Making it in the Melbourne Music Scene
Post-Punk and Post-Post-Punk

This paper uses contemporary documentation, interviews and maps to highlight the different types of music careers, and modes of “making it”, seen in the 1986 feature film Dogs in Space. The film concerns a fictional band of the same name, based on The Ears, a minor group active in the Melbourne band scene between 1979-1981. INXS’s Michael Hutchence plays Sam, the singer in post punk group Dogs in Space. The contrast between Hutchence and Sejavka was seen as remarkable: a major-league rock star, having “made it” by the time of the film’s production, portraying a relatively obscure post-punk musician. However, the trajectories of these bands did overlap in time and place. An historical geographical analysis of INXS and The Ears can help to add context to the Melbourne music scene depicted in the film, as well as to the later cult status popularity of the film, made during a transitional time between norms in the Australian music industry.

Keywords — Music industry; post punk; Melbourne; INXS; The Ears; Dogs In Space; restructuring.

INTRODUCTION

I was far more interested in doing, instead of your rags-to-riches pop star story, your rags-to-gutter story... by actually showing the ones that don’t become famous.

— Richard Lowenstein, director of Dogs in Space (quoted in Coupe, 1986)

At the time of its release in late 1986, Dogs in Space provided a compelling contrast between the heights of music industry success enjoyed by one of its stars, Michel Hutchence, and the exciting but imploding music movement it depicted (Smith, 1986, McGregor, 1986, Coupe, 1986). By the time Dogs In Space had been re-released in 2009, the status of live music in Australian cities had shifted sufficiently that the scenes depicted in the film were not so much of bands experiencing entertainingly low levels of commercial success, but of a successful and exciting city scene. From the viewpoint of contemporary bands, the trajectory of The Ears no longer seems quite so unfamiliar, or quite so unsuccessful.

Dogs In Space provides multiple vantage points to a decades-long story of restructuring for live music in Australian cities. Vignettes of changing norms for “making it” can be seen in the events depicted in the film (based closely on people and places active in the Melbourne post punk scene, circa. 1978-1981); in the contrasting but overlapping careers of bands linked to the film; and in the film’s later cult status and re-release in 2009 alongside the documentary We’re Livin’ On Dogfood (Lowenstein, 2009, Donovan and Murfett, 2009, Galvin, 2009).
**Dogs in Space, 1986**

*Dogs in Space* was filmed in Melbourne in early 1986 and was released in December 1986. The dialogue, characters, music and locations were drawn almost entirely from director Richard Lowenstein’s observations of the 1978-1981 Melbourne post-punk music scene, a fact that was widely acknowledged at the time of release (Seidenberg, 1987, Smith, 1986), but apparently lost on some viewers in the film’s ensuing decades as a cult-classic and quotable party film (Nichols and Perillo, 2016).

The term post-punk is now used to refer to a music movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The “punk” element in post-punk derived from the spirit of do-it-yourself musicianship in combination with experimentation and new technology, rather than a particular sound or fashion that might now be described as stereotypically and conspicuously punk. The Australian post-punk scene of the mid 1970s to early 1980s left a sufficient impression to be documented shortly afterward in a collection of clippings, *Inner City Sound* (Walker, 2005, first published late 1981), and in Vikki Riley’s contribution to the compilation *From pop to punk to postmodernism: popular music and Australian culture from the 1960s to 1990s* (Riley, 1992). A key impression of the post-punk scene in Australia, and particularly in Melbourne, was that it had been exciting: in spite of, or because of, being close to home.

Prior to *Dogs in Space*, Richard Lowenstein had directed the historical drama film *Strikebound*, multiple music video clips, including for INXS (beginning with in 1984 with “Burn For You”), Hunters and Collectors, and The Ears (“Leap for Lunch”, 1980), and a long-play concept video for Pete Townshend of The Who (White City). True to these music-video precedents, *Dogs in Space* featured a non-stop soundtrack that was more prominent than a mainstream narrative (Coupe, 1986). A large proportion of filming took place in the exact same house (18 Berry Street, Richmond) in which Lowenstein had lived as film student eight years prior to filming, in a share house with many of the assorted counter cultural characters who formed the basis of the script, including Sam Sejavka, lead singer of post-punk band The Ears. Other scenes were shot at post-punk music venues the Seaview Ballroom in St Kilda (also known as the George Hotel or Crystal Ballroom), and the Champion Hotel in Fitzroy, both significant post-punk venues.

