

A Brief History of Nearly Everything BSL

My Sister and Benny Andersson

A long, long time ago, I can still remember how the music used to make me... sick.

Well, not physically ill but so wound up inside that I wanted to pluck out every hair of Benny Andersson's beard with a pair of tweezers. It was 1976 and Benny's band, ABBA, and their song *Fernando* had just achieved the unbelievable feat of staying at number one on the charts of the iconic Australian pop music show, Countdown, for a record nine straight weeks. I hated that song.

My sister, on the other hand, loved it. Lisa (The Simpsons resonates on a number of levels with my life experience) was nine years old at the time, and had graduated from Suzi Quatro's *Devil Gate Drive* to *Dancing Queen* in one sparkling flash of blue eye-shadow. As the primary purchaser of records in the household, I was called upon by our mother to take \$1.75 to the local record store and purchase the picture sleeve version of ABBA's record-breaking single on Lisa's behalf.

The local record store was a cathedral to me. I worshipped at its altar, dutifully flicking through The Beatles section first on every visit, just in case the Fabs had decided to discretely reunite and release a triple album of new material.

I would then walk through most letters of the alphabet, ticking off my favourites and earmarking the albums I was going to buy next. The people that ran the place loved me. Pocket money never stayed too long in my "kick", preferring to wander aimlessly across their counter and into their till in exchange for a piece of black plastic wrapped in coloured cardboard.

Of course, I believed that I had a reputation for musical taste to both nurture and protect with every purchase. The guy who served behind the counter would discuss the opening track off Tommy Bolin's "Teaser" album with me, while his cousin (and co-worker) argued that Jefferson Starship's "Red Octopus" was a better album than "Spitfire", its follow-up. Meanwhile, we'd scoff at kids who were older than me buying the latest chart-topper – singles, pffff!

It was the windy, wintry afternoon of that fateful day. I approached the record store with trepidation, coin totalling \$1.75 and a knot in my stomach (*Monkberry Moon Delight*). It wasn't so much the act of purchasing the ABBA single, but more the hollow sound of my words – "It's for my sister". They kept straight faces until I was almost out the door, then the sound of my two "pals" chortling and singing the chorus of the pop-nauseum I had in my hand chilled me to the bone.

When I got home, my sister grabbed the record out of my hand, Frisbeed the disc onto our player and stared at the cover, singing along with every word. I didn't say anything. I just watched her, totally absorbed by the tune, mouthing every word, strumming every guitar chord, feeling every lyrical twinge through her soul.

I began to understand. This was what music really did. It didn't matter if it was greater or lesser in perceived artistic merit, whether the performer wore thigh-high red PVC boots or a beige cardigan – if the song sounded like it was being sung for you, that was all that mattered.

Of course, I didn't run out and buy a beige cardigan. I still loved the notion of exclusivity, of knowing about a band before my mates did and having them all to myself for a brief time. The fact that the rest of the world knew about them before me was a point I would later come to grudgingly accept. But, in my quest for uniqueness, I'd missed the central tenet of popular music – it's popular because it means something special to whoever is listening.

It's a phenomenon that still fascinates me today – and I have my sister, ABBA and Countdown to thank.



Ring Ring Goes the Bell

After this epiphany, the path to rock'n'roll superstardom became an obsession.

My mate, Johnathan K. Redenbach, and I had been producing albums under the name of The Rubber Mulligan Band since we met in the second year of high school. We recorded them, in our respective bedrooms, on cassette tapes which were then circulated around our school like the last cigarette from a packet of Marlboro Reds at the back of the school bus.

With album titles like “Live from Death Valley” and “Scabbey Road”, and songs such as *Cruising in a Mustard Marina* and *Henry Mancini and his Pet Snail, Rufus*, we were well on the way to crafting our perfect rock star futures. The difficulty was, there were only two of us – we needed a band.

Most of our mates were more into surfing than music, but we swam on against the socio-cultural tide of the times in search of a like-minded classmate. He came along in Year Eleven in the guise of Murray Cook. Muzz, like Johnathan K., was originally from the Central West of New South Wales, but had moved to Sydney with his folks. A more kindred spirit we could not have hoped to find.

Like us, Murray loved rock'n'roll music and he had a guitar which he could play. He even knew barre chords. We changed our name to The Flashers, then to The Ringrose Slashers, then back again, to indicate that we had come of age and were ready to rock.

We set about finding a drummer but had no luck until after we'd scrambled our way through the Higher School Certificate. In frustration, we lodged an advertisement in a Sydney music paper seeking a drummer "who lived for Keith Moon", our archetype of the sort of musical brilliance and psychological imbalance one needed to get on in this industry.

Enter Bruce Lindsay Carter, a guy whose musical tastes coalesced with ours perfectly (except for his penchant for Yes, Genesis, The Mahavishnu Orchestra and Emerson, Lake and Palmer). Bruce had been playing in bands with his mates and was similarly obsessed with aspirations of being in a big rock'n'roll band of his own. He loved pop music as much as we did, so we all set about getting our act together.

