‘Sheilas and Pooftas’: Hyper-Heteromasculinity in 1970s Australian Popular Music Cultures

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In 1978, a letter writer to Rock Australia Magazine (RAM) wrote disparagingly of pop music’s ‘sheilas and pooftas’, and positioned them as the antithesis of ‘Aussie rock and roll’. The colloquial language employed by the letter writer reveals a deeper fear and loathing of non-masculine (‘sheila’) and non-heterosexual (‘poofa’) influences on Australian popular music culture. Indeed, gender and sexuality were two key ways by which ‘Australianness’ in popular music during the 1970s was recognised, and this article seeks to unpack and problematise those nationalising demarcations. Using the analytical framework of performative hyper-heteromasculinity (specifically, the ‘ocker’ identity and variations thereof), this article will critically engage with artists including Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs, Skyhooks, and The Angels, in order to better understand the complex nexus of gender, sexuality, and cultural nationalism that defined much of 1970s Australian popular music.

Introduction

In 1978, a letter writer to Rock Australia Magazine (RAM) wrote,

At last Australia is coming up with some good recording artists. People like Midnight Oil, David Warner, the Angels, Cold Chisel etc. Not like this fuckin’ disco shit which is fit for sheilas and pooftas... There is Aussie rock and roll playing in the pubs these days.

Colloquial language and slurs aside, the letter writer articulates an under-examined aspect of Australian popular music of the 1970s; namely, the demarcative role of gender and sexuality in ascribing ‘Australianness’ to music cultures. Indeed, the 1970s provide a fascinating example of the fear and loathing of the non-masculine (‘sheilas’) and non-heterosexual (‘pooftas’) in music cultures recognised as ‘Australian’. This article will unpack the nexus of gender, sexuality, and cultural nationalism in 1970s Australian popular music through the shifting (and often simultaneous) interpretations of the ‘ocker’ performative identity, and the related theoretical framework of hyper-heteromasculinity. By tracing the ‘ocker’, the ‘anti-ocker’, and the ‘flamboyant ocker’ as performative (and, indeed, formative) identifying tropes in 1970s Australian popular music, this article will demonstrate the ways in which gender and sexuality acted as complex markers of ‘Australianness’ in these historically specific music cultures.

Defining Hyper-Heteromasculinity in Australian Popular Music

2 Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.
Before considering the role of the ‘ocker’ identity in Australian popular music, it is first important to outline, however briefly, the theoretical framework used to unpack this nexus of gender, sexuality, and cultural nationalism. This paper will employ the concept of ‘hyper-heteromasculinity’ drawn from Donald Mosher and Mark Sirkin’s socio-psychological theory of hypermasculinity.\(^3\) In 1984, Mosher and Sirkin described hypermasculinity as a particular type of aggressive macho personality, consisting of three components: \((a)\) callous sexual attitudes towards women, \((b)\) violence as manly, and \((c)\) danger as exciting.\(^4\) Four years after publishing this work, Mosher – this time with Silvan Tomkins – outlined the ways in which such a theory could be read as historically specific and, most interestingly, tied to ideas of national identity. He noted that hypermasculinity,

... links the historical events that served as prototypic scenes to a group or nation’s script. For example, the frontier... produced historical scenes still linked to the American ideological emphasis on rugged individuality.\(^5\)

The Australian context similarly sees an historically gendered interpretation of the ‘nation’s script’; a discourse of performative identity that has variously been expressed through the archetypal constructions of the larrikin, the ANZAC, the lifesaver, the sportsman, the bushman, the squatter, and – eventually – the ‘ocker.’\(^6\)

This ‘script’ of masculinity correspondingly shapes the construction of Australian rock music of the 1970s. As Carl Rhodes and Alison Pullen have noted, Australian rock music of this era was a reflection of a ‘cultural meaning of Australian masculinity.’\(^7\) Similarly, Shane Homan has defined the genre through its ‘masculine mainstream performative tradition.’\(^8\) Globally, rock music has been read as the stronghold of a specific performance of masculinity – what Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie notably termed ‘cock rock.’\(^9\) In this respect, the Australian context replicates this gendered demarcation, particularly – as Greg Young and Raymond Evans have detailed – in the juxtaposition between masculine (and nationalised) rock music and its non-masculinised (and subsequently less nationalised) pop music peer.\(^10\) Contrast to the predominantly female (or feminised) space of pop music,
Australian rock music has, in large part, been ‘produced as a music befitting of men and masculinity… marketed by its business producers to the hard drinking man understood as the other to ‘sheilas and pooftas’. Australian rock music, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, was a space within which the ‘script’ of a hyper-heteromasculine national identity was reiterated and reconstructed.