While the film conveyed highly localised and not particularly glamorous happenings, the *Dogs in Space* cast included bona fide national rock star Michael Hutchence, lead singer of INXS, a band that had been at the time, kicking unusually high goals for Australian popular music in overseas markets. “Starred” is not strictly accurate, since the film featured an ensemble cast, but the star power of Hutchence helped secure funding for the film (Walker and Stafford, 1987), and his presence in the film was a key focus of publicity (Coupe, 1986, Smith, 1986, Walker and Stafford, 1987, Seidenberg, 1987). Hutchence’s stardom and mainstream success contrasted with the characters in the film, for whom music was a central activity, but apparently undertaken in a mode of almost wilful anti-success. Commentary at the time seemed ambivalent as to whether the music scene of “the ones that don’t become famous”, recreated with such attention to detail, was actually interesting enough to warrant a film (McGregor, 1986, Seidenberg, 1987, French, 1988).

**The Ears’ Career Trajectory**

*Dogs in Space* featured a musician from a real-life band (INXS) performing in an almost-fiction band (Dogs in Space) based unabashedly on a real-life band (The Ears). INXS and The Ears began band-lives at similar times: in 1979 the Farriss Brothers changed their name to INXS, took on go-getter Chris Murphy as their manager, and proceeded to play around the Sydney circuit even more seriously than they had in their preceding year in Perth (see below, INXS’ career trajectory); also in 1979, an assemblage of friends headed by Sam Sejavka played a debut show as The Ears at a Footscray party, and thereafter proceeded to perform more frequently at inner city venues in Melbourne. Along the way, the Ears garnered a following with local trends, some press coverage (not much of it positive), the attention of Richard Lowenstein (who directed their film clips), and, much (much) later, status as a “legendary” band and must-mention to anyone describing Melbourne post-punk band (Riley, 1992, San Miguel, 2011, Carbone, 2014).

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*Figure 1* (overleaf) shows the distribution of performances in Melbourne by The Ears, from 1979 to 1981. The performances are grouped by venue, so that venues with more performances by The Ears have larger symbols and larger labels.

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1 Ears performances were sourced from gig guides in TAGG: the alternative gig guide, and *The Age*.
The Ears can be seen performing primarily – overwhelmingly – in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, and at particular venues more than others (namely the Seaview Hotel, Champion Hotel, and Oxford Hotel). This geography was a defining feature of their career, not a coincidence: they operated within the inner-city circuit of independently run music venues, without the machinery of a record company or manager pushing their expansion. Bass player Cathy McQuade recalled making only occasional trips to perform further afield:

"That venue out on Springvale Road...was one of our only trips out to the suburbs with The Ears. We played first, and there probably wasn’t so many people there. It was like entering a strange, scary universe."

(Cathy McQuade, interview 2017)

Notably, this trip for The Ears to the strange and scary suburbs was as a support band for INXS, an odd experience late in The Ears’ career trajectory. By contrast, The Champion Hotel, Fitzroy, was a key early venue for The Ears, firmly within the inner city. The venue also featured in their 1980 film clip (“Leap for Lunch”, directed by Richard Lowenstein, also featuring footage of 18 Berry Street, Richmond, in its original condition). The Champion was included in a gig scene for Dogs in Space. Contemporary accounts indicate that the band were quite as unambitious as the Dogs in Space band – indeed, this would be difficult to sustain for two years of organising their own gigs. They performed often at the Champion during 1979 and then moved on to other venues in the independent circuit when this pub stopped hosting bands. A review in 1980 noted that:

"A now defunct venue ‘The Champion’ was like their garage and their friends, acquaintances, peers and so on were always there when they were just mucking around... But it seems that this band had a bit more to offer than the general run of the mill, off-beat, crazed band. So they grew, from that recognition of talent. Whereas so many others dropped by the wayside. In reality the band was pretty bad about a year or so ago... But now they’re getting, they’ve got, so much better. They used to have the label of being the worst band in town and now they’re getting some recognition... They have enough confidence in themselves now to come out of their isolation, and they are as ambitious as the next person."

