

Songs in the key of Melbourne; Melbourne In the Key of Song.

Research assignment
SRA744 - Urban Patterns and Precedents
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“Representations of a city and its life in the arts can be narrative ‘portraits’, local or ‘synoptic’ descriptions, according to Shapiro. Choosing a particular city—[...your A1 city ?...]— as the object of such representation, examine and discuss what can be learned about the nature of that city from any of those descriptions. Use specific examples for you inferences to give them credibility.”

It has been claimed that Melbourne is the subject of popular song more than any Australian city (1). Since the 1970s, the city has been an incubator for the Australian music scene, growing some of Australia's biggest artists and music industry players (2). In this context, it is natural that this music would tell us much about the nature of Melbourne. Melbourne has been a muse to musicians and songwriters, which have in turn left to the city a series of cultural portraits in their songs that have not only described Melbourne; they have shaped its reality.

Melbourne and its songwriters can be seen to have developed a symbiotic relationship where songwriters are inspired by the many faces of the city, while their songs are cultural documents that influence the way people view and interact with the city. As Keeling says, music acts "as a mirror to and for society, and it plays a very important role in shaping both our social identity and the identity of places" (3). While this project demonstrates the importance of popular music in reflecting and shaping the Melbourne's sense of place, it does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of all this material - partly because songwriting focused on and inspired by Melbourne has been so prolific.

The songs in this essay are chosen to reflect a range of perspectives and themes in Melbourne songwriting as well as the story of how the city has changed, from the 1970s until today:

- The Skyhooks (Carlton Limbo, Balwyn Calling, Toorak Cowboy)
- Paul Kelly (From St Kilda To Kings Cross and Leaps and Bounds)
- Strange Tenants (Grey Skies Over Collingwood)
- Archie Roach (Charcoal Lane)
- Dan Sultan (Old Fitzroy)
- Mark Seymour (Home Again)
- The Living End (All Torn Down)
- AC/DC. (Long Way To the Top).

There is an inbuilt irony in popular music providing some of Melbourne's most important cultural portraits. The form described here as popular music has derived from both sides of the Atlantic, through blues music's development into rock and through western folk music. These musical forms constantly evolve. Cohen states that popular music is "a fluid, travelling culture" and that its development depends on "specific local and material settings" (4). Melbourne's music scene has been a major catalyst in this development of distinctly Australian styles of popular music (5). The development of mass media allowing more music from around the world to be heard in Australia and the emergence of distinctly urban Australian cultures provided a context for distinctly Australian sub-genres, like Oz rock or pub rock, to develop (6). The idea of the Melbourne music scene forming its own sub-genres based on place can also be argued, in much the same way McLeay argues of the development of a distinctive sound in the New Zealand city of Dunedin that is "not based on lyrical or musical attitudes, but on a cultural identity created by internal and external imagings of place". (7)

The social and urban landscape of Melbourne in the 1970s contributed to this process. Paul Kelly, one of Australia's most famed songwriters and arguably the most prodigious songwriter on Melbourne, wrote that "Melbourne was jumping in the late seventies...There were a lot of small venues in the inner city - pubs mainly - which put on live music most nights of the week (8)". Apart from gigs, Kelly's account includes share houses in inner suburbs hosting communes of musicians that shared music from around the world (9). Kelly, widely recognised the songwriter that most accurately carry Melbourne's sensibilities (10), moved to Melbourne from Adelaide in 1977 (11).

Melbourne differed from Australia's other main music city, Sydney, in which multinational record companies were based. Australian music's institutions were more localised in Melbourne: Festival Mushroom records was founded in Melbourne in the 1970s, national music show Countdown was broadcast from Melbourne and a robust community radio scene developed (12). Another other major difference between Melbourne and Sydney in this light is Sydney's storied location including the beaches, harbour, Opera House and Harbour Bridge; which Keeling contends led to songwriting focusing more on landscape (13). A lack of such spectacular landscapes meant Melbourne songwriters found other ways to engage with their city.

