

# So Sharp You Could Bleed: Sharpies and Artistic Representation, A Moment in the Seventies History of Melbourne

Peter Beilharz and Sian Supski

## Abstract

How does popular culture change? And, how can it also be understood as creative, in the sense traditionally associated with art as the avant-garde? This chapter uses the experience of the dominant youth gang in Melbourne in the seventies, the Sharpies, to open up such questions. Experience and expression are primary here: for the Sharpies were a tribe of ‘well-dressed thugs’, but they also created a culture and its own aesthetic forms, in fashion, dance, music, and the techniques of the body that animate everyday life. More, the innovative patterns of their performative working class culture attracted and even seduced or captured some leading middle-class artists, in particular, rock guitarist Lobby Loyde and feminist photographer Carol Jerrems. Sharpie aesthetics came to be a cultural dominant in Melbourne in the seventies. Sharpies played a significant part in the everyday life of the city and in the dynamics of its uses of public space and then evaporated, the intensity of the experience remaining in this music, these photographs, in memory, testimonial and in these performative shadows and echoes of the city.

## Introduction

Who were the Sharpies, the dominant youth gang in Melbourne in the seventies? How were they represented, and how do they represent themselves? The primary purposes of this chapter are given to the recovery of memory and experience, to the centrality

of the oral and visual in everyday life, of innovation, reaction and violence in the fibre of a city and a culture like Melbourne's in the seventies. The point of this chapter is not to contribute to any particular sub-field of sociology, such as youth or subcultures, but to contribute to sociology in general by narrating some glimpses of this period and its cultures through the media of two particular carriers or actors, Lobby Loyde and Carol Jerrems. These middle class actors represented the Sharps, in different and difficult ways, though their relations with these working class boys were also clearly constructed in fields of tension.

Who were the Sharpies? Sharpies were a significant part of Melbourne culture, especially in the early 1970s. So-called for their fashion sense, 'sharp' in contrast to the baggy formlessness of hippie culture, it was also 'sharp' in the other sense. Sharpie culture was violent, territorial, and other-directed. It cut. It was not conspicuously racist, not skinhead, in this regard at least passingly multicultural. But it was based on claims to urban space as in the 'Clocks' area of Flinders Street Station, its central meeting place ('meet you under the clocks') and iconic symbol the centrally located late Victorian railway centre of Melbourne. It was also constituted against others, 'girly longhairs', sometimes surfies. It was working class and largely masculinist, though some images of its women have also been captured by ex-Sharps like Australian actor and comedian Magda Szubanski.

The Sharpies were mostly white, working class youths who wore distinctive clothing – knitted cardigans and jumpers, known as 'Connies' manufactured locally in the textile companies located in the nearby inner city suburb of Brunswick. They wore tight jeans (and flares, Staggers brand, for special occasions). They had tattoos and

distinctive haircuts, short with a little tail, often like Lobby Loyde's. For Sharpie boys fashion was Italian, snazzy. For girls, it was similar, cardigans, short denim skirts, flat heels to run in, cork soles to parade.

The Sharps were outer suburban in origin, apprentices or store workers, tribal, regional. They hunted in packs, as Mark Feary observes

... the Sharps were as concerned with busting heads as they were with looking good. Sharps expressed their difference through a well dressed thuggery that was designed to intimidate by thumbing its nose at mainstream conventions of dressing and behaviour. A lot of the time, violence and bullying was the defining experience of being a Sharp.<sup>1</sup>

Views as to the centrality of violence to Sharp culture vary. Some recent analysts, like Paul Oldham, argue that the Sharps were themselves victims, of moral panic.<sup>2</sup>

How to place Sharpie culture, historically and geographically? Some, like Julie Mac, date Sharps from 1963 to 1984.<sup>3</sup> Others, like McIntyre, date Sharps from 1966, after Stylists, Mods with short hair or in the Melbourne case short top and sides, long back, razor cut.<sup>4</sup> Taylor discerns four distinct periods of Sharp culture, 1964-1970, 1970-1972, 1972-1976 and 1976-1980.<sup>5</sup> Sharp culture was not limited to Melbourne: it had a powerful presence in Sydney where the La Perouse Sharps were an Indigenous gang, and in industrial Anglo migrant parts of Perth around Kwinana.<sup>6</sup>

There is an emergent print literature and web literature or archive on Sharpie culture, to which we seek to contribute, in this context via two life moments, those of guitarist Lobby Loyde and photographer Carol Jerrems. Both these artists became connected with Sharpies; both, in different ways, played with and to their danger. They leave us

with two data sets to interpret the Sharps – musical and photographic. Then we consider the testimonial or memoir literature which now, retrospectively, has been generated by Sharps or ex-Sharps themselves.

## **Lobby Loyde**

Lobby Loyde was born John Basingdon Lyde at Longreach, Queensland in 1941. His guitar work covers the entire span of rock music from Ventures style covers to the rhythm and blues of The Purple Hearts to the psychedelia of the Wild Cherries, Chicago blues with the Aztecs, Sharp music (or was it?) with Coloured Balls, progressive rock with Southern Electric and so on.<sup>7</sup> The moment that concerns us here is that of his intersection with Sharpie culture. Lobby and the Aztecs were a hippy band, and Lobby's re-formed Wild Cherries, captured on film for the ABC's *GTK (Get to Know)* in 1971, still look and play like a hippy band – laid back, loud but gentle in their rendition of his instrumental classic, 'GOD' (Guitar Over Drive).<sup>8</sup> Lobby plays chords, no notes even though his reputation was as a note-player, on a Les Paul Professional, 'George', which replaced the 'Yellow Canary', his long treasured Fender Jaguar, stolen from a club.