In adopting Mosher’s theory of hypermasculinity to explain these gendered discourses in Australian popular music, this paper makes one small adjustment, using the phrase ‘hyper-heteromasculinity’ to emphasise the role of predominant (hetero)sexualised discourses and performative ideas as linked to recognitions of ‘Australianness.’ Though Mosher’s work does include ‘callous sexual attitudes towards women’ in his working definition, the focus of his analysis is on violence in masculinity. Australian popular music cultures, I would argue, were far more sexualised than they were celebratory of violence; hence the reference to both ‘sheilas’ and ‘pooftas’ in the RAM letter of 1978.

The Ocker

In 1979, Harry Oxley rather harshly characterised the ‘ocker’ as, ‘a self-satisfied vulgarian, a beer-sodden slob uncouth in behaviour and thought… ‘one of the boys’ spending his time and money in the pubs.’ Existing studies of the ‘ocker’ have focused primarily on film and theatre, with more recent studies examining the ‘ocker’ in the world of advertising – spearheaded, as Robert Crawford noted, by John Singleton. The ‘ocker’ Crawford describes was part of that longer historical lineage of the archetypal ‘Australian’ (male), ‘from the bushman to the Digger and then on to the lifesaver.’ The ‘ocker’ as an identity has been explicitly linked with the larrikin identity of earlier Australia, a working-class masculinised discourse centred on an ‘authentic’ nationalised archetype – the ‘quintessential, typical Australian male.’

On the 12 July 1976, the ABC broadcast a Monday Conference debate between author and social critic Max Harris and advertising executive John Singleton. The debate centred around the portrayal (and indeed, the existence) of the ‘ocker’, an identity which host Robert Moore summarised as ‘fair dinkum Australians; the ones without pretence. ‘Ockerism’ is self-recognition and confident self-acceptance.’ It was a characterisation with which Singleton agreed, noting that the ‘ocker’ (though he questioned the specific phraseology) was ‘naturally Australian… the things that we enjoy naturally in Australia are football, beer, barbecues, surfing, it suits our way of life, it suits our natural heritage.’ Harris disagreed, citing – as he had in his book on the subject - the ‘ocker’ as ‘retrogressions… affectations which are artificial

12 Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.
15 Crawford, ‘Ockerdom in Adland Australia’, p. 2
18 ABC TV, ‘The Ocker Cult: Heritage or Heresy?’
proletarianisations — we’re back to the beer-swilling thing.’ 19 The very broadcast of such a debate highlights the dominant presence of the ‘ocker’ – authentic or affectation – in 1970s Australian culture. The ‘ocker’, then, also had a place in the popular music of 1970s Australia – so much so, that ‘ocker’ performance and behaviour was the key way through which rock music of this era was recognised as a discourse of ‘Australianness.’ In her book *Friday On Our Minds*, Michelle Arrow traced the development of the ‘ocker bloke’ and its relation to 1970s Australian pub rock. Discussing the archetypal ‘Australian male,’ Arrow wrote,

The burgeoning pub rock scene was also home to an ockerish popular culture that centred on beer and heavy guitar rock…The ocker, it seemed, was alive and well and enjoying his Angels gigs. 20

Connecting the ‘ocker’ identity to the Australian rock scene of the 1970s thus situates this performatif masculinity within a broader historical narrative that incorporates discourses of gender, sexuality, and national identity.

**The Ocker in Australian Popular Music: Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs**

The (tellingly) nationalistically-termed ‘Oz Rock’ is broadly defined as an Australian rock music tradition primarily situated within the 1970s and 1980s. 21 Though its musicological roots stretch back to the first wave of rock ‘n’ roll in 1950s Australia with artists such as Johnny O’Keefe, and continued into the 1990s with bands including You Am I and Powderfinger, the most blatant performance of the masculinised (and nationalised) ‘ocker’ identity emerged in the 1970s, with Australian rock band Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs. Originally a pop-rock beat band, by the early 1970s Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs had undergone numerous line-up changes, and emerged at the 1972 Sunbury Festival as an ‘ocker-fuelled’, hard rock act.

