. In 1990, a few years after the events outlined in this paper, Premier Joan Kirner proclaimed a ‘sophisticated, cultured and vibrant’ Melbourne. Kirner’s was a rallying cry which caused former general manager of the Arts Centre, George Fairfax to caustically respond ‘Good on you, Joan. Perhaps we now have a new Joan of Arts’ (Fairfax 1990). Yet Fairfax’s more measured, and ultimately positive, analysis included the common caveats:

We... need to show the knockers within our own ranks that Victoria’s cultural life can offer great rewards when it is a culture which can truly be said to be our own. Through the arts we express what we believe in, who we are as Australians; what we want for our city, our state, the world (Fairfax 1990).

The 1990 City of Melbourne Strategy Plan concentrated strongly on Melbourne’s status as ‘the nation’s main source of arts innovation’ (City of Melbourne p. 50). Fairfax’s assessment of the arts scene in Melbourne found common ground with an opinion on Australian popular music frequently expressed by legendary Melbourne guitarist, manager and record producer Lobby Loyde, who wrote for instance in 1971 that ‘Australian rock is probably the most advanced in the music world... By the very virtue of its separateness and isolation [it] has weaved itself into its own thing’ (Loyde 1971).

Between Loyde’s words and Fairfax’s two decades of extraordinary cultural change took place. The ‘cultural cringe’ (of which, more later) was not destroyed through forays in one field: if anything, it was probably ultimately beaten by the revolutionary global communications change of the 1990s, primarily, the internet. However, when Boom Crash Opera began in earnest in 1984-85 Farnan and Pleasance were well aware that international success was more possible than ever. Little River Band, a Melbourne group which had become one of the most globally lucrative rock bands of the 1970s had, according to their drummer Derek Pellicci, created ‘a nice bitumen four-lane highway in the U.S. for other bands to follow’ (Elder 1985). More remarkably and tellingly for many Melbourne or Australian musicians was the experience of Men at Work, a group perceived as jobbing, competent and unremarkable until, three years into their existence, their 1981 debut album Business as Usual sold fifteen million copies worldwide. If the world liked anything about Men at Work aside from their music, it was their lackadaisical attitude: Colin Hay, for instance, observed his band was ‘lucky in the timing. It’s positive at the moment for Australian bands, here and overseas’ (Thomas 1982). Men at Work’s whimsical survey of global Australiana, ‘Down Under’, was first released (in its initial, low-key incarnation) the same year as another observation on cultural transplantation: Joe Dolce Music Theatre’s ‘Shaddap You Face’, a number one hit in fifteen countries that year.

The 1980s can thus be plotted on a timeline of Australian musicians’ expectations of potential for international success. The possibilities for exposure, in a healthy market eager for new product, were evident and attainable for many. How, then, might one synthesise one’s own ‘true’ experience of Australian urban life into an international market? Was urban life the same everywhere? If it was not, what was unique about (in the case of Boom Crash Opera) Melbourne?

ORIGINS OF BOOM CRASH OPERA: “IT’S GOING TO BE A COMMERCIAL ROCK BAND”

Like many successful groups, Boom Crash Opera had a ‘dry run’. Serious Young Insects was a three-piece power pop band; it cultivated impressive local success in a few short years (1980-83) without actually attaining the ‘next level’ of another observation on cultural transplantation: Joe Dolce Music Theatre’s ‘Shaddap You Face’, a number one hit in fifteen countries that year.

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Like many successful groups, Boom Crash Opera had a ‘dry run’. Serious Young Insects was a three-piece power pop band; it cultivated impressive local success in a few short years (1980-83) without actually attaining the ‘next level’ of major record sales. Each of the three band members – Mark White, Michael Vaillance and Peter Farnan – wrote songs and found ways to extemporise a powerful ‘contemporary’ sound which saw them often picked to take on major support slots to international artists at the time (for instance, The Police, another trio which similarly distilled diverse influences and utilized strong musicianship to create nominally literate, appealing pop). For the purposes of this paper, it’s possible that the most telling song on the Serious Young Insects’ only album was the single, ‘Faraway Places’, a paean to world
travel and experience from the point of view of a narrator compelled to stay in an unspecified ‘here’: ‘Faraway places’ so intrigue me.’ The song was by Vallance, but it resonated for Farnan. The two years after the demise of his first band saw Farnan exploring a range of options with, apparently, little concern to act with haste – or perhaps with a caution born of anxiety. He says now that inbetween his first ‘real’ band and Boom Crash Opera, ‘I felt like I was clinging to the cliff edge, “how do I have a music career?”’ As Farnan plotted his next career move, he completed the education component of his Bachelor of Education, the initial years having been, he says, primarily concerned with learning composition. In stepped Richard Pleasance who, like Farnan, had studied music at Melbourne State College. For their new project, Pleasance and Farnan were in no doubt that it would be ‘a commercial rock pop band’. Pleasance later described their ambition to Rosemary Mullaly from the Age:

> What we’re trying to do is make the connection between the arty, underground, culty bands that produce great music and reach no-one, and trashy bands that have massive appeal and put out bad records (Mullaly 1985).

Today, Farnan recalls ‘Richard and I were really arrogant about preserving whatever we had from that Ballroom scene,’ the ‘Ballroom’ in question being the Crystal and/or Seaview Ballroom, ‘an old hotel and residence that was sometimes used on the weekend as a venue’ (Riley, 119). It plays an appropriately key role in the film Dogs in Space and was a crucial element of Melbourne’s alternative music scene in the early 1980s. Shane Homan has pointed out that the ‘bohemianism’ of Melbourne music was in part due to the City of Melbourne’s ‘unwillingness to incorporate venues within urban planning controls’ necessitating the location of such venues in ““murky” fringe locations’, a policy decision made in the 1960s and early 70s which arguably created a crucible for creativity outside the instant feedback of mainstream audience approval (Homan, 78). The second tier – which some bands aspired to – was the ‘beer barns’ of the middle and outer suburbs, for Homan the site of “‘a collective performance mythology of Australianness in an industry otherwise subject to the machinations of globalization’” (Homan, 110).

Mullaly described Boom Crash Opera’s vocal style as ‘chanty’ and Pleasance, it seems, agreed, adding the group’s sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985). At the risk of seeming trite, this approach has already proved successful in novelty records of five years earlier, such as ‘Up There Cazaly’, but might sound was ‘like a footy team with a back beat and the keyboards and guitar’ (Mullaly 1985).

Yet, as will be seen, Farnan and Boom Crash Opera were capable of their own distinct ‘urban expressionism’. Farnan now recalls that when the two began writing songs, he lived in Annand Street Fitzroy, while Pleasance lived six streets away in Canning St.

> Richard’s place was a classic share house. Two up two down … you had to leave the house to go to [the kitchen]. Funny comic stuff stuck up in the toilet.

So I lived in Annand Street then moved around the corner to Batman St, then moved to Rae St and then ended up in Scotchmer St, all in the space of about 18 months, even less … that was a really happening house, actors and writers … it was fantastic. Then we all migrated – when I say ‘all’ – that household and Richard as well, we all migrated to St Kilda…We were ensuite in St Kilda before we went to London.

The St Kilda stage of the group’s existence is outside the purview of this paper. However, it is notable for one key element; as Farnan points out, ‘that’s when we lived in flats’; whereas at the time of writing ‘City Flat’, the two songwriters were in 1880s-era share houses of the typical 19th century Carlton/Fitzroy variety.

**Australian Urbanity: Writing and Producing ‘City Flat’**

Hugo Race, a notable figure in Melbourne in the early 1980s and similarly yeared to leave the city, reminisced of Melbourne at this time in his recent memoir Road Series: ‘I can see there are cracks forming in me, in the music, in the worn and torn city streets, and a whole lot of chaos out there waiting to get in’ (Race, 29).

In 1986, Farnan reflected on the nexus between being overtly Australian and being cornily so: ‘We didn’t want to sound like Redgum or Grauma, and we certainly didn’t want to be jingoistic. I don’t think many bands have succeeded with a true Australian feel and not fallen into a trap’ (Moncrieff 1986). Rosemary Mullaly reported that the group had an ambition to be honest to their origins: ‘Proud of their Australian flavor, they maintain this doesn’t mean songs about camping in the outback, because their experience is camping in the kitchens of Carlton’ (Mullaly 1985).

A conflicting, coincidental pride and shame in local culture might well be germane to the emergence of national pride. In 1980 Lobby Loyde – who had written so effusively in praise of Australian popular music – opined that:

> People don’t like the word ‘style’ but it’s something David Bowie has. He creates melodic structures that stand firm in the face of trends. He’s creative but if he were an Australian, we’d call him self-indulgent. He’s lucky he wasn’t born in Footscray… We’re far too timid in this country. We never take any risks (Write 1980).