The earlier rendition of GOD, captured on the pathbreaking ABC TV show *GTK*, was a kind of hippy anthem in the making. It moves gently but powerfully, in 3/4 rather than the 4/4 which characterizes the later gushing Sharpie version. Its mood is oceanic, gently climatic rather than ferocious. This performance is roughly contemporaneous with *Lobby Loyde plays with George Guitar*, same rhythm section, Ted Toi and John Dick playing Hendrix power trio tunes but in unmistakable syrupy

‘woman tone’ (Eric Clapton) of the Gibson (Gibson, plus Marshall amplifier; on the Gibson, volume right up, tone off).

In one interview Lobby, referring to it as ‘Guitar Overdose’, claimed that GOD was conceived as a parody of the guitar hero, notes like confetti, ‘look at me’. ‘It was based on a piece of Beethoven, ... using minor chords against one note, using the rising fifths against the E note. You can’t really hear the finger picking because it’s based on the circular fifths that keep peaking’ (Coloured Balls, *Ball Power* liner notes). On this occasion he observes that the capacity to generate harmonics is directly related to playing on a big stage. He tells Clinton Walker that GOD was,

a kind of Beethoven, Wagnerish ... improvisation where you’re working in a very simple series of five or six open mode lines. ... allowing it to build and build and build and all the harmonics to ring together and the harder you push it and the louder it gets the more it starts to create additional notes and sounds as all the instruments are playing lots and lots of open notes.<sup>9</sup>

Lobby refers to Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*, and observes that it all sounds very Germanic. Certainly it all sounds very romantic, and it is clearly creative and innovative, conceived and led by the musicians on the stage and not by the audience.

Probably the best known Coloured Balls version of GOD is that recorded at the second, 1973 Sunbury festival, the Australian after-echo of Woodstock. It can be heard on *Ball Power*, but is more meaningfully encountered as the dropped-over soundtrack to Greg Macainsh’s short 1974 documentary on the Sharpies entitled *Sharpies*.<sup>10</sup> Macainsh uses about four minutes out of sixteen minutes recorded on vinyl. Macainsh, then emerging as bass player in the legendary Melbourne glam rock band Skyhooks, was part of the same scene as Carol Jerrems, though contact between

them seems limited. Jerrems photographed the Hooks when they rose to national prominence from 1974 and did the cover work for the book project by Jenny Brown, *Skyhooks: Million Dollar Riff*. Macainsh was taken by Sharpie culture, following some Sharpie fashion, haircuts, and noting in sociological register that what was striking about the Sharps was their outer sense of unity: “I shot the film when I was at Swinburne [Technical College] but I didn’t hand it in because of Skyhooks taking off. I thought Sharpie was visually very interesting, very stylish, and I don’t think there’s been a youth cult since that’s been that unified.”<sup>11</sup>

Macainsh opens the film questioning a group of Sharps. “What do you think of Melbourne?” “It’s a hole.” “What sort of people do you like?” “Sharpies.” Then round the circle, “who cuts yer hair?” “Grant.” “Who cuts yer hair?” “Grant.” Then he asks of Grant, “what do you do”; he’s an apprentice hairdresser. Footage follows of boy Sharps and girls, looking tough in Lobby Loyde t-shirts, smoking, showing tattoos, glaring at the camera or clowning, single sex dancing, driving dodgems, necking, playing knuckles, fooling around for the camera, performing, being led away from their scene at the Melbourne Showgrounds by police in pith helmets.

Lobby was, as the t-shirts indicate, the music hero of the moment. And so he shifts his views, apparently, on the relation between audience and artists. Now, after the Sharps, the audience calls out the music. “Okay, a guy sits in a little back room and comes up with a new revolutionary form of jazz. He goes to a little club and maybe he finds an audience, but that’s one out of ten. I reckon that nine out of ten is people responding to their environment.”<sup>12</sup>

This is not to suggest that Lobby somehow morphed from purist to populist. But across the path of his life, along with GOD and “Rock Me Baby”, he was a lifelong sucker for “Johnny B Goode”, though it is also striking that the earlier Balls still persisted in playing blues standards such as “Help Me”. Of course, the performance of culture respects rules only in the general sense, whether this is in terms of dress style or musical repertoire. But here are also plainly broader trends at work: from hippy, against hippy to Sharps, to glam and punk.

Two years later Lobby had left the Aztecs, shifted from head to body music, loud and fast, one-two-three-four! and his new band, Coloured Balls, had secured a new, Sharpie audience. In the longer run, the audience captured the band, and it all came unstuck.

Lobby relates the story of getting his hair cut, via the work of Murray Engelheart.

After stopping off in [provincial city] Albury during a tour the Balls looked the Sharpie part too, with closely shaved hairstyles that, according to Loyde, were actually more a reactive measure than conforming to the appearance of their fans. ‘We all had really long hair at this point in time and everyone used to give me that fucking [you look like a] girlie thing, you know? We were pretty stoned this day – we’d smoked a few – and we passed a barber. It was a genuine bush barber and it had the striped pole out the front and the whole caper. There were all these guys in there in short back and sides with virtually no hair anyway waiting for a hair cut. And I thought, hmm, I think I’d like to go in there and sit with the boys, and all these guys were just so bloody uncomfortable. And as [the barber] trimmed each ones hair they all made loud remarks about long-haired poofers.

‘By the time I got in the chair [the barber] looked at me and said, “What do you expect me to do with that?” I said, “Get the finest clippers you’ve got, start at the forehead and stop half way down the back of the neck and just take everything else off.” And this guy with great relish grabbed the clippers and I had to put my hand at the back to stop him ...

‘I walked back and poked my head through the car window and I swear to God two of the guys in the band screamed! I was totally bald except for the long bits ... I looked like fucking Cousin It or something. By the time we got to Sydney and Brisbane I was going “Fuck man! Are you guys weird or not?” ... ’

The band’s new look gave them a warrior-like appearance that fitted well with their anti-establishment stance ...