In 1974, Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs released their fifth, and what would end up being their final, studio album. Fabulously titled *More Arse Than Class*, the album was released at a moment of initial saturation of Pub Rock, and by a band which had, in a few short years, become one of its key practitioners. The release of *More Arse Than Class*, with its musical emphasis on hard rock twelve bar blues and irreverence, was touted as an embodiment of the ‘blokey’ Australian music form. So key were Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs to conceptualising Australian rock music of the 1970s that Jon Stratton used the band – and specifically, their 1972 hit song ‘Most People I Know (Think That I’m Crazy)’ to unpack the features of the broader music culture. Stratton described the culture as,

An Australian popular music sensibility which was fundamentally European-derived… It was a tradition that valued melody, musical

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linearity and lyrical clarity… Billy Thorpe’s self-penned ‘Most People I Know (Think That I’m Crazy)’... provided a template for Australian rock, and for... Oz Rock bands.22

Termed ‘Oz Rock’ by Stratton and Shane Homan, Australian rock of the 1970s has historically been recognised as the birthplace of an identifiable ‘Australian’ sound.23 Ian McFarlane, for example, drew links between the sound of the music and the ‘Australianness’ of Oz Rock bands, describing Cold Chisel as having ‘fused a combination of rockabilly, hard rock and rough-house soul’n’blues that was defiantly Australian in outlook.’24 This ‘defiantly Australian... outlook’, I would argue, came not from the sound of the music, but rather from the gendered discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality that infused the music culture. Garry Raffaele, a rock music writer with the Canberra Times, summed up this discourse when he noted,

More Arse Than Class proves that Thorpe is a rocker, plain and simple, irreverent and cocky, an anti-hero, a man for dancing and digging, nothing more pretentious than that.25

Raffaele thus defined Thorpe through the trope of the ‘ocker bloke’, and this sentiment was repeated in music writing about Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs throughout the early 1970s. In a 1970 profile of the band, Ed Nimmervoll emphasised its ‘ego thing,’ while Ian ‘Molly’ Meldrum’s two long-form profiles of Thorpe in the 1972 and 1974 editions of Go-Set charted the frontman’s progression from teen pop icon to ‘Australian blues rock’ legend.26 David N. Pepperell noted in 1973 that the new line-up of Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs was ‘not a rehashed band desperately trying to make do and look progressive,’ but rather a ‘blues rock sound explosion’ fronted by ‘an all-Australian rock musician.’27 By 1974, significant news copy was dedicated to outlining details of Thorpe’s brash attitude, proclivity for swearing, and experimentation with drugs and alcohol.28 The references to ‘rock’ music (particularly ‘blues rock’) were in themselves a gendered discourse, with this music culture (as already noted) recognised as a masculinised space. This was particularly apparent with the comparisons made, by Meldrum and others, between Thorpe’s early ‘pop’ career and his later, more ‘ocker’ rock incarnation. The connections made by Meldrum, Nimmervoll, and Pepperell between ‘blues rock’ and the ‘all-Australian’/’ego thing’ nature of the band further entrench the nexus of gender and cultural nationalism which defined Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs – and through them, the broader music culture of Oz Rock.

Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs played at each of the Sunbury Festivals, with their 1972 Sunbury headline set a debut of the new Aztecs line-up, and of the new Aztecs musical sensibility. The band now performed their material under the influence of alcohol, with long hair and a penchant for swearing (for which Thorpe

was arrested on numerous occasions). Though Thorpe and The Aztecs were well received by the crowd, other acts (particularly those who did not necessarily perform hyper-heteromasculinity) did not fare so well. Skyhooks' first Sunbury performance was met with homophobic chanting, while British rock band Queen's headline set in 1974 was blighted by booing and persistent (anti-gay and anti-British) chants of, 'go back to Pommyland, ya pooftas!' 29 The hyper-heteromasculinity of Sunbury extended to the stage, with no female artists on its lineup throughout its initial three year run. I argue, therefore, that the performance of the 'ocker' at the Sunbury Festival was also behavioural, and that the whole of the music culture (not just those on the stage) participated in a re-inscription of the 'ocker' identity and ideals, thereby demarcating this culture as masculinised and heterosexualised. Sunbury also points to another way in which the hyper-heteromasculinity of the 'ocker' identity was performed and reinscribed – the role of alcohol consumption in the prescription of the genre as 'Australian.'


It is impossible to fully understand the ‘ocker’ as a nationalised performative discourse in 1970s Australian rock music without also understanding the space from which this music culture emerged – specifically, the pub. In The Australian Pub, Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins, and Chris McConville assert,

The pub is an Australian icon... its history continues to be a part of the national culture...the pub has in no small way contributed to an Australian national identity.30