So You Wanna Be a Rock'n'Roll Star

Of course, this was easier said than done. We spent many long days and nights in hot, fetid chambers of remorse (commonly referred to as rehearsal studios) across Sydney, building up an eclectic arsenal of our favourite songs and finessing a handful of tunes that I had written. The goal was to develop a set that was predominantly comprised of original songs, flanked by a couple of well-chosen cover versions.

Most of the gigs we got demanded that the band played all night, meaning three sets of fifteen songs each. We only had about six of our own tunes, so covers were a necessary evil in order to get gigs – unless, of course, we played our own tunes a few times each during the evening, which occasionally we did.

"Play La Grange!"

In Sydney at the time, there were lots of venues available for fledgling bands like us to cut our teeth on. Most of them were big beer barns with merciless crowds, drunk from song one and screaming for ZZ Top's *La Grange* all night. These punters were somewhat bemused by our performances.

We played bright, poppy guitar-based tunes, alternating between classic Rolling Stones songs and obscure B-sides by Squeeze. We wore little matching outfits of stovepipe black jeans, black shirts and skinny ties (this is well before Billy Joe Armstrong had turned ten – we had set the fashion trend for the whole Emo phenomenon, sans eyeliner, tattoos and piercings).

Often, the PA would consist of two vocal columns which were pointed towards the audience (logically) and provided no fold-back for us to hear what we were singing. Many of the punters suggested that this was a good thing for us.

A Clone by Another Name Would Smell As Sweet

Around this time, we crossed paths with an amazing band called The Clones. They looked like they were doing a Sixties tribute show, all collarless shirts and Rubber Soul bobs, bouncing around the stage singing close harmonies and having way too much fun for Sydney's independent music scene of the time. But they were much more than this. Their original songs were great, melodic power-pop "hits" with a nod to the beat groups they idolised.

The Clones' bass player, Mark Alchin, along with John, Ian and Noel, became buddies with us as we criss-crossed the pubs of the era. After playing with a pop group called The Turnaround, and appearing with them in a movie musical called *Starstruck*, Alch went on to form another band called The Reasons Why, another great power-pop bunch who were very popular with the mod revival crowd of the mid-eighties. The Clones released a single on RCA called *Tired of Hiding*, and The Reasons Why released a single on Sydney independent label Phantom called *In The End*.

Getting Better

As we grew in confidence, chose better covers and wrote more songs, we began to get gigs supporting iconic Australian bands like The Angels and Men At Work. This was good because it meant better production, bigger crowds and a higher proportion of our songs in the (shorter) set. To consolidate our newfound status (and to distance ourselves from the cover band we'd become), we changed our name again to Finger Guns, a moniker which stuck for some years to come.

We recorded demonstration tapes at various Sydney studios and farmed them out to any record company or radio station that would listen. Sadly, there weren't many of those. Fortunately, it was a time of DIY rock stardom and many of the releases that were popular were released independently.

Broooooce!

It was at this time that Bruce decided to leave the band. We knew something was wrong when, after rehearsing a song one Sunday afternoon called *Another Girl, Another Planet* by a band called The Only Ones, Bruce threw his drumsticks into the air and exclaimed, "I don't know what I just played!". Neither did any of the rest of us, but we kept on.

Bruce went on to pursue his dream with another band of mates, Silent Types. As fate would have it, he also decided to embark on a music management/record-label business enterprise and released our first single, *Happy Screams*, on his Reaction Attractions label. Similarly, Silent Types released several singles/EPs on Reaction (*Midnight to Dawn*, *Burning Stage*). After Silent Types broke up, Bruce continued his music management

business but also went on to play in another band which toured extensively called Dawn Brigade.

Finger Guns released two other singles (*Heart Man is Breathing* and *In Love With a Legend*), but with a major label, RCA. We didn't have any real chart action with these releases, but our mums loved them.

Hello Funky Killer Banana III, Bye Bye Johnny

By this time, Johnathan K. had left also to pursue an academic career. Muzz and I remained the only two original members of the band. We'd had a couple of new drummers (Fiji Banana and "Killer" Karl Perske) and several guitar players (Ken Barrington-Smythe III and Funky Laidler among them) to steer us through, but things were looking bleak.

We were nearing our late twenties and had come no closer to the guitar-shaped pool out back of the Beverley Hills mansion that we'd envisaged writing our next album in. It was time to let go.

A Very Wiggly Garden

I went back to the financial services industry and Muzz, sick of the public service and taxation, decided to study to become an early childhood teacher. Talk about a fork in the road!

Muzz went on to meet Anthony Field and the rest of The Wiggles at college. Their story is well-known to all. We were all so amazed when he started to appear on television here, and then in the States.

Johnathan K. and I had the opportunity to witness a Wiggles show in the Madison Square Garden Arena in late 2004, and it was a humbling experience. That was Muzz up there, entertaining thousands of adoring kids... at The Garden, no less! Brilliant, yet slightly surreal. We were so proud of him, and always will be.