It is worth noting that 1980 was the year that Leigh Bowery, who would come to be infamous in Europe in the subsequent decade as a globally celebrated designer and performer, relocated to London. Bowery had been born and raised in Sunshine, five kilometres west of Footscray. It was only a few years later that Pleasance could tell the Sydney Morning Herald that ‘the time has come when you can be influenced by Australian bands and not be embarrassed (Gatley 1986).

Boom Crash Opera quickly signed management and record deals within a few months of their formation. The next step was to travel overseas to record and perhaps also to tour. Pleasance observed in 1991 that commitment to rock success is ‘a life of displacement’ (Hill 1991).

Boom Crash Opera released its first single, ‘Great Wall’ in late 1985 and followed it with a second, ‘Hands Up in the Air’ in August the following year. ‘How many bands can you think of whose first two chart offerings were songs about Australian geographical idiosyncrasies and not about love?’ Age journalist Peter Holmes asked – hypothetically (Holmes 1992). ‘Great Wall’ was written by Pleasance and vocalist Dale Ryder after a suggestion by Farnan that they write a song ‘about’ the Hume Weir; ‘Hands Up in the Air’ was concerned, according to one jaded journalist, with ‘apathy in Melbourne’ (Schembri). It featured, notably lines about a city riddled with swimming pools in which everyone was too scared to swim; it was, thematically speaking, ‘Faraway Places’ yet again – including the aquatic imagery.

> ‘City Flat’ was, Farnan was born, written in 1984 ‘that first year when Richard and I were writing songs… by the end of ‘84 we had everybody bar the keyboard player – we had our first gig in April and “City Flat” would have been played in that first gig, I expect.’

Farnan’s house in Annand Street in North Fitzroy was ‘just near the kink’ in that small east-west street, whereas Pleasance lived, according to Farnan, in a ‘really nice double fronted two storey’ in Canning Street. ‘It wasn’t far,’ Farnan
saying, adding obliquely, ‘of course I drove.’ The song references the right-angled streets, journeys between the two men’s houses to ‘drink cups of coffee’; it is a utopia, but also a limbo.

Going from my house to Richard’s to write songs and spending a lot of time in the kitchen and then there was the ‘at night we can dream’ line, which was in the first version of the song, and the chorus, of course. But we got rid of the ‘I’m sleeping, dreaming, please wake me’—something about being in a half-dream state, waiting for the real world to happen, it’s elsewhere, it’s over there.

Farman says the song is a partner to ‘Hands Up in the Air’, as it is similarly about ‘ambition’. ‘Are we leaving soon? Are we going to go where all those other bands went? Because it’s only kind of half happening here.’

It might seem overly generous, at first blush, to typify such an attitude as ‘ambivalence’ (as opposed to outright hostility). Yet the group’s attitude changed even as the song was being recorded. Keyboard player Greg O’Connor, the last to join the original line-up, now says that he took the lyrics ‘to heart’. Melbourne was flat and at the bottom of the world.

Yet the group’s attitude changed even as the song was being recorded. Keyboard player Greg O’Connor, the last to join the original line-up, now says that he took the lyrics ‘to heart. Melbourne was flat and at the bottom of the world’ (O’Connor 2017). The Sydney Morning Herald paraphrased Plesance in 1995 typifying the essence of inner city Melbourne as ‘Darkness, suffering, bad weather: firewood for the artistic fire’ (Molitorisz 1995).

The commercial success of their first two singles was heartening for the group’s long-term success. They were paired with Alex Sadkin, a leading American producer, to record their debut album in London. O’Connor recollects:

Boom Crash Opera arrived in London on January 14, 1987 straight from the bright mid-summer sunlight of Melbourne. It was like stepping out of a Heidelberg School painting by Arthur Streeton and into Claude Monet’s, ‘Houses of Parliament’ (1904). When we left Heathrow Airport and headed for St. Johns Wood, it was 4:30pm and an eerie twilight was descending over us. The early evening mist was chilly and infused with diesel fumes, the dull yellow street lights were already on. I woke at 9.30am the next morning and pulled back the curtains. It was just getting light. I could see an entire street of suburban Georgian rooftops silhouetted against a grey down. The flats looked familiar, it felt like inner Melbourne, so I took a photo (which would become the inspiration for the ‘City Flat’ cover art). (O’Connor 2017)