John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner’s Myths of Oz posits a more detailed explanation, noting that the ‘defining activity of the pub’ – the consumption of (often vast quantities of) alcohol – has a rich history of cultural meaning in Western, and indeed Australian, society.31 This cultural meaning, I would argue, takes on a nationalised discourse in Australia. Russell Ward, for example, drew links between the comparatively high level of alcohol consumption of Australians and the popular perception of the nation at large in his work The Australian Legend.32 Indeed, Fiske, Hodge and Turner noted the connection between the drinking culture of the pub and what they termed ‘radical egalitarianism’ – an idea found earlier in Craig McGregor’s 1966 Profile of Australia, which asserted that the public bar was the most egalitarian – and thus ‘Australian’ - space in the nation.33 The ‘Australian national identity’ of Kirkby, Luckins, and McConville’s analysis was one defined by the link between the pub, beer, and masculinity; and where the gendered nature of the pub space reinforced the nexus of gender, sexuality, and national identity.34 This multi-faceted

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space of ‘Australianness’ was echoed in Fiske, Hidge and Turner, who noted that ‘the dominant images of Australianness [are rooted in] the nexus between the pub, the music, the people, and the country.’\(^{35}\) The pub, then, was not just a conduit for nationalistic discourses; it was a nationalised discourse in its own right.

Just as the ‘ocker’ identity was firmly embedded within the pub space and the broader drinking culture (the ‘beer-sodden slob’\(^{36}\) and the ‘beer-swilling thing’\(^{37}\)), so too was Australian rock music of the 1970s characterised by its association with – and, indeed, emergence from – the pub as a site of dissemination and cultural discourse. Writing in 1987, Fiske, Hodge and Turner noted,

> One relatively new use of the Australian pub [is] as a venue for rock bands. Dating only from the early 1970s the association between the young audiences of rock music, the rock promoters, the bands and the pubs is now a structural feature of the music industry in Australia.\(^{38}\)

As the RAM correspondent declared in 1978, ‘There is Aussie rock and roll playing in the pubs these days.’\(^{39}\) It is undeniable that the 1970s saw the Australian pub opened up as a viable option for live music dissemination. Key to this spatial emergence was the extended trading hours afforded by the end of six o’clock closing (the ‘six o’clock swill’) across Australia by 1967. In a 2003 ABC TV feature on Pub Rock, Australian rock band Mental As Anything’s Greedy Smith explained,

> The six o’clock swill made possible the Pub Rock revolution in the late ’70s because they built all these pubs with enormous bars so that they could serve everybody beer for 10 minutes… once they changed the licensing laws… they had these big, empty bars so it was quite easy to go to… to the publican and ask him, “Could we play over here and take the door money?” That’s how we got started.\(^{40}\)

The end of the ‘six o’clock swill’ coincided with the emergence of a new audience for whom the pub had become, by the early 1970s, a practicable (and legal) meeting place. According to Fiske, Hodge and Turner, this new (young) audience for rock music\(^{41}\) was comprised of children of the ‘Baby Boomer’ generation, who had been raised on rock music and who had reached adulthood just as the Australian licencing laws changed to allow those vital extended trading hours. As Jon Stratton notes, the pub crowd of the 1970s was marked by a particular nexus of generation and class: specifically, the (male) working class subset of the Baby Boomer generation.\(^{42}\) It was this demographic that was characterised (or caricatured) by the ‘ocker’ identity, and

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\(^{35}\) Fiske, Hodge & Turner (eds.), *Myths of Oz*, pp. 22-23.

\(^{36}\) Oxley, ‘Ockerism’ p. 193.

\(^{37}\) ABC TV, ‘The Ocker Cult: Heritage or Heresy?’.

\(^{38}\) Fiske, Hodge & Turner (eds.), *Myths of Oz*, p. 17.

\(^{39}\) Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.


\(^{41}\) Fiske, Hodge & Turner (eds.), *Myths of Oz*, p. 17.

which encapsulated the intended audience for Oz Rock bands in the 1970s. The pub thus became the physical and temporal home for the ‘ocker’ bloke, and Pub Rock served as the soundtrack to this psycho-geographical cultural discourse.

The pub also directly influenced the identity and sound of Pub Rock bands. Like Mental As Anything and Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs. Midnight Oil began their career in the pub; as frontman Peter Garrett later reflected, ‘every Australian band comes from a different pub, and it’s there that they define what they’re about.’ With this remark, Garrett gestures to the idea of the pub space as a contributing factor in the identity formation of ‘Australian’ bands, a concept explored by both James Cockington and Shane Homan. In describing 1970s Australian rock music, Cockington ascribed it a ‘distinctively Australian phenomenon,’ centred on the ‘huge brick sheds with all the charm of a bus shelter, filled to the rafters with screaming shit-faced masses.’ Homan used the example of Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs to more explicitly detail the effect of space on sound, noting,

Technical capacities (great PA sound levels and increasingly sophisticated microphone techniques for drums, for example) were finally capable of matching performers’ on-stage intentions. Technically, bands such as The Aztecs redefined the limit of amplification and the size of sound systems... performances had to reflect the physicality of the music in a sonic experience that had to be felt as well as heard. The high decibel level of The Aztecs... involved the audience completely.45