(Lee, 1980)

Other reviews for The Ears veered between admiration and outright loathing. Perhaps because of their “arty” tone, and/or the timing of the band at the tail end of the Melbourne post punk scene (so that comparisons to predecessors Boys Next Door or Whirlywind were inevitable), The Ears managed to generate some startlingly negative press:

The Ears are currently the dahlings (dashing) of Melbourne’s ‘arty punk set’... an imitation of the Boys Next Door, and a bad one at that.

(Walker, 1980)

Straining myself to think seriously about what they were offering, words such as banal, mundane and pretentious sprung to mind. Perhaps their only saving grace was their filmclip, on show 3, 4 or ten times in the foyer... If this is all The Ears have to offer then perhaps they should take a hint from Van Gogh.

(Gleeson, 1981)

The last Ears gig on written record was in June 1981, at the opening of rock music nights at the Oxford Hotel. A music magazine in May 1981 noted that “The Ears are rumoured to be breaking up...the usual professional differences are cited as the reason...” (TAGG Magg, May 1981). A review of their last gig confirmed the impression that their press coverage had been unusually negative, and that the band could have, should have, but never tried hard enough, to break into a wider scale of operations:

...the Ears confirmed rumours that they were splitting after 2½ years. I’ve never really understood the media’s attitude to the Ears. Over the years, and most recently as well, they’ve been mercilessly hammered as a dismal punk band... Personally, I’ve often enjoyed them, and considered ‘The Crater’ from their single of 1980 as close to the best song for that year. My only criticism was their sloppy, unprofessional approach to gigging, which prevented their music from rising out of the new wave ruck.

(Lynch, 1981)

The Ears would never be accused, as INXS sometimes were, of being overly professional. Instead, both their best and worst feature appears to have been their lack of discipline. Bass player Cathy McQuade reflected on the two sides of this coin, during an interview in 2017. On the one hand, their non-professionalism was interesting on stage:

"I thought they were the worst band I’d ever heard. But that they were so bad, that it kind of tipped over into something really special."

But also frustrating as a self-management practice:

"When I hear myself discussing musicians of that period, it all sounds like...egos, with very little sense of the long plan, just all reacting, not strategizing... I think INXS were a great example of a band who understood the role that everyone played... until Michael met with personal misadventure, they definitely understood that the structure worked as a whole, and that kind of discipline worked really well."

(Cathy McQuade interview, 2017)

**INXS’ Career Trajectory**

The funding and promotion of *Dogs in Space* was helped, in no small part, by the star power provided by Michael Hutchence, who as lead singer of INXS exemplified the 1980s heights of “making it” in the Australian music industry. While Michael later came to the attention of tabloidists and met a tragic and sensational end in 1997, the band as a whole were remarkably un-controversial and almost industrious: travelling on some of the same roads as The Ears, but at different speeds.

Both INXS and The Ears are documented in Australian popular music reference texts (McFarlane, 1999, McFarlane and Jenkins, 2017, Walker, 1996, Nichols, 2009), as are two of the spinoff bands of The Ears (Beargarden and Deckchairs Overboard). None are completely obscure bands, but INXS are now part of the canon of Australian rock music history, with several biographies for the band and/or Michael Hutchence (INXS et al., 1992, Bozza, 2005, Gee, 1998, St John, 1998, Hutchence and Glassop, 2001). In fact, a map of INXS gigs has already been produced, albeit at a very different scale to the map in this paper. An animated, year by year, world-scale map of all INXS gigs is provided on the official INXS website, with the subheading “How INXS conquered the world”:

**INXS rose to world dominance in the late eighties through groundbreaking music and relentless touring. They played 2,146 gigs to more than 30 million fans in 49 countries from 1977 to their final show in Perth, 2012... Sit back and watch how the band grew from playing pub gigs in Sydney, to stadium shows and festivals around the world”**

The world map shows INXS gigs expanding in scale from Sydney (1977), to the Australian eastern seaboard (1981), to the USA (1983), and to the UK and Japan (1984). Just as The Ears were definitively inner-city Melbourne, INXS were characteristically expansive: they made full use of the Australian live music circuit available through the early 1980s, often at the same venues as The Ears, but their sights were unashamedly on wider scale operations.

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INXS began in Sydney in the late 1970s with the nucleus of brothers Tim, Andrew, and Jon Farriss, later joined by Michael Hutchence (who attended the same high school) and then by Kirk Pengilly and Garry Gary Beers. This line-up remained remarkably unchanged for the ensuing decades. After a year in Perth in 1979 the band returned to Sydney and began playing around the northern beaches, gaining many support spots for Midnight Oil, whose manager suggested their name change from the Farriss Brothers to INXS. By many accounts INXS were unapologetically confident and almost bizarrely professional in approaching pub rock gigs large or small (Bozza, 2005, Nichols, 2009, Sarno, 1986, INXS et al., 1992, San Miguel, 2011).

In 1979 they hired Chris Murphy as their band manager. Chris was a “colourful hard-arse” (McCabe, 2016) and confident wheeler-and-dealer who had been working as a booking agent in Sydney throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 1982 Murphy joined with fellow man-about-town Gary Grant to establish MMA (Murphy Media Academy), the management and publishing group that brokered subsequent deals for INXS and a stable of other bands (including Models, whose 1984 signing prompted a controversial line-up change and more mainstream sound). MMA became an influential organisation in the 1980s, functioning as something of a Jerry Maguire (“show me the money”) team for bands wishing to get serious and crack bigger markets (McFarlane and Jenkins, 2017, Adams, 1994, Mathieson, 2000).

Figure 2 shows the Melbourne gigs played by INXS during 1979 to 1981, the same years in which The Ears were active. At this point, INXS were beginning to crack the Australian charts, and were touring constantly throughout Australian cities, but were yet to break overseas. The two bands overlapped at several of the same venues in the inner city: the Seaview Hotel, Hearts in North Carlton, and the Oxford Hotel. However, they combined this inner city circuit with performances outside of the central city, and a higher number of performances overall: INXS played 94 gigs in Melbourne between 1979-1981, while The Ears played 38.

Several of the same venues can be seen in Figure 1 (The Ears) and Figure 2 (INXS): indeed, INXS and The Ears occasionally shared bills at the Seaview Hotel. However, a characteristic feature of INXS’ career during the 1980s is that of expansion: each album sold incrementally more records, and each tour extended further afield.

Rather than ups and downs, or a single meteoric rise followed by dramatic crash, the 1980s played out for INXS as a steady, gamified rise through available paths of opportunity. In April 1981 their third single reached #18 on the Australian charts; in 1982 their second album (Shabooh Shoobah) reached the Australian Top 10 and US Top 30; in January 1984 the single The Original Sin reached #1 on the Australian charts; and in April 1984 their third album, The Swing, debuted at #1 on the Australian charts and reached #52 in the US. The goal-kicking continued in 1985 when their fourth album, Listen Like Thieves, debuted at #1 in Australia and reached #11 in the US. Finally (actually, not technically finally, but their sales did decline afterward) their fifth album, Kick (1987), went on to become their highest selling album, selling nine million copies and reaching #1 in the US in January 1988. Through all these years the band toured constantly, upping scale from 300 gigs in Australian cities in 1982, to 86 US cities in 1983, and a world tour in 1984.