Lobby Loyde: ‘Everybody was so righteous and so on the money, and “Hey, love, man”, and nobody was playing fucking rock n’roll! Every prick had really long hair and dressed flamboyantly in pretty, pretty shirts and flares and lovely sandals and played comfortable, naturally stained Les Pauls and Strats all in beautiful woods with a very casual manner. To me, Coloured Balls was the antithesis of all that.’<sup>13</sup>

However it happened exactly, a process of identification between performers and audience resulted. Keen to take a distance from violence, Lobby defended at least the idea of Sharpie culture, as a counterculture or alternative culture within and against the hippy counterculture. In an interview with Andra Jackson in *Digger* Lobby defends Sharp culture as innovative, reactive, different, representing the underprivileged. He rehearses the idea that music is therapeutic: “we [the band] are not doing anything [to bring out violence] ... we are not doing any good ... we are only relieving a momentary tension. The same as a football match. But football has an aggressive connotation whereas there is no violent connotation in music.”<sup>14</sup> Like his careful analyst Paul Oldham, Lobby Loyde viewed the media fuss around the Sharps as exaggerated, a beatup. Yet the identification of band, tribe and violence became so extreme that he disbanded Coloured Balls and escaped to London.<sup>15</sup>

A similar process, on an even grander scale occurred with the cult around Billy Thorpe and the post-Lobby Aztecs. Various participants have associated the first Sunbury Rock Festival, in 1972, with the Nuremburg rallies. ‘Suck more piss’ became a mantra for mindlessness, and again, after a point, Thorpe escaped, this time to Los Angeles. Like Lobby and the Balls, he had helped create a monster.

What happened to the Sharps? They grew up, got married, or else became punks or glams, adding leather, lace, lingerie, metal, Bowie. Were they larrikins? Bogans? The local version of Dandies? Just boys (mainly)? They were gangs with a high sense of

style and toughness, a strong sense of territory and ‘fuck-you’, this is our turf, yet they also intersected at different moments with the hippy or bohemian impulses of the middle class, art school scene in Melbourne. They loved Lobby Loyde, but also later followed Skyhooks, the band for which Macainsh both played and wrote. These were countercultures that met, to collide, negotiate, blur, and pass on. Carol Jerrems’ work opens another window of experience onto this culture of danger and exhilaration.

### **Carol Jerrems**

Carol Jerrems was born in Ivanhoe, Melbourne in 1949. She attended Heidelberg High School in the early 1960s and then in 1967 majored in photography as part of a three-year Diploma of Art and Design (Honours) at Prahran Technical College. Her teacher was the Australian filmmaker and photographer Paul Cox. In the late 1960s the College became known as Melbourne’s most innovative art school. She graduated from the College in 1971 and completed a Diploma of Education at the State College of Victoria, Hawthorn in the same year. As elsewhere in this period the art school scene was a crucible of creation.

In the same year as she graduated from the State College of Victoria works by Jerrems were acquired by the Department of Photography at the National Gallery of Victoria. She was in prestigious company. Other photographic works acquired at the same time included those by Paul Cox (her teacher and mentor), Geoffrey Smith, Max Dupain (known most famously for the iconic *The Sunbathers*) and John Cato.

In 1972 another influential maverick Australian photographer, Rennie Ellis, opened Brummels Gallery of Photography in South Yarra. Ellis selected Jerrems’ work for

the inaugural exhibition entitled, “Two Views of Erotica: Henry Talbot/Carol Jerrems” held from 14 December 1972 to 21 January 1973. Ellis had a significant impact on Jerrems’ work. He was a strong supporter of her work, as evidenced by the inaugural exhibition at Brummels, and he continued to exhibit her work throughout her lifetime. There are a number of photos of Jerrems taken by Ellis that represent the spirit of the times and display the adventurousness of Jerrems, in particular the nude shots. Ellis was also inspired by the Sharpies, taking one of the earlier photos of a group of Sharpies at the Myer Music Bowl.<sup>16</sup>

In 1973 Jerrems began teaching at Heidelberg Technical College. The students came from a range of backgrounds, many were Indigenous Australians and from disadvantaged families who lived in the nearby housing commission flats (once part of the 1956 Olympic Village). It is here, in 1974, that she meets the Sharpies, in particular, Mark Lean, Jon Bourke and their friends. The Sharpies accepted Jerrems because she opened another world to them, both in the classroom and the surrounding suburbs. She had a car and would often take them on the weekend to the local Banyule Reserve along the Yarra River where she photographed them. There is a series of photos taken over a period of time that show the Sharpies as young men ‘mucking’ about. The photos are playful, full of irreverence and capture some of the danger that so attracted Jerrems to the Sharpies.<sup>17</sup>

Jerrems became increasingly fascinated with the group. She was not afraid of danger. It might be suggested that Jerrems thrived on the idea of danger, or certainly the intensity of the thrill. More importantly, she valued the insight that the boys offered her, which was a central tenet of all her work – she valued those who were

traditionally thought of as disadvantaged or underprivileged. In an interview in 1974 she said, “The world is in a mess ... You either drop out or help to change it. I want to focus on the underdogs, the underprivileged of Australian society and all the things that people don’t want to talk about or know about.”<sup>18</sup> One way in which she does this is by concentrating on faces. She stated, “A face tells the story of what a person is thinking. The eyes reveal the suffering.”<sup>19</sup> Her dominant method is full frontal, eyes to the lens.

“Vale St” taken in 1975 over a number of hours in a suburban backyard in St Kilda – is all about faces, but also bodies.<sup>20</sup> It is one of the most iconic photos in recent Australian photography. The boys – Mark Lean and Jon Bourke – had not previously met Catriona Brown, a friend of Carol’s. Through the afternoon they relax, smoke dope and Jerrems convinces them to take their tops off. Catriona’s pose is representative of the social mood of the 1970s – women’s new found liberation. The boys are in the background, dark but hesitant. The naked breasts of Catriona Brown are juxtaposed with the boys’ bare torsos. Brown wears an ankh necklace – the ancient symbol of women and power revived as a hippy logo. All three engage with Carol (or with the audience). The powerful image is also one of contrast – “black and white, male/female, light/shade, soft/hard.”<sup>21</sup> The delicateness of the ivy, the tattoos and the breasts, contrast with the boys’ muscled bodies, menacing, yet vulnerable stares.