Greg Macainsh of the Skyhooks is widely recognised as the first songwriter to write about Melbourne - and he did so with his tongue firmly in cheek. The Skyhooks were seen as a subversive act in part because of their costumes and their lyrics. In hindsight, their most significant musical act of cultural subversion was singing about the (sub)urban place they came from. In *The Age*, Melbourne radio personality Billy Pinnell credits Macainsh with "opening the door for Australian rock'n'roll songwriters to write about local places and events. He legitimised Australian songwriting and it meant that Australians became themselves" (14).

The Skyhooks' landmark *Living in the 70s* album (1974) had six tracks banned from radio, but more notably three tracks about Carlton, Balwyn and Toorak - all with a heavy satirical edge and a dry wit. *The Lygon Street Limbo* asks "how low can you go-go" of the colourful cast of characters comprising Carlton's nightlife (15). The other two songs are more class conscious: *Balwyn Calling* warns of the dangers of ending up in "a brick veneer prison" in the suburbs through a romantic attachment with a social climber (16) while *Toorak Cowboy* is perhaps the most scathing, aimed at a "village playboy" from Melbourne's most affluent inner east: "My friends he don't do nothing, he just ain't got no stuffing, he's just another social disease" (17). Similar targets are in the sights of *Australian Crawl's Beautiful People*, who are derided in that they "haven't got much to say" (18). These songs use characters as allegories to satirise the superficiality of the complacent upper middle class and conservative suburban life.

The Skyhooks' *Living in the 70s* was significant on more fronts: it set an Australian album sales record of 250,000 copies (19). It has also been cited as a product of Whitlam's Australia, in Encarnacao's view, just as "the Sex Pistols were the product of an England in decline" (20). Encarnacao goes on, "Melbourne was set as the scene where such subversive cultural acts could germinate, where a musical vernacular could be spoken without recourse to international concerns" (21). Thus, Melbourne sounds were born.



RIGHT: The Skyhooks engaging in a spot of subversion (Source: www.ariacharts.com.au).

Shaun Carney in *The Age* asserted that, “Melbourne isn’t beautiful or majestic. That’s why so many of us love it, of course. It’s what’s inside that counts”. (22) Carney says that Melbourne songs are devoid of “sweeping celebrations...instead it’s about the little pieces of life in the city that have occupied our songwriters...” (23). Kelly’s treatment of place in his songs is almost akin to that of a folk singer, performed with a more rock and roll edge. Flanagan has said that Kelly’s gift to Melbourne has been “four of his best songs” (24) - three of which are covered in this study.

From St Kilda To Kings Cross, points to the eschewing of the superficial as a trait of Melbourne culture. The singer compares the virtues of Sydney’s Kings Cross with Melbourne’s beachside suburb of St Kilda. While in Sydney’s Kings Cross “everything shines just like a postcard”, Kelly states a preference for St Kilda’s Esplanade, “where the beach needs reconstruction, where the palm trees have it hard” (25). The song’s conclusion, “I’d give you all of Sydney Harbour/all that land and all that water/for that one sweet promenade” (26) has become one of Kelly’s most memorable lyrics. The implication here is that Melbourne, with its rough edges, has particular beauty in its distinct character and substance.

In both *From St Kilda To Kings Cross* and *Leaps and Bounds*, the singer is an observer, with the city as the central player. Musically, *Leaps and Bounds* emerges from a swelling organ intro with a crisp guitar line as if the song is emerging through Melbourne clouds that almost become visible when Kelly tells us that “the clock on the silo says 11 degrees” and mentions the month of May (27). In *Leaps and Bounds*, the city acquires almost spiritual significance as the singer levitates, taken to a place where “I don’t hear a sound, my feet don’t even touch the ground” (28). The song’s celebration of the MCG parklands, the view from the top of the Punt Road Hill and the now heritage listed “clock on the silo” has elevated these places in the consciousness of Melbournians and Australians alike. In these songs, the essence of these places within the city - without reference to its people - are channelled through the narrator. These are arguably the most intimate Melbournian examples of what Cohen describes as the music maker’s “engagement with the built environment that is not just social but also ideological, emotional and sensual” (29). The songs replicate this engagement between place and listener.