1985 to 1987 were particularly busy for INXS, to the extent that Michael needed to take time out from their schedule to fit in filming for Dogs in Space. In 1985 they performed at Wembley Stadium with Queen, and at the influential (but unusual) “Rockin’ The Royals” gig in Melbourne. At the end of 1986, when Dogs in Space was released, they were about to embark upon the “Australian Made” arena tour featuring the “cream of the crop” (Hutchence, 2001) of Australian

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3 Not a typo, this is his real name.
4 INXS gigs were sourced from the INXS “gigography” at http://inxsonline.com/gigography/, as well as The Age and TAGG: the alternative gig guide.
5 The Seaview Hotel is used here to refer to the George Hotel / Seaview Ballroom / Crystal Ballroom / Paradise Lounge, all within the same building.
bands. The nationwide arena tour was organised by Chris Murphy, staged through the summer of 1986 and 1987. INXS headlined with Jimmy Barnes, with whom they recorded the #1 promotional single “Good Times” (Barber, 1987).

**AFTER THE EARS**

The Ears dethroned quickly into two bands with more obvious mainstream ambitions, and occasional successes. The (male) members of The Ears had by October 1981 reassembled under a new name, Beargarden. After leaving The Ears, Cathy McQuade joined funk-pop Deckchairs Overboard. With a record deal and a strong following in Sydney, the band presented an enticing alternative for McQuade, and she relocated to Sydney, where the band had some minor hits between 1982 and 1985. Cathy also provided the “singing voice” for the ABC TV series, “Sweet and Sour” (McFarlane, 2017).

The first Beargarden gig was in October 1981, and shortly afterward they began to tour a slightly different circuit than The Ears, combining the inner city circuit with big suburban pubs like the Ferntree Gully Hotel and the Prospect Hill Hotel. The resemblance to INXS was not coincidental: Beargarden came to the attention of Chris Murphy when they both performed at the Seaview Hotel, and Beargarden subsequently signed to MMA and toured several times with INXS. They became the first band to sign to Virgin Records Australia, and even performed on Countdown in 1985, becoming (in the short term, at least) more widely known than “notorious laughing stock” The Ears (Ryan, 1982). Beargarden were active until 1987. As a less weird and slightly more ambitious version of The Ears, and a more weird and slightly less ambitious version of INXS, they achieved some successes but never reached the “legendary” status of The Ears. This was summed up, not so generously, in 2009 as such:

*By the time the film was released Sejavka had shaken off the punk image and had reinvented himself as a 80s new-waver in a highly digestible form in the band, Beargarden [sic]. He spent a lot of time in the music papers slugging off Lowenstein and Hutchence for producing a noxious caricature of his-self (the later admitted that he was indeed as affected, mumbling and unwashed as Hutchence depicted him).*  
*(Galvin, 2009)*

**HIGHS, LOWS, AND HOLLOWING OUT**

As well as being a highpoint of INXS’ career, 1987 was also the point at which INXS were aligned with mainstream success and corny nationalism:

> You would have to have been living in a barrel not to have noticed the nationistic tub-thumping about the qualifications of “Australian music” that has been going on in the past year - the failures of the jingoistic Australian Made tour notwithstanding. Sometimes I think no-one would bat an eyelid if INXS, Jimmy Barnes and Pseudo Echo formed a supergroup to record Advance Australia Fair for their next assault on the lucrative American market, with a dub mix of Waltzing Matilda on the B-side...

*(Lynden, 1987)*

After this highpoint (or low point, depending on opinion) the landscape of the Australian music scene changed. As Craig Mathieson (2000) described in The Sell-In, from the early 1990s major international record labels courted Australian bands from the independent / inner city scene, “plucking” them from obscurity and fast-tracking them to mainstream success. Chris Murphy was a factor in these industry changes, founding the rooArt record label in 1988, landing Australia’s first “alternative” #1 hit with Rancid’s “That Ain’t Bad” (1990).

During the 1990s rooArt and other smaller labels were absorbed into multinational record companies, so that in spite of outward changes of “alternative” music the global music industry reached a peak of agglomeration in the late 1990s (Hirac, 2012, Leyshon et al., 1995). This left a hollowed out structure in which the idea of being “picked” was the most realistic chance of success, rather than working a circuit. A key case in point was silverchair, a group of teenagers from Newcastle who won the evocatively titled “Pick Me” competition run by SBS-TV and Triple J (McFarlane, 1999).