This iconic image is in contrast to “Mark’s Game of Rape” taken earlier in 1975. The images are threatening and evoke danger. The story of these images is complex.

Jerrems had gone with the boys to the Yarra River around Heidelberg. She had bought

them a carton of beer, and in exchange they agreed to be photographed (a pattern of behaviour that had been in place for some time). They enjoyed Carol's company and she was increasingly drawn to Mark Lean. On this day the boys had devised a game of drawing straws: the boy with the longest straw would go off with Carol. The boys contrived that Mark would be the one. Carol agreed to the game. The photos are menacing, particularly the one where Mark holds the straw and is looking directly into the camera.

Kathy Drayton, the filmmaker of a documentary on Jerrems, *Girl in a Mirror* suggests that "Mark's Game of Rape" had repercussions for all involved. She states: "This was a game that had been pushed too far unsettling the relations of power between student and teacher, younger boy (sixteen) and older woman (twenty-five). But its impact did not destroy the trust or the creative relationship between the photographer and her models."<sup>22</sup>

A few months later the iconic "Vale St" was taken. Drayton further suggests that Jerrems created an "intimate frisson between herself and her subjects."<sup>23</sup> This is clearly seen and experienced by the audience in the "Rape Game" series and "Vale St". This style of photography was one that Jerrems had increasingly moved towards, a collaborative and creative process which "emphasised ... the subjects' acknowledgement of her presence. By gazing directly into the lens, hamming it up for the camera, or striking a pose, the subjects of Jerrems' portraits of the mid-70s reveal the collaborative nature of her working method."<sup>24</sup>

The photos also illustrate a tension between the sexual liberation of the 1970s and the complexity of class, masculinity and femininity. Drayton says of this time: “On the one hand, women were called to adopt an active unencumbered sexuality as part of the sexual revolution; on the other, they were rallied by feminist challenges to the unreconstructed misogyny that underpinned so much of masculine response to this revolution.”<sup>25</sup>

Jerrems clearly understood and reflected the sexual and gender politics of the 1970s. Germaine Greer had published *The Female Eunuch* in 1970 and Jerrems had a copy of de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Her “increasing politicization, particularly with regards to gender” is illustrated most powerfully in *A Book About Australian Women* published by Outback Press.<sup>26</sup> The book had 131 images of women taken by Jerrems between 1968 and 1974.<sup>27</sup> They tell a story of Australian women. The book was launched by Elizabeth Reid, the first women’s advisor to the Federal Whitlam Government. It included images of Grace Cossington-Smith, Wendy Saddington, Kate Fitzpatrick, Linda Jackson and Beatrice Faust, among others. It also included, in keeping with Jerrems’ desire to bring the underprivileged to the fore, photos of Indigenous Australian women in a section entitled “Reconciliation”, Kath Walker, Bobbi Sykes and Syvanna Doonan. Jerrems said of indigenous Australians, “they are the biggest underdogs and the most underprivileged people in Australia.”<sup>28</sup> Natalie King, the curator of the most recent exhibition of Jerrems’ work, *Up Close*, suggests that Jerrems was “one of the first photographers to portray urban Aboriginal people in an empathic and empowering way.”<sup>29</sup>

The sentiment expressed below by Jerrems can be equally related to her desire to capture or represent those who are marginalized in society, for example, the Sharpies. Jerrems said of *A Book About Australian Women*, but which also operates as a motif throughout all her work:

The photographs are mostly portraits of artists ... painters, sculptors, writers, poets, filmmakers, printmakers, photographers, designers, dancers, musicians, actresses and strippers. Others include women's liberationists, Aboriginal spokeswomen, activists, revolutionaries, teachers, students, dropouts, mothers, prostitutes, lesbians and friends ...

It is difficult to exist as an artist, being almost impossible to live off one's 'art' alone. It is more difficult for a woman. And if her tool of creative expression is a camera, there is yet another struggle because photography is not fully recognised as being an art form in Australia.

There is so much beauty around us if only we could take the time to open our eyes and perceive it. And then share it. Love is the key word.<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, as Ennis suggests, Jerrems wished to legitimize the lives of those who were often on the margin or who were living in counter-cultures: "Jerrems' photographs are a hymn to youth, to life, to the future."<sup>31</sup>

How is Jerrems' work to be interpreted? There is an almost complete absence of sociological analysis of Jerrems' work, however three existing texts stand out, Gellatly, Drayton and King. These works have already been drawn upon in the above analysis, but more can be said, as ever.

Gellatly suggests that Jerrems' strength as a portrait photographer is derived from her interest in her subjects' lives. She often produces an intimacy in her photographs that results from knowing her subjects or from having an affinity with the lives they were creating or experiencing. The intimacy that is captured in her photos, for example in "Vale St", "Mozart St" and "Mark's Game of Rape" comes from an inherent if momentary trust between photographer and subjects. Further, it is this "documentary,

eyewitness approach” which situates Jerrems’ work at the intersection of her own life and those of her subjects who were often family, friends, lovers or students.<sup>32</sup>

Catriona Moore has characterized the connection between intimacy and everyday life as one of “theatrical intimacy and social revelation.”<sup>33</sup> By the mid-1970s when “Vale St” and other Sharpie or cross-class portraits were taken, Jerrems’ practice had developed further – often the subjects of her photos acknowledge her presence and the portraits become collaborative. Ennis suggests that “natural fictions” are created whereby the artist and subjects conspire to create the portrait which in turn “plays with the notion of photographic ‘truth’.”<sup>34</sup> King elaborates on this “empathic, directorial” approach: “[Jerrems] produced fictions through deftly manipulating the placement of sitters, ensuring direct eye contact and emphasizing tonality.”<sup>35</sup> Both of these effects can be witnessed in “Vale St” and “Mark’s Game of Rape”.