The editors of the 1985 Rolling Stone Big Australian Rock Book took a similar view, describing the sound of Pub Rock as directly influenced by its environment.46 As Graeme Turner convincingly argued,

If we are to look for a ‘national character’ in our popular music we might do this best by looking at the context in which it was heard and played – that is, its cultural function as performance and event... [Australian music’s] distinctiveness is not so much constituted through its musical discourses as through its functioning in specific sites and spaces...47

The influence of the pub space on 1970s music culture served to imbue Oz (‘Pub’) Rock with the nationalised cultural meaning already historically present in the physical space.

So pervasive was the ‘ocker’ identity that it extended outside the confines of the hotel bar. In January 1972, the first annual Sunbury Pop Music festival was held on a private farm in Victoria. Held from 1972 until 1975, the Sunbury Festival ushered in the reign of pub rock. The inaugural Sunbury saw an estimated 35,000 people descend onto the farm for three days of rock music, sun, and – inevitably –

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45 Homan, ‘Losing the Local’, p. 36.
46 St John & Gerdener (eds.), The Big Australian Rock Book, p. 22.
beer. Part of the ‘Australianness’ of the festival was derived from its primarily Australian line-up of artists, and the fact that the festival was held over the Australia Day long weekend. The prevailing discourse of national culture, however, was found in reference to the festival attendee’s consumption of impressive quantities of alcohol. Though described and initially promoted as ‘Australia’s Woodstock’, Sunbury represented more accurately an end to the ideals of that festival. James Cockington has outlined the way that, ‘The Woodstock spirit of peace and love and bad brown acid was largely replaced here by VB, Tooheys and West End.’

After the first Sunbury Festival, the attending doctor’s report on the festivities for the *Australian Medical Association Gazette* noted the ‘incredible quantities’ of alcohol consumed by festivalgoers, with some 3,000 attendees treated by the on-site St. Johns Ambulance personnel. Most were treated for complications related to an over-indulgence of the cheap, on-site beer. Press reports from each of the festival’s incarnations focused on the brawls and bad behaviour of the ‘beer-fuelled’ crowds, while a cartoon in *The Herald* after the 1973 Sunbury festival demonstrated the mountains of beer cans which littered the site after the last performance. Tellingly, as Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs performed on the Sunbury stage, the alcohol-fuelled crowd chanted, with increasing enthusiasm, the three word phrase that characterised much of the festival atmosphere, and indeed pub rock more broadly: ‘suck more piss.’

The chanting of the Sunbury crowds also points to the ways by which the 1970s Australian music culture demarcated itself along gendered lines: namely, through a critique of the ‘anti-ocker’.

**Defining the ‘Ocker’ Through the Critique of the ‘Anti-Ocker’**

The ‘sheilas and poofitas’ described by the RAM letter writer was indicative of the discursive differentiation made by, and within, Oz Rock to non-hyper-heteromasculine music cultures. As previously noted, pop music in 1970s Australia served as the antithesis to the masculinised world of rock music, providing a space for female (and queer) participation not typically afforded by Oz Rock. During this era, pop music in Australia was dominated and disseminated by the music television show *Countdown*, whose queer host Ian ‘Molly’ Meldrum championed those acts who fell outside of the ‘ocker’ performative and behavioural identity. One such act was Swedish pop band ABBA, whose domination of the Australian pop scene at this time fed a wave of scathing critiques by rock fans.

Unsurprisingly, the most fervent anti-ABBA sentiments were to be found in the pages of Australian rock music press publications. At the end of 1976,
RAM magazine published an ABBA Dartboard for readers.\textsuperscript{57} As the then-editor Anthony O’Grady explained, the dartboard was a way for fans of Australian rock music to ‘relieve the frustration’ incurred by ABBA’s continued chart dominance.\textsuperscript{58} An article in TV Times magazine surveyed Australian rock musicians as to their opinions of ABBA, and Of’55 lead singer Frankie J. Holden summed up the dominant sentiment, noting ‘ABBA have proved you can succeed by being bland and sexless.’\textsuperscript{59}

