

Musing on a Theory

After a recent spate of relatively ephemeral re-visitations of my early years as a cultural and political activist in Brisbane, I'm now presented with something quite substantial, a major 1973 article from *Semper Floreat* (the University of Queensland student newspaper) about the then Melbourne band *Mackenzie Theory*.

My first observation on reading this article is that it is, for me, about two theories, not one.

It is of course firstly about the exceptional music of *Mackenzie Theory*, and the very creditable attempt by the author of this article to analyse the theories behind the music, and to place them in a live-gig and road-trip context.

The second is my theory, a comment on the ever-fascinating contemporary diaspora of the political and cultural life of Brisbane in the 60s, 70s and 80s. For me, the comparison that springs to mind is one between the limited media and sophisticated organisations of those times, and the sophisticated media and limited organisations of today.

Here we have a two-thousand word article from a major student newspaper, one of the few influential forms of independent media then, about a Melbourne avant-rock band embarking on a less-than-break-even road trip to Brisbane and Toowoomba, and back via Sydney, to perform in a quite unique way with HARPO, one of Queensland's seminal oppositional-culture organisations that grew out of the Nicklin/Bjelke-Petersen era.

I am of course reading this article today on my computer. I'm in Melbourne, with the article sent to me from Los Angeles by filmmaker and period-archivist Peter Gray, that Peter obtained from recently-digitised records posted on the University of Queensland website. Comments then followed from fellow-filmmaker Bruce Dickson, also in the US. I will forward this material to HARPO-stalwart Bomber Perrier in Brisbane, as Peter will no doubt do to Rob Mackenzie, the band's guitarist and composer, who is in the USA as well.

So is this important cultural history, or just nostalgia? I think it's both.

Back to the main Theory then, and to the unknown author. When I read the article, it immediately made me think of rock journalism. This was written by a person who had a view of themselves as a writer, with a healthy cynicism, some referencing of rock history and theory, and a pretty good observational and writing style. Someone like Clinton Walker, I thought, even though I knew he was far too young. Rather amusing then to note Bruce referring to late-70s writing by Clinton, and in *Semper* too, in his comments on the article.

I don't recall doing the Warrego Highway for the HARPO / Mackenzie Theory gig in Toowoomba, although I'm certain I was involved in the Brisbane show the night before, and I did do another HARPO gig up there at another time. Even so, this article is very evocative of the times, and what we all did then, and I'm easily transported back – to the gig and to the road – as I read it.

However I did start to have my doubts when he (and I'm sure it's a he) wrote about the band "*not being attuned to where the kids are at*". That's pretty naff, even for 1973, and then his decidedly oldies' comment re not being able to understand "*how the band's music could equal political theatre*". Showing a tad too much bias-before-judgement, methinks.

So, not a person who sees themselves as young (old before their time, perhaps) and more a FOCO-esque cultural/political activist rather than a rock journalist; someone like Bob Daly, though he had left Brisbane by then. Perhaps Bomber, or *Semper* editor Alan Knight will remember.

However I do have some sympathy with the author's basic premise that, despite Bomber's unbridled enthusiasm, and Rob's lengthy explanation, the band's music, on it's own, did not clearly evoke the radical political position that the band members themselves espoused.

Like all great artists, it is essential that they follow their creative muse; that they stay true to their artistic vision, and hope that the audience will respond to their work as the creator/s intended. Hard for all artists; harder than for most musicians for a band that doesn't use lyrics.

I'm certain that many, even most of Mackenzie Theory's fans, myself included, had no real difficulty in perceiving a radical intent, particularly when the music was enveloped in the uber-blatant messages of HARPO's theatre pieces. Even so, that may have been a fairly individual experience.

This analysis becomes more challenging for the print-medium rock journalist, who has both the advantage of permanence and mass-distribution, but also the disadvantage of perpetual judgement. Not just because of the need to be cleverer than the next reviewer, the writer needs to be appropriately skeptical of what the artist and their supporters (and, where they can afford them, their publicist or manager) might say about them.

While this writer is right to question the zeal of Bomber and Rob, and the effectiveness of the communication achieved by the band's music, it is a cruel stretch to extrapolate a more radical sound from glam-rockers *T-Rex* just because he could understand the lyrics of one of their songs – "*Children of the Revolution*".

Mackenzie Theory and HARPO were the revolution; by comparison, *T-Rex* were just children.

John Stanwell
November 2011