Further, in analysis of the series of photos “Mark Lean: Rape Game” and “Mark’s Game of Rape” Drayton suggests that Jerrems had “formidable talent for evoking heightened emotion and the suggestion of narrative to create strikingly beautiful, powerfully engaging and complex images which hover in the highly charged terrain between documentary and fiction.”<sup>36</sup>

It is the storytelling through photos, which produces and engages with intimacy that is so powerful about Jerrems’ work. Jerrems values the lives of her subjects and through her photography we as the audience value them too. She captures the Sharpies, but they captured her too. Much like Lobby, Carol also withdrew, eventually moving to Sydney in the mid to late 1970s. For the Sharpies, Mark Lean and Jon Bourke, the

photos continue to haunt them, they have made them famous or as Mark Lean says, “infamous.”<sup>37</sup>

## **Sharpie Memoirs**

Alongside these powerful middle class reflections of Sharp culture and this moment of the seventies, we now have several major works of Sharpie memoir, Tadhg Taylor’s *Top Fellas*, the ‘Seagull’s’ *Out with the Boys*, Julie Mac’s *Rage* and Nick Tolewski’s *Once Were Sharps*.<sup>38</sup> What does the view from below, after the fact, look like?

Tadhg Taylor’s *Top Fellas – The Story of Melbourne’s Sharpie Cult* is a very smart chronological assemblage and interpretation of testimonial material from participants and others – especially musicians like Lobby Loyde, Greg Macainsh and Angry Anderson. These are grouped into five chapters: 1964-1970, 1970-1972, 1972-1976, 1976-1980 and finally the 1980s. It is an assemblage of testimonial and memoir, with analysis added by Taylor. Taylor begins by asking the obvious question, what holds these movements or moments together? One key source of continuity is place: Melbourne. And there are continuities of fashion, style, music, and activity, though there are also significant differences.

An early *leitmotif* for *Top Fellas* is the Coloured Balls’ album *Ballpower*. Musically this is tough, 1-2-3-4 stuff; semiologically, in terms of the cover visuals, it is high Sharps. Lobby and the Balls are dressed like Sharps, wear their hair like Sharps, and cluster around one of the Sharps favourite hangouts, the billiards table. It evokes a

certain kind of class comfort, bravado, booze, skill and a particular kind of masculinity.

The first period, 1964-70, is already Sharp as anti-hippy. “We’re in revolt against the femininity of long hair and sissy clothes” (Dennis, 17 years old).<sup>39</sup> According to Taylor, an originating source here is not yet Melbourne but the Adelaide of mass Anglo assisted migration, with some crossover with Mod culture, dandies on scooters and 64 rockers, together with some mafia connections – Southern European, dangerous and spiffy dressers. By the time Sharpies took off in Melbourne, their shoes were handmade, Levis hand fitted by Epsteins in downtown Melbourne. Tattoos spoke of danger, ‘don’t-mess-with-me’; Sharps had their own techniques of the body, walking with shoulders back, wrists bent up, poker stiff, ‘what-you-lookin-at’. Sharp girls were known as ‘brush’, striking in appearance and often in conduct, but peripheral to this largely masculine culture. Sometimes they wore twin-sets (matching jumper and cardigan). Some modes of dress echoed 1920s-1930s gangster movies, under the influence of *Bonnie and Clyde*.<sup>40</sup> Gangs had their own hierarchies, running from ‘Top Fellas’ down to ‘Apprentices’. They were tough.

Peter: “We’d rather have a fight than a feed.”<sup>41</sup> Sharps would hunt in packs, often against each other, when they came together in shared public places or events – Moomba, the annual Melbourne Easter Festival, or November, at the annual Royal Melbourne Show. According to these testimonials the largest meetings and fights numbered into the thousands. But smaller groups would also ambush each other on Melbourne’s trains, the favoured mode of transports for Sharpies. Sharps were often under legal drinking and driving age, but more, the collective form of public transport

meant that they could travel in the relative safety of numbers. Sharps were keen on fighting; they were also keen on boxing, and on dancing the ‘Sharpie Shuffle’.<sup>42</sup>

Taylor confirms that the average Sharp girl worked in an office and that the boys were usually apprentices or shop assistants, many of them in the rag trade. Some, like Grant in Macainsh’s documentary were hairdressers. The central spatial locus for activities was the iconic centre of the city of Melbourne: under the clocks on Flinders Street Station. So the identity politics of the Sharps was both suburban and tribal, and given to some claim of a right to the city.

The 1970-72 phase indicated by Taylor included aspects of the skinhead revolt against hippy culture. According to Chris, skinhead culture, apparently continuous with the Sharps was also called Sharpie.<sup>43</sup> Fashion in this period shed the dandy component, stripped back to items of a discernible uniform, and introduced the short on top/long at the back haircut.<sup>44</sup> The years 1972-76 were the high Sharp period, introducing ‘treads’ – sandals with car tyre soles – and matching t-shirts, ‘Lobby’ or ‘Melbourne Sharps’.<sup>45</sup> Suits, and zoot-suits might still be used for a big night out. Girls could mix dress codes more freely, baggies (jeans), short or pencil skirts, halter neck tops.<sup>46</sup> Glam rock, Bowie as Ziggy Stardust, Marc Bolan all appealed, Slade and Suzi Quatro. Sharpie was, in short, a culture of performance; even boys might plaster on the make-up, acting out Bonnie and Clyde, or the Droogs in *A Clockwork Orange*. Being tough was a central value; but being tough meant in the first instance looking tough, or being perceived to be tough. Or was it rather the other way round, that bands like Slade, via the clever management of Chas Chandler, themselves mimicked the

boots and braces image in order to call out their audience?<sup>47</sup> As in Jerrems' photography, we are caught here in the presence of mirrors.