Juke magazine was perhaps the most fervent in publishing anti-ABBA sentiments, with the magazine naming ABBA ‘Bore of the Year’ for 1976. In the same issue, writers of the List O’Mania section complained that ABBA were stopping ‘better’ bands from getting to the top of the charts; however, Juke still acquiesced to the marketing power of ABBA, putting the band’s image on the front cover of the issue within which the Swedes were so thoroughly trashed.\textsuperscript{60} Readers, too, articulated anti-ABBA sentiments: as one self-proclaimed ‘ABBA hater’ told Scream magazine, ‘I’m sick of ABBA… let’s hit them right out of the charts with some great Sherbet singles.’\textsuperscript{61} By the end of 1977, ‘ABBA hater’ got their wish, with The Sun gleefully noting the ‘boos for ABBA’ on an episode of Countdown, and hoped that ABBA’s stated decision not to come back to Australia for quite some time was ‘less of a threat than a promise.’\textsuperscript{62}

It would be easy to dismiss the local reaction against ABBA as one predicated on nothing more than citizenship; that ABBA’s Swedish nationality irrevocably marked the band as ‘non-Australian’ in terms of musical nationalism. Though the Scandinavian origins of ABBA undoubtedly played a part in the band’s exclusion from a nationalised discourse of Australian identity, I would argue that the vehement reaction against ABBA was indicative of more nuanced discourses of gender and sexuality, and of a broader attitude to pop music. The loathing of ABBA spoke not only to a fear of domination of the local scene by an international music act, but also to an underlying discourse of gender – specifically, hyper-heteromasculinity – as a nationalised construct. The publication of an ‘ABBA Dartboard,’ for example, is telling – a re-inscription of the activities of the pub space (playing darts) interwoven with the ‘anti-ocker’ discourse of ABBA. The dartboard reaffirmed the role of the pub as a space of and for an exclusionary dialogue around music; listening to Australian pub rock bands and drinking now came with a third opportunity to reaffirm a nationalised masculinity in music. The reviews of the shows which found the ABBA performances ‘boring’, and the Juke assertion of ABBA as ‘Bore of the Year’ emerged from a context of pub rock performances, within which an inebriated and subsequently often chaotic performative style spoke to a similarly rambunctious audience. By critiquing pop music, and thus asserting it as the ‘other’ to an allegedly hegemonic mode of performative hyper-heteromasculinity, Oz Rock practitioners, fans, and press outlets subsequently reinscribed their cultural (gendered) identity through the oppositional discourse of the ‘sheilas’ and ‘pooftas’ for whom pop music served as a (pop) cultural safe space.\textsuperscript{63}

The Flamboyant Ocker

\textsuperscript{57} RAM, ‘ABBA Dartboard,’ December 1976.
\textsuperscript{58} ABC TV, ABBA: Bang A Boomerang, January 30 2013.
\textsuperscript{59} F.J. Holden, quoted in TV Times, March 5 1977.
\textsuperscript{62} Juke, ‘List O’Mania’
\textsuperscript{63} Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.
This is not to say, however, that an aggressively hyper-heteromasculine performative identity or behavioural code was wholly unchallenged in the Australian popular music culture of the 1970s. Emerging almost simultaneously to the rise of the ‘ocker bloke’ in Australian rock music was a performative idea that I will term the ‘flamboyant ocker’: an often-theatrical (re)interpretation of the ‘ocker bloke’ that ever-so-slightly subverted the dominant notions of masculinity. A key case study of this queering of hyper-heteromasculinity in Australian popular music of the 1970s was Melbourne five-piece band Skyhooks, who combined a glam rock aesthetic with a more traditional ‘ocker bloke’ performative style in a new way.64

Described by Ian McFarlane as making an ‘enormous impact on Australian social life’, Skyhooks were one of the first Australian mainstream musical acts to deliberately subvert the prevailing hyper-heteromasculinity of Oz Rock.65 The band created a performative style that blurred the lines between traditional masculine identities and queer identities, while still performing within the structures of the ‘ocker bloke’ – the pub, the all-male line-up, and the guitar-based rock music. This style was described by Rhodes and Pullens as, variously, a ‘fracturing (of) masculinity’ and an ‘ironic representation of men’; a queering, then, of the hegemonic modes of performative hyper-heteromasculinity, but one which requires more historicisation than offered in Pullen and Rhodes’ analysis.66 In 1975, for example, Skyhooks performed their hit single ‘Horror Movie’ on Countdown (itself more commonly the space for pop musicians), and their performative aesthetic highlighted the flamboyance of the band. Frontman Graeme ‘Shirley’ Strachan performed in a brightly-coloured, low-cut jumpsuit, while guitarist Red Symons wore a red spacesuit, cape and platform heels. All members except for Strachan also sported deliberately conspicuous make-up, and during the song’s bridge and final chorus, a soft-focus image of Strachan was super-imposed over images of the rest of the band. Between the film technique, Strachan’s curly blonde hair, and the broadcast of such on Countdown, the performance mirrored imagery more commonly associated with pop princesses and female pop musicians.67