Farman and O’Connor remember Sadkin’s first exposure to ‘City Flat’ differently. Farman believes that the group revived the song, which had been dropped from their set, when Sadkin asked for more material. O’Connor feels that Sadkin had heard and liked a recording they had made in the Sydney studios of the ABC. Both agree that Sadkin changed the song; Farman recalls an ‘earlier more angular weirder version… it was jerky, a lot more new wavy, jerky baseline stuff. Stiff rhythms’ Sadkin then ‘curated’ a different iteration simply by explaining to Farman at key moments ‘I like it when you do that, do more of that.’ O’Connor recalls:

We spent weeks recording and mixing ‘City Flat’ until Alex finally had it ‘in the pocket’. Our engineer once told us. ‘When people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them I mix “City Flat”’.

When we revisited the song in London, we were at the top of the world, the northern hemisphere, 1000 miles further away from the equator than Melbourne was. Homesickness, melancholy, fog, snow in the streets, traffic, noise, anonymity had found its way into my keyboard parts for ‘City Flat’ (O’Connor 2017).

O’Connor suggests that his own musical contribution was a complimentary interpretation to Farman’s and Pleasance’s initial understanding:

In the verses I imagined our dreams would inhabit the streets at night, sneaking and sliding along, looking for openings and opportunities. The keyboard parts for the bridge of the song represented waking up from the dream, the chorus parts are me, mimicking peak hour traffic noises and urban anxiety.

Like Georgian architecture, I chose to keep my parts symmetrical and ornamentally restrained but charged with emotion behind closed curtains. Alex Sadkin gave me the space to hide in plain sight.

One peculiar Australianism also, seemingly, hid in plain sight. Farman now observes that the title “City Flat” was a play on the word “flat”, I didn’t realise the Americans didn’t use the word “flat”, it’s “apartment”. I have no idea what Alex Sadkin thought that word meant.’

**City Flat: Visuals**

Sadkin was, both Farman and O’Connor attest, highly confident of the song’s capacity to be a major hit for the group. Although the first two singles, ‘Great Wall’ and ‘Hands Up in the Air’ were to be included on the album, in Sadkin-supervised remixes, the next Australian single was to be ‘City Flat’. O’Connor took responsibility for the design of the single sleeve, wherein Melbourne was ‘remade’ for a global audience, incorporating his experience both physical and intellectual:

At the time, I was a great admirer of German Expressionism and the more I walked home from RAK recording studios at the end of the day, the more those Georgian rooftops began to look like Karl Schmidt-Rottluff linocuts and paintings, particularly ‘Houses At Night’ (1912). When I returned to Melbourne (nearly six months later and ten years older), I created a linocut from the photo I took of the flats on day one (O’Connor 2017).

A version of the same design was constructed as a large wooden backdrop for the band’s tour in support of the new album; thus the band became even more firmly aligned, both visually and conceptually, with a close, dense cityscape. That this was patterned on a conception of inner city Melbourne which was, at its kindest, ambivalent, seems to have struck no-one as unusual or important.

The band’s two previous videos had to date been the work of two men, Kimble Rendall and Michael Williams, as director and cameraman. Williams was, and remains, better known as a photographer, and his work continues to have currency. O’Connor was responsible for the initial concept of the video for ‘City Flat’, inspired in the first instance by a tracking shot in a Louisiana Street in Jim Jarmusch’s film Down By Law. ‘Those houses could have been in Richmond, inner Melbourne,’ he recalls. ‘I instantly imagined the verses of “City Flat” over this scene, not Tom Waits singing “Jockey Full of Bourbon”’. Williams was assembling what O’Connor describes as a ‘quasi abstract photographic exhibition about Melbourne’, entitled Chromophobia, at the time he was commissioned to create the video; he was also a Jarmusch fan. O’Connor continues:

It was winter. One night while standing on my balcony, trying to dream up ideas for the video, I saw a ‘Class W’ tram emerging from the fog, covered in bright light bulbs and engulfed in a huge halo of light. It looked like a small Las Vegas casino on wheels as it passed quietly by. Right there, that was the dream, the opportunity, my keyboard parts in the verses of “City Flat”. I insisted to Michael we get THAT tram in our video clip.