Taylor shifts sequentially from the punters or followers to their creative leaders, the musicians. Lobby's second band, interestingly, after the Devils Disciples was Bobby Sharp (!) and the Stilettoes: late fifties, up north in Brisbane.<sup>48</sup> When Lobby and R&B band the Purple Hearts moved to Melbourne in the mid-sixties there were already Sharps among the punters. This is pre-hippy, pre-psychedelic. Clearly marked by their dress, they "really liked the music, they were incredible to play to, and had their own way of dancing, they were just fabulous."<sup>49</sup> Later, Lobby

formed the Coloured Balls because I liked what I was seeing. I was fascinated by it, I thought it [Sharps] was a very romantic movement. I liked the way they looked, the way they danced, the whole vibe ... the Coloured Balls became one of the few bands who could communicate with these kids. Everywhere we played would be full of them, they liked our music and we liked playing to them.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps a minority were violent, "peripheral aggression, but that's youth, that's exuberance." More surprisingly: "My memory of the era is of a kind of super-Australianness."<sup>51</sup> Lobby remembers that the girls dressed like Minnie Mouse; harmless. Sharps were, essentially, a fashion movement,

I think that throughout history, the dances of the people have always fuelled the rhythms of the musicians. It's pretty hard to ignore an audience, if you're looking at an audience and they've got a certain rhythmic thing, you'll find yourself playing it or not playing there any more ... I wrote music that went with it.<sup>52</sup>

Does innovation then come from the crowd? Was Lobby Loyde the sorcerer's apprentice? For the Sharps Lobby was god because he played fast and loud and he "looked like us."<sup>53</sup>

The Seagull's memoir was published privately as *Out with the Boys: The Sharpie Days* in 2011. It defines Sharps expansively as expressive of youth culture in and around Bankstown in Sydney since the fifties. The definitional issue is interesting and significant, but it also bleeds, in the artistic sense. For the Seagull's initial memories are clearly of rockers. Elvis was king. These are stories of bluff, discovering sex and working on, but not out of masculinity; meeting girls at school, or the swimming pool, shifting loyalties to the Beatles and to the next best girl who comes along. Then the boys, and the uniform, become Sharp. As in Melbourne, this meant being properly kitted out, in this case by Syd Green in Glebe Point Road.<sup>54</sup> Sex seems easy, relationships less so; for Sharp culture also means that the boys should hang out with the boys, the girls separately.<sup>55</sup> Memory shifts easily from violence to fashion, from bashing and gang rape to dressing up.<sup>56</sup> The Seagull's sexual behaviour takes him too close to Long Bay Gaol for comfort. He steps away from the Sharps, and into the mainstream. Most Sharps grow up, and away; some, presumably forget, and others position themselves as custodians of the tradition.

*Rage – A Sharpie's Journal, Melbourne 1974 to 1980* is a novel contribution to the testimonial literature on Sharps – outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Croydon-Mooroolbark-Ringwood – and written by a girl.<sup>57</sup> Action occurs at Iceland, the Ringwood skating rink, the Ringwood Bowl and its bands, the Croydon pool, the local railway station. It is often, as observed above, located around rituals, such as the Moomba Carnival at Easter in Melbourne, or the Royal Show in November. Julie Mac's text is diaristic in form, though it includes an attempt at a book, "Westside Story", from page 147, which lapses back in diary entries, and summaries from other actors like Angry Anderson, Chane Chane, Sam Biondo and Les Twentyman.

Sex, and the ribald figure centrally.

GET IT UP,  
GET IT IN,  
GET IT OUT,  
DON'T MESS MY HAIR UP.<sup>58</sup>

Sex seems to be fun and transgressive, but it is also a way to hold onto the Sharp boys who otherwise keep to themselves. Pairing-off seems like a threat to tribal loyalty, as it refers to the dyad, the premise of marriage, rather than to the group or the gang. Boys take solace with boys, girls share their stories with other Sharpie girls.<sup>59</sup> Girls are not here allowed to wear the uniform t-shirts ('Melbourne Sharps').<sup>60</sup> Music and fashion also loom large, and not just as the soundtrack of the era. The Sharps hunt in packs, travelling on the train they discursively appropriate as The Sharpie Express. In terms of space, they take possession of trains, railway stations, the clocks at Flinders Street, bowling alleys and the park area around the Myer Music Bowl, including the Lady Janet Clarke Rotunda, which is christened the Sharpie Shrine.<sup>61</sup> The Sharps are, in short, highly visible. They follow parties and dances and other events right across the city's extensive railway network and across each other's turf, where violence often erupts.

The final recent memoir under consideration here is *Once Were Sharps. The Colourful Life and Times of the Thomastown Sharps*, a collaborative venture, "book by Nick Tolewski, written by Dean Crozier."<sup>62</sup> The combined voice complements some of the other mixed genre writing here, like Julie Mac's. The voice is Tolewski's, via Crozier; the result is somewhere between interview and testimonial. Much of the story is told via the kingpin actor, Bowie (no relation). The locale of Thomastown

was northern, and tough, though as the book notes what was peculiar about the Sharps was that they became a cultural and geographic phenomenon and movement across Melbourne.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to other gangs, the Sharps were largely Melbourne: by the seventies hundreds of gangs scattered across the suburbs, including the Melbourne Sharps, who were a non-suburban aggregate rooted in the city around Flinders Street.