In line with their aesthetic, Skyhooks’ lyrical content similarly queered hegemonic notions of heterosexuality. In 1974, the band released ‘You Just Like Me Cos I’m Good In Bed.’ Later infamous for being the first song played on the new Double J radio station, ‘You Just Like Me Cos I’m Good In Bed’ depicted a male protagonist as a ‘damsel in distress’ character, at the mercy of the whims of a female sexual aggressor, with Strachan singing, ‘Well I’ll meet you in the pub at two minutes to ten / You’re all ready to go / Six bottles of beer and a sneer on your face / I’d run but I’m much too slow.’68 The aggressive heterosexuality of Pub Rock was thus flipped; interpersonal relationships surrounding heterosexual sex were effectively queered in order to place the woman in a position of power and authority. The band also directly addressed queer identity: in the song ‘Toorak Cowboy’, for example, Strachan sang,

64 Young, ‘So slide over here’, p. 180.
66 Rhodes & Pullen, ‘Commercial Gender’.
He dyes all his grey ends
And he’s got lottsa gay friends
He is twenty-nine if he’s a day
And he wears tinted glasses
And his girls have got tight arses
And if he’s camp he wouldn’t like to say®

Skyhooks’ 1976 album title *Straight In A Gay, Gay World* also presented a similarly satirical examination of 1970s gay culture.® This queering of masculinity in Skyhooks did not necessarily permeate the entire band. Frontman Graeme ‘Shirley’ Strachan cut a more traditionally masculine figure than Symons et al; Strachan, then, was comparatively labelled ‘ocker’ in the context of Skyhooks, and indeed, the title of Jeff Apter’s 2012 biography of Strachan included the phrase ‘legendary larrikin.’® Comparing Strachan to Rod Stewart, Apter elaborated on his characterisation of the frontman as a ‘larrikin,’ noting,

There was little separating Shirl from his fans… he never placed himself above them. At heart, he was a bloke from the suburbs… Shirley chugged beer with the boys… wore overalls… and greeted the faithful with an emphatic, “G’day, wackers!”… all Strachan hoped to be was a normal bloke pulling a wage, but to his thousands of fans he was always going to be… a working-class hero.®

It was a sentiment shared by Strachan’s Skyhooks bandmate Greg Macainsh, whose Foreword to Apter’s biography contended that Strachan was a ‘rigdy-didge Aussie bloke… rambunctious, tireless, extroverted, driven, laidback, perfectionist, envelope pusher, good chap, bad boy, straight shooter, jester, team player, yachtsman, frontman.’® Strachan, then, was the archetypal flamboyant ‘ocker’ – a performative trope that saw a queering of masculinity within the historical lineage of the ‘ocker bloke.’

Skyhooks and Strachan were not the only examples of the flamboyant ‘ocker’ in 1970s Australian rock music. According to the *RAM* letter writer, The Angels were a band that embodied the traits of ‘Aussie rock and roll’ and represented an antithesis to the music preferred by ‘sheilas and pooftas.’® Certainly, much of the band and their broader music culture conformed to the ‘ocker bloke’ performative and behavioural idea, with a hard rock sound and a band primarily filled by the ‘ocker’ persona. Frontman Doc Neeson, however, proved a slight exception to this rule. In an episode of *Australian Story*, which examined his career, Neeson explained the performative style of The Angels as drawn from the Arts, noting,

I used a lot of the ideas that I’d picked up from film school and it gave The Angels a really different look. And I also had this kind of dramatic

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® Apter, *Shirl*, pp. xiii-xvi
® Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.
alter ego or persona or whatever you call it - Doc. And Doc could do anything, because I gave him permission to do it.\textsuperscript{75}

Neeson’s theatrical persona manifested in his on-stage sartorial decisions - elaborately-patterned scarves, overcoats, three-piece suits, and the occasional hat. Expanding on this idea in \textit{Australian Story} was The Angels’ former manager, John Woodruff, and The Angels’ drummer, Graham ‘Buzz’ Bidstrup. Woodruff and Bidstrup noted,

WOODRUFF: He would come along to the 120 degree heat in the venue dressed in 3 overcoats and bandaged to the hilt just to say to the crowd, well you reckon you’re hot? Check this.