The path taken by INXS, with such confidence, from local to global markets, presented an enticing story that others in the 1980s music industry (Milsom et al., 1986), as well as exerting influence further afield. The “Rock n the royals” showcase in 1985 was later regarded by Marcus Breen as a tipping point for the series of mostly-unsuccessful ventures by state and federal Labor governments to fashion the Australian music industry into an export industry and stable employer between 1986 to 1998, in which the idea of a national music industry ready to triumph on the global stage — “a minnow somehow bestowed with the mighty jaws of a ravaging shark” (Breen, 1999, p. 3) — was both imagined and then radically downsized.

Meanwhile, between the early 1980s and the mid 2000s, live music transitioned from a taken-for-granted facet of a wider music industry with sights on global domination, to a practice positioned as being in need of, and needing, saving. When reports of decline in the live music circuit began in earnest in the late 1980s, INXS was often cited as an example of what could be lost: the possibility of starting local and then “making it” to something bigger (Casimir, 1990).

Shane Homan’s work on Sydney live music (2000, 2003), drew attention to forces acting on music scenes at a local scale, with the overlapping policies and commercial interests which impacted upon the material circumstances of live music practices. High levels of expertise in the web of policies affecting the material and economic viability of live music have developed within the last decade, many from authors with an urban planning background (Beet, 2011, Burke and Schmidt, 2009, Burke and Schmidt, 2012, Homan, 2011b, Gibson and Homan, 2004, Homan, 2011a, Shaw, 2013a, City of Sydney, 2013, Shaw, 2013b).

**DOGS IN SPACE / POST PUNK REAPPRAISAL IN LATE 2000S**

In the wake of radical music industry changes in the 1990s and 2000s, the term “independent musician” has come to be something of a tautology, since the majority of musicians operating in the contemporary industry are independent (Hirac, 2012). The key characteristics of The Ears’ gigs in contrast to those of INXS (independent management, performing less frequently, and performing within a smaller geographical area, seldom in the suburbs) are now defining features of the wider music industry (Taylor, 2016). Similarly, between the 1980s and the 2000s, musicians in Australian incrementally performed less often, and closer to the city, even if aggregate live music numbers did not decline (Taylor, 2016).

In comparison to the norms of the 21st century Melbourne music scene, The Ears would just be “a band”, and not a particularly unsuccessful one, let alone a “laughing stock”. They had gigs more than once a month, a consistent (albeit niche) audience, a handful of film clips and written reviews, and appeared, at the very least, to have had fun. They were also, apparently, able to take the presence of inner city music venues, affordable Richmond share houses and exciting parties for granted, and had the interest value of imploding for personal reasons rather than simply from fatigue or external pressures: all luxuries by present standards (Taylor, 2016).

Dogs in Space was not a commercial success on its release, but it did go on to achieve cult status in subsequent decades. Decades later, the Melbourne post-punk scene received renewed attention as a historical example of a thriving local music scene (Donovan and Murfett, 2009, Lowenstein and Milburn, 2011, San Miguel, 2011, Carbone, 2014, O’Brien, 2010). It helped that some of its original participants had gone on to achieve long-term recognition: Nick Cave, Rowland S. Howard, Hunters and Collectors, Models, Dead Can Dance, Dave Graney, Paul Kelly, Boom Crash Opera, and more. The film was re-mastered and re-released in 2009 as part of the Melbourne International Film Festival. In addition, Lowenstein directed a documentary, We’re Living on Dog Food, looked back to the making of Dogs in...
Space, and to the post-punk scene itself. “Exciting” was a key word throughout: it was an exciting time to be in a band, an exciting time to be in a city. With fans of Dogs in Space now making pilgrimages to the Berry Street house (also has its own Facebook page), it appears now that the appeal of an inner city scene is as strong as the appeal of “making it” on a global scale.

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