

63 Langridge St, Collingwood c.1980

by Mick Earls January 2024-01-30

The building was as nondescript as you could imagine: a brick wall, set right against the footpath, with a single door that opened into a dingy, disused storeroom. Attached to it on the left side was a double storey building which the estate agent described simply as a 'dwelling', as if there was no point even attempting to edify it a little by calling it a 'home' or 'residence' or 'townhouse'.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the place was a dump. But it was cheap, dirt cheap, and with a capacious rehearsal room, and fine acoustics, it suited perfectly the purposes of our bands Sample Only and Use No Hooks — and their experimental audio-art offshoot, Invisible Music. And it would soon provide a fertile gathering place, and launching pad, for many of the 'little bands' involved in the so-called second wave of that movement, which had been initiated in North Fitzroy during 1979 by friends and associates of the bands Primitive Calculators and Whirlyworld.

In those days (sigh), there was an abundance of low cost share housing in rundown inner Melbourne suburbs like Fitzroy and Collingwood, where it was possible to pick up a joint like ours, or an old shop-fronted house, for a song — or even less, as in our case. There was no inspection queue, no checking of IDs or bank statements or even references. All I had to do was cough up a month's rent in advance as a bond, and I can't remember if I even had to sign a lease. It didn't bother the landlord that we didn't have full-time jobs or were living on the dole (as you could do in modest comfort back then), so long as the rent kept being paid on time.

For us, the setting was ideal. That part of Collingwood was almost entirely industrial in those days, so we could have bands rehearsing and jamming at full volume by day and by night without a single complaint ever being raised. During 1980-81, the place became a hangout for various groups of friends, and friends of friends, of widely varying musical abilities and interests, many of whom would pass in and out of the ever-changing lineups of Use No Hooks, whilst at the same time participating in one or another of a succession of short-lived little bands that would often use our premises and equipment to prepare material for a forthcoming Little Bands Night, which would be staged, typically, at Fitzroy's Champion Hotel or St Kilda's Seaview Hotel (managed by the legendary Delores San Miguel).

Many of these bands would come together through sheer happenstance. Someone would be fiddling around on a piano or synth when someone else would emerge from upstairs or the kitchen and join in, playing along on guitar or bass or drums until something clicked; a third or fourth person might then be invited to try out on another instrument, and over the next few hours they'd come up with some vocals and help each other work it all together into a song as best they could. After another session or two, they'd have enough material to perform a 10-15 minute set at the next Little Bands Night, along with maybe six or eight other bands who, like them, would emerge from the audience, play their set, then disappear back into the audience and disband immediately.

Underlying this whole movement was a shared feeling that music was too vital and important an element in everyone's lives to allow its creation to be dominated exclusively by the much despised music 'industry', and that no matter how limited anyone's musical experience and expertise, they could have a go at making some music of their own, given suitably non-judgemental support from others and a willingness to learn from them. Many such bands would comprise one or two players who'd never performed live before (or even played a musical instrument), along with a more experienced performer or two who were taking the opportunity to try their hand on an unfamiliar instrument, and thereby expand their own musical capabilities a little too. Since everyone in the scene was more or less self-taught, this provided a sense of common purpose that enabled players of widely disparate capabilities to blend together successfully to some extent — however fragile or unhinged their performance might turn out to be on the night.

As our Langridge St premisses became a primary centre for little bands activities, and Use No Hooks became the host band for Little Band Nights over many months, I found myself thrust into the role of convenor of acts for those gigs — and distributor of miniscule sums of money afterwards to a couple of dozen performers and more — until it all became a little too tiresome, and we in Use No Hooks decided to turn our attention to reinventing the band with new personnel and moving its music in another direction.

Looking back now some four decades later at that Little Bands movement, it's clear that without the ready availability of cheap live-in rehearsal premisses such as our Langridge St hangout provided — and others like the Primitive Calculators' North Fitzroy shopfront and Jim and Kate Buck's in Collingwood, all located in reasonably close proximity to where most of the Little Bands participants and their audiences were living — that movement would surely never have happened the way it did, if at all. It's also worth recalling that it was happening at a time when scarcely anyone even had a telephone — let such luxuries as mobile phones and email and internet — so that if you wanted to visit someone, you'd simply go around and knock on their door (or just walk in if it was open, as it often was), and if someone happened to be in there playing a musical instrument, you might soon find yourself joining in, and before too long another little band might be in the making. And it was a time when many in those circles were severely critical of the political system in which they were embedded, and looking forward to the likelihood of radical change, if not revolution, happening in the not-too distant future — an outlook which inspired some angry and provocative music making by many performers.

That Langridge building would be demolished just a few years afterwards (alas), to make way for a carpark, and it too would disappear soon enough when a harsh new economic regime (so-called neoliberalism) imposed its iron grip everywhere across the land, deifying private wealth, demonising unemployment and turning residential properties into speculators' toys, so that when Big Money moved into those inner suburban neighbourhoods in Melbourne and took over, low-cost housing disappeared, and the social and economic and political conditions that had made the Little Bands movement possible would be no more.