BIDSTRUP: Then he’d remove the jacket, the waistcoat, the tie. The shirt would come out. So by the end of the show he was dripping wet and a mess.\textsuperscript{76}

Neeson not only dressed in a distinctive style whilst on stage, but he also used the disintegration of the costume as a performative tool. Costuming, then, was a key part of Neeson’s act; indeed, the theatrical nature of a planned and executed sartorial element to the performance indicates a non-traditional masculinity evident in The Angels’ theatre. It is important to note, however, that this blurring – or queering – of hyper-heteromasculinity was primarily performative, and did not always translate to the broader music culture. In April 1976, The Angels released their first big single. Entitled ‘Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?’ the song combined Pub Rock musicality with a lyrical sentimentality, with frontman Neeson singing, ‘I’ve got to stop these tears / That’s falling from my eye / Go walk out in the rain / So no one sees me cry.’\textsuperscript{77} The song was quickly modified by Australian Pub Rock audiences: in response to the eponymous chorus phrase, pub audiences began to shout back, ‘No way / get fucked / fuck off.’ On the audience-instigated profanity, Neeson noted,

In a way I’m really delighted to hear that because it’s Australian audiences making a song their own. And from the point of view when the band first started, we were trying to write songs for Australian audiences, they’ve made it their own in a way I’d never have thought possible.\textsuperscript{78}

The ‘Australianness’ of ‘Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?’ came, then, from not only the recognised cultural nationalism of The Angels, but also through the re-appropriation of a lyrical sentimentality within a more aggressive discourse. Neeson, noting that he did not believe ‘Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?’ could be made (or recognised) as ‘Australian’ on its own is telling; it suggests that romantic sentimentality (both lyrically and in a performative space) was not a defining trope of 1970s Pub Rock. Though Neeson was characteristic of the flamboyant ‘ocker’, the behavioural cultural nationalism of the music culture at large did not reiterate this queering of defined and demarcated gender boundaries.

\textsuperscript{76} ABC, ‘A Very Good Rascal,’.
\textsuperscript{77} The Angels, ‘Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?’ Mushroom Records, 1976.
\textsuperscript{78} D. Neeson, quoted in ABC, ‘A Very Good Rascal,’.
The flamboyant ‘ocker’ thus neither wholly embraced nor completely rejected the performative hyper-heteromasculinity of ‘Australian’ music. Rather, this identity used the existing structures of hyper-heteromasculinity (the pub, rock music, and the all-male line-up) as a framework within which to queer the gendered demarcations of the predominant music culture. Artists like Doc Neeson and ‘Shirley’ Strachan thus problematised the notion of a hegemonic mode of hyper-heteromasculinity in 1970s Australian popular music, suggesting instead a much more nuanced reading of its articulations of masculinity, identity, and ‘Australianness.’

**Conclusion**

When the RAM letter writer wrote of ‘sheilas and pooftas’ versus ‘Aussie rock and roll’ they articulated an existing dichotomy evident within Australian popular music of the 1970s – one hinged upon a performative and behavioural hyper-heteromasculinity.\(^79\) The fear and loathing of the non-masculine (‘sheilas’) and the non-heterosexual (‘pooftas’) is evidenced by the author’s choice of colloquial rhetoric. What is less evident, however, is the crucial role played by hyper-heteromasculinity in ascribing ideas of ‘Australianness’ to popular music of this era. The history of rock music as a masculine mode of cultural engagement must be read simultaneously with – and indeed, as part of – a broader historical narrative of the archetypal Australian (male) in the nation’s popular culture. In doing so, it then becomes possible to unpack the ways by which heterosexuality and masculinity were performed, behaved, and recognised as constituting ‘Australianness.’ This nexus of gender, sexuality, and cultural nationalism is particularly evident in Oz (Pub) Rock, where discourses around rock band Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs and the pub as a performative space indicate the role that hyper-heteromasculinity played in the recognition of that music culture as ‘Australian’ – as ‘Oz.’ Similarly demarcative was the construction of this nationalised identity through the fervent critique of the ‘other’ – that is, the ‘sheilas and pooftas’ of pop music.\(^80\)

But to assume a static dichotomy of nationalised hyper-heteromasculinity in 1970s Australian popular music is to over-simplify the nature of this complex nexus. As Skyhooks and The Angels demonstrate, the ‘ocker’ identity lent itself to a notable and simultaneous queering, with the ‘flamboyant ocker’ identity raising questions as to the hegemonic nature of performative masculinity in popular (and particularly rock) music. Masculinity in Oz Rock, as Rhodes and Pullen have argued, cannot be read as static, but must rather be examined as a complex series of gendered performances and behaviours.\(^81\) Reading this nuance within the broader tradition of the ‘ocker’ identity further historicises this idea, and what emerges is the realisation that gender, sexuality, and cultural nationalism form a nexus far more nuanced than the RAM letter writer might admit.

\(^79\) Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.
\(^80\) Letter to RAM, December 1978, p. 121.
\(^81\) Rhodes & Pullen, ‘Commercial Gender’, p. 46.