Melbourne’s weather makes several appearances in songs - including in Kelly’s *When*



ABOVE: Paul Kelly plays *Leaps and Bounds* on Grand Final Day at the MCG - a moment when Melbourne’s feet didn’t touch the ground. Source: *The Herald Sun*



ABOVE: The “clock on the silo”, a heritage-listed Melbourne landmark Source: *The Age*

I First Met Your Ma, where the singer enjoys a walk of “two miles in (specifically) Melbourne rain” (30). In other songs, the bleak weather is juxtaposed with social issues. The Strange Tenants’ Grey Skies Over Collingwood (1983) is notable for its bleak-humoured opening lines - “Grey skies over Collingwood/It’s a typical summer’s day” and its chorus, “Grey skies, grey skies/smoke stacks competing” (31). The song’s image of a young girl on the tenth floor (presumably of one of the area’s housing commission buildings) with a sadness in her eyes juxtaposes the weather with the industrialised environment and social alienation characterising the inner suburbs at this time. The simplicity of the lyric shows music’s ability to convey complex ideas with simplicity and efficiency, as well as a catchy hook.

Popular music has served as an accessible way for stories of social alienation in Melbourne to be told. One of the most striking examples is indigenous songwriter Archie Roach’s seminal track Charcoal Lane (1990), which tells the story of alienation-driven binge-drinking around Gertrude Street in Fitzroy. The sardonic humour portrays a world whose inhabitants would “laugh and sing, do anything to take away the pain” (32). The song explicitly mentions Smith Street, Gertrude Street and the Builder’s Arms Hotel in Brunswick Street; located near large housing commission flats that remain intact to this day. This same story is told another indigenous songwriter Dan Sultan’s track Old Fitzroy (33), where a young indigenous man talks of his hatred of life in Fitzroy and the life that got him there. Old Fitzroy’s black and white filmclip features Sultan walking and singing through the suburb with its curious mix of residents, graffiti covered laneways, cafes and housing commission high rise (as featured in the Strange Tenants’ Grey Skies...) all on show (34). These songs take often-repeated narratives of indigenous alienation throughout Australia and plant them squarely in Melbourne’s inner suburbs.

Through the 1990s, Melbourne went through a period of change that included the years of Jeff Kennett’s government that brought the Grand Prix to Albert Park and opened Melbourne’s first legal casino in the city centre. Mark Seymour’s Home Again (1998) portrays a sense of Orwellian angst (35). As in Kelly’s From St Kilda to Kings Cross, Seymour’s Melbourne isn’t a postcard. The opening line suggests it is “surely not the place to make a movie” (36) - but unlike Kelly’s song, Coming Home’s images get bleaker. Seymour told The Age:



ABOVE: The housing commission buildings that housed the young girl in Grey Skies Over Collingwood, as featured in the film clip for Dan Sultan’s Old Fitzroy (still shot from clip)



ABOVE: The Labor In Vain hotel in Fitzroy, possibly as seen by the characters in Archie Roach’s Charcoal Lane; shown in the filmclip for Dan Sultan’s Old Fitzroy (still shot from clip)

“We were going through a period of cultural turmoil. Melbournians were very much divided about the direction the city was going in politically. There was a lot of tension and anxiety in the mood of the city...” (37)

The song’s lyrics paint a picture of the destruction of the past, including its “perfect open spaces” and it references the Grand Prix in Albert Park as a “demolition derby in the garden”. It tells the story of a time when “the past doesn’t matter any more when the future is a secret closely guarded”. Seymour’s conclusion that “knowing you are here” is the antidote to the “grief that’s going down” (38) pays homage to an enduring sense of place and substance in the city.