These gangs were familial, according to Crozier. Anti-familial, in the Freudian sense, anti-oedipal, they also offer alternative forms of solidarity forged in cultures where the traditional family fails.<sup>64</sup> Girls remained marginal to Sharp activities, though sex was important in its masculinist rendition: drinking, fighting, fucking.<sup>65</sup> Music is more than wallpaper: Lobby Loyde, AC/DC, Rose Tattoo, even Glam and the Skyhooks, globally Status Quo, Slade, the other Bowie, Suzi Quatro but also Thin Lizzy.<sup>66</sup> But as is often observed, local bands ruled, because ‘they were ours’, because they were local, because their presence was seminal and sentient, live and sweaty, because performers and the audience engaged, and something magical happened.

Lobby Loyde was an icon in this story. Carol Jerrems’ connections were local, specific to Heidelberg, so that her work became iconic for a different audience, later.

## **Conclusion**

Carol Jerrems died in 1980 in Melbourne from a rare liver disease. She was 30. Lobby Loyde died of lung cancer in Melbourne. He was 65. They left works at once transcendent and local, tied umbilically to place and time, to the moment of Sharp culture in Melbourne in the seventies. Both Jerrems and Loyde created significant forms of art and culture working in the intersection between their own middle class

origins and the lives of their working class subjects, each drawn to the sense of dangerous inspiration provided by Sharpie culture. Through their creative works and politics each gave legitimacy and recognition to their subjects as actors. The Sharpie memoir literature, in turn, works across the field of nostalgia, but also in the positive sense as well as the negative, indicated by David Lowenthal.<sup>67</sup> Lowenthal claimed that nostalgia was memory with the pain cut out. In the Sharpie memoir literature, as in Jerrems' last work, the pain is central however compromised its representation might be for the Sharps by creation or distortion.

What was the nature of this experience, this time and place, this creative destruction, these dangerous liaisons? Plainly there was something in the air. The quality of experience was different, throwing together actors of different and distinct cultures and backgrounds. Something of this was in the moment – in the *exchange* between subject and photographer, as Jerrems put it, or between audience and musicians, as Loyde had it. These were embodied, sensuous encounters, of the flesh as well as the imagination.

As leading Australian rock writer Clinton Walker says, and it is an axiom at least since Miles Davis and John Coltrane, the consummate artistic experience is *live*, in the moment, fleeting and ephemeral, in GOD and in Vale St. In the future, or near present, as Walker puts it,

Music could be lost to multi-streaming and interactivity. In an increasingly isolated and irreligious society, songs trace the currents of our collective unconscious, and when interactivity kills narrative – when we get the stories we want, not the stories we need, which is what myths are – we are spinning out of the orbit of a spiritual centre.<sup>68</sup>

Musical experience, in this optic, involves some kind of communion. It offers the momentary aspect of human efflorescence as in Durkheim, or creativity as in Castoriadis.<sup>69</sup> The MP3 shuffle is not the same as the blues shuffle. Music at its best is live, and small, proximate and sweaty. It calls out all the senses.

Walker claims, in interviewing Lobby Loyde, that the optimal room size for creative music is capacity for between 350 and 600 souls. Lobby agrees: “Once it fires up, everybody ... connects, the audience connects, the band connects, this is the heart and soul of music ... it’s little rooms that make it happen.”<sup>70</sup> Greg Macainsh agrees, in his reflections on the period, “There was no internet, no VCRs, if you wanted entertainment you had to go out and be with people” even if some of them wanted at some point to harm you.<sup>71</sup> Somewhere in the seventies in Australia something changes. Amplification expands dramatically, foldbacks or monitors so musicians can hear themselves, and the promoters swell their bank accounts, as do the hotels. Pub rock, mass public events, the shift to stadia formats, more than 30,000 fans, not 350, and the musical innovators of the earlier period relinquish their creative leadership (other rockers like Billy Thorpe just never stopped playing ‘Be Bop a Lula’). Lobby Loyde, the architect of GOD, became a god; finally, this was an unwanted aura.

Carol Jerrems was also in a sense swept away, or along with these events in cultural transformation. Her teacher, Paul Cox confirms this sense:

She was right on the edge. It turned out to be alright in the end but she did come to see me once after they [Sharpies] had threatened her and she was scared, but she had also provoked it herself. She felt that she should do the Diane Arbus business totally ... Experience what you photograph. You can’t just be an outsider. You have to be an insider.<sup>72</sup>

This was Jacob Riis in the flesh, where the identification with the subject risked self-negation, where the thrill of discovery came too close to the pulse of urban nihilism immanent in Sharpie culture. The creative genius of middle class connection took on the risk of crowd-surfing. The stories we have tracked here are one of the results of this intersection of bodies, minds and lives.

In differing and momentary ways they represent some kind of crowd capture.

Coloured Balls were appropriated, claimed or captured by the Sharps as a movement across Melbourne and its suburbs. The nature of Jerrems' encounter was as different as the intimacy of Vale St would allow: perhaps this was less a case of capture than of connection with a gang of bad boys from Heidelberg. Perhaps this is the price of art, or of engagement.

## Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> M. Feary, "Sharpies – A Unique Australian Subculture," *The Space*, 2002, ABC Arts Online, [abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/sharpies\\_index.htm](http://abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/sharpies_index.htm) in S. Biondo, (ed), *Skins' n Sharps. The Forgotten Subculture Melbourne 1971 to 1979*, Melbourne, Skins' n Sharps (self-published), 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> P. Oldham, "Lobby Loyde: The G.O.D. father of Australian rock," BA Honours thesis, Communication, International studies and Languages, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Mac, *Rage. A Sharpie's Journal, Melbourne 1974-1980*, Melbourne, self-published, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> I. McIntyre, *Tomorrow is Today. Australia in the Psychedelic Era 1966-70*, Adelaide, Wakefield Press, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> T. Taylor, *Top Fellas. The Story of Melbourne's Sharpie Cult*, University of Melbourne, Custom Book Centre, 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> see Biondo *Skins' n Sharps*, 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> P. Beilharz, "Lobby and Me: Remembering the Melbourne Music Scene in the Sixties," *Thesis Eleven*, 91, November, 2007, pp. 64-70; P. Beilharz, "Lobby Loyde and the history of rock music in Australia," *Thesis Eleven*, 109, April, 2012, pp. 104-107; I. Marks and I. McIntyre, *Wild About You. The Sixties Beat Explosion in Australia and New Zealand*, Portland, VerseChorus, 2010; McIntyre, *Tomorrow is Today*, Oldham, "Lobby Loyde: The G.O.D. father of Australian rock," 2010; P. Oldham, "Lobby Loyde: the G.O.D. father of Australian rock," *Thesis Eleven*, 109, April, 2012, pp. 44-63; R. Warburton, "The Wild Cherries," *Ugly Things*, 22, 2004, pp. 119-124.
- <sup>8</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3gN3\\_DOn3w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3gN3_DOn3w)
- <sup>9</sup> C. Walker, personal archive.
- <sup>10</sup> G. Macainsh, *Sharpies*, 1974, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQteROjUdrl>
- <sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 124.
- <sup>12</sup> Loyde in Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 108.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Engleheart, *Blood, Sweat and Beers. Rock from the Aztecs to Rose Tattoo*, Sydney, Harper Collins, 2010, pp. 56-57.
- <sup>14</sup> A. Jackson, "Youth, defiant, in the Dream Stage," *Digger*, 14 January, 1975, 40, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Oldham, "Lobby Loyde: The G.O.D. father of Australian rock," 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> R. Ellis, *No Standing Only Dancing*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Susan Van Wyk, curator, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> K. Drayton, *Girl in a Mirror. A Portrait of Carol Jerrems*, Toi-Toi Films, ABC, 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> N. King, ed., *Up Close: Carol Jerrems with Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and William Yang*, Melbourne, Heide Museum of Modern Art and Anna Schwarz, 2010, p. 171.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Vale St – <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/46.1979/>
- <sup>21</sup> King, *Up Close*, p. 50.
- <sup>22</sup> King, *Up Close*, p. 147.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> K. Gellatly, "Carol Jerrems," *So You Wanna Be A Rock Star: Portraits and Rock Music in Australia*, Canberra, National Portrait Gallery, 2001, p. 64.
- <sup>25</sup> King, *Up Close*, p. 147.

- 
- <sup>26</sup> C. Moore, *Indecent Exposures: Twenty Years of Australian Feminist Photography*, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1991, p. 39, in Gellatly, "Carol Jerrems," p. 59.
- <sup>27</sup> C. Jerrems and V. Fraser, *A Book About Australian Women*, North Fitzroy, Outback Press, 1974.
- <sup>28</sup> King, *Up Close*, p. 171.
- <sup>29</sup> King, *Up Close*, p. 40.
- <sup>30</sup> C. Jerrems 1974 in King, *Up Close*, p. 93.
- <sup>31</sup> H. Ennis, (1990) *Living in the 70s: Photographs by Carol Jerrems*, exh. cat., Australian National Gallery Travelling Exhibition, Hobart, Art Exhibitions Committee, University of Tasmania, in Gellatly, "Carol Jerrems," p. 64.
- <sup>32</sup> Gellatly, "Carol Jerrems," p. 58.
- <sup>33</sup> Moore, *Indecent Exposures*, p. 39, in Gellatly, "Carol Jerrems," p. 59.
- <sup>34</sup> H. Ennis, "Carol Jerrems: Documenting a Life," *The Arts Show*, ABC radio, in Gellatly, "Carol Jerrems," p. 64.
- <sup>35</sup> King, *Up Close*, p. 15.
- <sup>36</sup> K. Drayton, "Mark's Game of Rape," in King, *Up Close*, p. 145.
- <sup>37</sup> Drayton, *Girl in a Mirror*.
- <sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*; Mac, *Rage*; Seagull, *Out with the Boys: The Sharpie Days*, self-published, 2011; N. Tolewski with D. Crozier, *Once Were Sharps. The Colourful Life and Times of the Thomastown Sharps*, Thomastown, Melbourne, self-published, 2011.
- <sup>39</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 11.
- <sup>40</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 20.
- <sup>41</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 35.
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 52.
- <sup>44</sup> See Engleheart, *Blood, Sweat and Beers*, p. 56-57.
- <sup>45</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 63.
- <sup>46</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 66.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, pp. 100-101.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p.106.
- <sup>51</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 105.
- <sup>52</sup> Loyde in Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 107.
- <sup>53</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 114.
- <sup>54</sup> Seagull, *Out with the Boys*, p. 243.
- <sup>55</sup> Seagull, *Out with the Boys*, pp. 248-249.
- <sup>56</sup> Seagull, *Out with the Boys*, pp. 260-262.
- <sup>57</sup> Mac, *Rage*.
- <sup>58</sup> Mac, *Rage*, p. 177.
- <sup>59</sup> Mac, *Rage*, p. 150.
- <sup>60</sup> Mac, *Rage*, p. 172.
- <sup>61</sup> Mac, *Rage*, p. 164.
- <sup>62</sup> Tolewski with Crozier, *Once Were Sharps*.
- <sup>63</sup> Tolewski with Crozier, *Once Were Sharps*, p. 13.
- <sup>64</sup> Tolewski with Crozier, *Once Were Sharps*, p. 49.
- <sup>65</sup> Tolewski with Crozier, *Once Were Sharps*, p. 113.
- <sup>66</sup> Tolewski with Crozier, *Once Were Sharps*, p. 114.

---

<sup>67</sup> D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

<sup>68</sup> C. Walker, "Rock n Roll Music," in Peter Beilharz and Trevor Hogan eds., *Sociology: Antipodean Perspectives*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 347.

<sup>69</sup> C. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Oxford, Polity, 1987.

<sup>70</sup> No date, no page.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, *Top Fellas*, p. 125.

<sup>72</sup> King, *Up Close*, pp. 164-165.