The Siren of the Barbecue

So, rock'n'roll stardom finally revealed herself as a lecherous siren, beckoning us to her tantalising shores with a wanton song, only to be dashed upon the rocks of our unfulfilled dreams. Bummer.

Back we went to the grind, living our lives and accepting our lot, but still hopelessly in love with music. Muzz and I started a duo act called Yellow Snow to keep our hands in. We played a residency at a night spot in Sydney's infamous Kings Cross area for some

time before things got too busy in other parts of our respective lives and we again parted ways.

Some time later, Johnathan K., Bruce and Muzz came over to my place for a barbecue. We ate a lot of overcooked red meat and drank way too much lemonade. Suddenly, the idea for Bang Shangalang jumped out from behind a gum tree and accosted us. We were hooked again and set about the task of developing a repertoire and recruiting Bruce's neighbour, Ray Freeman, into the fold to play piano.

Our first gig was at a birthday party. I'd never really played in a band with keyboards before and the sensation was one of liberation and possibility. Ray was a great player, as was his successor, Ben, so we broadened our horizons and started to choose tunes that were outside the scope of our usual guitar/bass/drums spectrum.

Everything's Coming Up Rosie's

Rosie's Tavern in the middle of Sydney's central business district became our regular gig. We played there on Friday nights, to audiences comprised largely of corporate types out to shake off the mind-forged manacles of men (and their booty). It was great fun and really set up a platform for us to get back into the scene.

Unfortunately, Muzz could only play with us when he was in town, which was becoming less frequent. We had two incarnations to suit this situation – one with all of us there, which enabled me to put down my guitar and become one with the audience when the mood struck; the other, Muzz-less, which necessitated a harder-edged, but no less interactive, approach.

At a point in mid-2000, Johnathan K. again had to leave to attend to other stuff, so we approached our old mate from The Clones/Reasons Why, Mark Alchin. I had always admired Alch from days of yore, and relished the possibility of getting him into our little band. He had a fantastic voice for both lead and harmony vocals, played great bass and proved to be an ally in supporting the continued inclusion of Badfinger's *No Matter What* in our repertoire. A perfect and logical choice, with the full blessing of Johnathan K., Bruce and Muzz.

Blinded by the Northern Star

Meanwhile, young Richard Stevens was growing up. An incorrigible five-year-old, he began piano lessons and hated every minute, especially the prelude by Mozart in G major. However, that Wolfgang bloke was not a patch on his hero of the future, Justin Hawkins, ex of The Darkness (along with Mike Barnet of A Flock of Seagulls, of course).

Richie's first band was called Zenith – he played his first gig at the tender age of fifteen years and charged £1 admission. After the first fight of the evening broke out, he knew that rock'n'roll was to be his destiny.

His talent of being able to pick out a tune by ear after hearing it only once was testament to his affinity with his instrument and his love of music. Like his other musical heroes, including Benny Andersson (see elsewhere in this missive) and Reginald Dwight, he possesses a talent for melody which is otherworldly.

We were very lucky to have had some wonderful keys men in the band prior to Rich (Rowdy Ray Freeman and Bouncing Ben Herden), but when Rich applied to our ad for a keyboard player after our Bouncing Ben left, it was like another gear clicked in the BSL machine.

Unity-ed We Stand

Not long after Richie joined, we got our first date at The Unity Hall Hotel in Balmain, a funky suburb in Sydney's inner-west with a wonderfully cosmopolitan restaurant strip and a down-to-earth approach to rock'n'roll – hell, Angus Young lives there!

The patrons and staff at the Unity suddenly became like family to us. We began to recognise the same faces turning up to the shows in growing numbers. It's always such a great night there and it just seems to keep getting better.

Of course, we have just as much fun (sometimes even more!) at the various corporate, charity fundraiser and private events we play. The Corporate Countdown event in Sydney's Hordern Pavilion was a particular highlight.

The Orange Never Falls Far From the Tree

Last year, we decided to record a bunch of our tunes for release on a CD. Utilising the services of our pal, Dan Lia, we selected a handful of our live favourites along with a few of our own song, which we'd started to include occasionally at our shows. This was the first time that Richie had been in a recording studio, though you wouldn't know it. He was the consummate professional, re-recording bum notes that only he could hear relentlessly until all was just right. Alch, Muzz and Bruce, of course, hit all their first takes perfectly.

It was probably the most fun I've ever had in a recording studio, very relaxed and rewarding. I certainly consumed the most chocolate biscuits I ever have in a single sitting, and I was in awe of Bruce's comedy drumming and his remarkable impersonation of Eddy Grant, a sight for sore eyes... and ears.

When we finished the final mastering session for what was to become *Unreal, Orange Peel!*, I felt a great sense of whimsical satisfaction. Not smug in any way or self-righteous about the final product (we're not that good!) - just happy that I am still in a band with my mates, that we are able to keep living out our dream to play music together that is... well, popular.

And it's popular because it means something special to whoever is listening, especially us. I hope that we can keep on doing exactly that for many years to come.