The finished video, like ‘Hands Up in the Air’ was shot primarily at Melbourne’s beachfront: Port Melbourne, rather than Williamstown which had been the earlier song’s video’s locale. A visual joke – or in any case a theme – was revisited about the impossibility of loading an oversize kick drum into an old Holden; Farman says the band all owned these by this stage (Richard got an EK and I got an EH). The argubly very Australian joke of a group of people owning – and thereby identifying with – the same make of car is replicated in Richard Lowenstein’s Dogs in Space, wherein the household at
the centre of the film all owns Volkswagens. Williams’ penchant for the bizarre – reminiscent perhaps of Diane Arbus’ work – was also given some screen time, particularly in the unlikely camera angles on old, overweight men walking in the street. O’Connor also notes:

The video ended up with sight gags about flat tyres, theatrical ‘flats’ (towards the end on the video, stage hands are struggling to erect two ‘flats’ of buildings… the ‘Houses At Night’ by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff … while the band are playing the song on a studio set). The video finishes with Dale Ryder and I, coffees in hand, no car, waiting for that tram to take us home.

To the surprise of many, the song was only a minor hit (the group took to referring to it as ‘City Flop’). More importantly, the entire debut album became tainted by tragedy; its release in September 1987 was an epitaph for Alex Sadkin, who had died in a car accident in Nassau in June of that year. It has come to be understood within the band that this tragedy also meant that Boom Crash Opera no longer had an international ‘champion’ for their album, which although released in the USA, was not an international success. ‘Early on,’ Farnan told a journalist in 1992, ‘we assumed that all the overseas stuff would happen.’ He added:

We just thought the world was at our feet when we started. It was pretty difficult to hit reality and realise that it is a long hard slog, and we were kind of tricked by that first single being such a big hit.

We thought we would go to America and triumph – probably.... (Holmes 1992)

CONCLUSION

‘City Flat’ is a fine lens through which to explore Melbourne in the late twentieth century, when the city’s built fabric was up for reinterpretation as either a limbo for the apathetic and anxious and as a launch pad for those with high ambition. It was written in Melbourne under the first term of John Cain Jr’s government (1982-5). A cheap, ad-hoc city – now long gone – Melbourne’s centre was notoriously emptied at night (some cinema and restaurant patrons notwithstanding) its shops adhering to a rigid closing policy at midday on Saturdays. The Victorian Housing Commission, renamed the Office of Housing, was building new two-story terrace homes in the inner city on sites it had erased the previous decade as part of bold mass housing schemes, rendered unrealizable by political realities of gentrification and inner-urban protest. Many Mediterranean migrants of previous decades remained in the inner city, though many had also relocated to the outer suburbs; the smartest or luckiest ones had retained their Carlton or Fitzroy properties to rent out to young students or artists either escaping their comfortable suburban upbringings or merely establishing an easy access point to clubs, cafes and venues within a walk or short cab ride from the city.

It is here that ‘City Flat’ resides. It is a song of complaint – about waiting for something to happen – but that need not be an Australian condition, just impatience, often a condition associated with youth and ambition. It is also a song about the city itself, a place of ten thousand meeting places, domiciles and destinations, a hive for the hatching of plans. The full realization of the gentrification of the inner city, initiated by neglect and bohemianism, means that – while such artistic conspiracies can still take place – they take place in conditions of greater financial restriction and much less freedom. Melbourne as one of the world’s most livable cities is no longer the ‘bottom of the world’ – or if it is, the bottom of the world is now the place to be.

CODA

In October, 2012, Greg Arnold – whose band Things of Stone and Wood had a top ten hit in 1992 with ‘Happy Birthday Helen’, parodied on the ABC’s The Late Show the same year as ‘We’ve Run Out of Melbourne Cliches’ – curated an event at what is now known as Melbourne Polytechnic, Song City. The concept was, simply, songwriters performing songs they had written about Melbourne: Arnold suggested to Farnan that he perform ‘City Flat’.

So I worked up a version of it that I could do – and I realised it didn’t have a second verse. I never thought of it! So I wrote a second verse for it that in hindsight I built in the journey from Carlton to St Kilda ‘any day now it’s going to happen to me, I’m going to move and live by the sea’ – still hoping the adventure was going to unfold – but by the end of the verse we’re still drinking cups of coffee and killing a few hours. And it talks about Melbourne’s weather and escaping. In fact I never adequately finished the verse, the last few lines are embarrassing.

But then I was satisfied.

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