Angst about change in Melbourne over the 1990s was also expressed in *The Living End’s All Torn Down* (39). Over the 1990s, Melbourne continued to sprawl and the gentrification of the inner suburbs changed the face of its inner suburbs. *All Torn Down* mirrors Friedmann’s description of the “violent act” of “the erasure of places” (40). The song expresses concern for the lack of respect for history and heritage as the city turns into an all consuming “big machine” where “the streets are freeways and the parks are just a memory” (41). *All Torn Down* is one of Melbourne’s most significant cultural expressions of protest against the gentrification and dehumanising of the city and place. By implication, the song says the city has a human side worth saving.

The places under attack in *All Torn Down* include the inner-suburban and inner-city live music venues that acted as the incubator to the live music scene in Melbourne. Homan provides an extensive discussion of factors contributing to this decline, including government policy affecting live music and urban change:

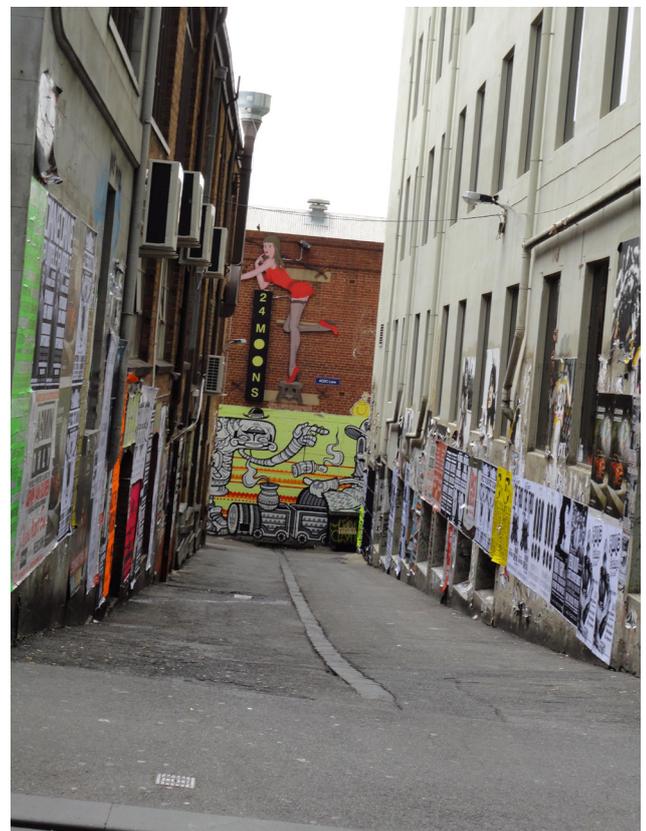
“The property boom, and subsequent changes to residential populations, has thus provoked a perverse program of social selection, where the more controlled urban environment sought by the new residents is distinctly at odds with its earlier vibrant, cosmopolitan reputation. The paradox of affluent residents seeking a bohemian culture, only to see it destroyed by their cultural tastes and influence, was not lost...” (42).

On this basis, questions might be asked as to how popular music might portray Melbourne in the future - if at all. But it is true that popular music has already provided a rich narrative and left its mark. In 2004, the Melbourne City Council renamed one of the city’s laneways to ACDC Lane (43) in tribute to one of the biggest bands to emerge from Melbourne’s 1970s incubator. AC/DC’s most enduring contribution to Melbourne’s narrative wasn’t through a song, but through the famous film clip for *A Long Way To The Top* which featured the band playing the back of a truck travelling down Swanston Street. The grand symbolism is clear. Guitarist Angus Young (himself from Sydney) told *The Age* that, “If you could make it in Melbourne, you could make it anywhere in Australia” (44).

Melbourne’s music displays the city through the prism of a range of performers from different backgrounds and social contexts. They also tell a story of how the city has changed - complete with growing pains. The reflection is of a city that celebrates simple beauty and the substance within; while questioning the superficial. It is a city where middle class affluence creates tension; where the past, rituals and places are valued. There is no bombast, but there is a city capable laughing at itself and incorporating its imperfections into its character, while maintaining a confident strut.

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