

# Scratch Pad 58

February 2005



Photo of Brian McCurdy by Anne Patterson.

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Based on *\*brg\** 40, a fanzine for the **February 2005** mailing of ANZAPA by **Bruce Gillespie**, 5 Howard Street, Greensborough VIC 3088, Australia. Phone: 61-3-9435 7786. Email: gandc@mira.net. Weblog: www.appleblossomblues.blogspot.com

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## I remember Brian McCurdy

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On 17 November 2004 Anne McCurdy rang to tell me that her husband Brian had died. This was a very great shock. Only a week before, he had sent me an email thanking me for mentioning his name in the article I wrote for *\*brg\** about Joe Szabo's artwork. He said that he was leading a life of quiet retirement and that he and the family were looking forward to moving house sometime in 2005.

Anne said that Brian had suffered from fibrosis of the lungs for the previous two years, so had spent much of his time struggling to breathe. He had been in hospital for another condition, and the treatment had seemed to improve the condition of his lungs. Before he could return home, he died in hospital.

Anne also said that Brian had suffered from a number of health problems, some quite debilitating, since he had retired from Macmillan Education Australia eight years before. On the few occasions I had spoken to him on the phone, he gave no hint of these problems. Anne regretted that Brian had not stayed in touch with the people who admired him most, although he did attend my fiftieth birthday gathering in 1997.

There is a science fiction connection with everyone, even with Brian, who never read SF. In 1971, Hedley Finger, an *SF Commentary* subscriber, rang me at Publications Branch, Education Department, enquiring if I would like to become a founder member of the Victorian Society of Editors. Because of my usual reluctance to join anything, I declined the invitation, but kept up the conversation with Hedley. When I went freelance in early 1974, I rang him at Macmillan. In turn, he put me on to John Rolfe, then one of the senior editors (and later CEO) of Macmillan. John gave me the first major project of my freelancing career, the detailed editing of the first edition of Hugh Emy's *The Politics of Australian Democracy*. John still remembers climbing the garret-like stairs at 72 Carlton Street to deliver the manuscript to me.

I continued to edit manuscripts every now and again for Macmillan. Hedley Finger, a bubbling soul, was my contact with the company. However, he was leaving in order to become one of Australia's first writers of computer textbooks. One day in 1978, he introduced me to Brian McCurdy, who had recently taken over as head of Secondary Publications.

At first Brian was a bit of a puzzle to me. His rich baritone voice gave me the impression that, like so many other people in Australian publishing, he was merely another Briton imported to show the colonials how to do it. I had no idea then that he had lived in Australia since he was a teenager, had a dirt-poor

Scottish background, and had taught school in South Australia for many years before entering publishing through Rigby. Brian was a man of multiple talents, most of them unsuspected by me until I heard tales other people told at his funeral.

During the late seventies Brian and I warmed to each other as I tackled, successfully, several tasks that other people regarded as bit difficult. One of them was working with a history author who drove other editors to despair. Ron was a superb writer of history, producing books based on diligent research, pitched at the appropriate language level. Ron never learned to type. I was willing to decipher his handwriting and edit his manuscripts while retyping them. The personal computer had not yet arrived in publishing. Together, we produced one book after another, although Ron was fond of scrawling red marks of rage over the pages I had edited. I didn't take offence. Ron kept writing. When I finally met Ron, he was quite easy-going.

During my difficult years (1982 to 1984, when often I would earn less than the dole each week for the little bits of work I could scrounge) the most substantial freelance jobs usually came from Brian at Macmillan.



Brian McCurdy, early 1990s (photo: Anne Paterson).

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However, there weren't many of them. I began applying for jobs in mid 1984. (I am a person who values the freedoms of the freelance life above everything. For me to apply for a job, I had to be desperate.) I rang Brian to ask him to be one of my referees. 'Why are you applying for jobs?' he said. 'We have plenty of work here.' With some asperity, I said, 'But I haven't had any work from Macmillan for six weeks!' Silence from the other end of the phone. 'Oh,' said Brian, 'we must do something about that.'

Brian McCurdy is the only person I ever met who was actually a lateral thinker. He once demonstrated his method to me by drawing an imaginary line with his finger across the desk. 'That's the way you're trying to do the job,' he said. 'And I don't know how to do it,' I said. He moved his finger several inches to the right of the other line and started a new line. 'Then do it in a completely different way.'

He invented a new category of employee to fit my circumstances. I wanted to stay a freelance worker. Brian wanted to give me a whole lot of projects he knew I could do. 'You stay a freelance,' he said, 'but we'll pay you a set amount per month. And we'll give you a desk and a computer in here so you can learn how we do things at Macmillan.' In August 1984 I began the 'job' that seemed too good to be true. It lasted twelve years, although I signed no contract with Macmillan. It lasted, indeed, until Brian retired from Macmillan.

For nearly two years I was the only person at Macmillan editing books on a computer. Brian would have computerised Macmillan several years earlier, but couldn't gain the funds. The situation came to a crisis, and was resolved, when Martin Hooper brought in his own Mac and started editing Maths and Science textbooks at his desk. Several other people did the same, and the computer dam broke.

Meanwhile, Macmillan ran out of room for me at its building in Moray Street, South Melbourne. For several months, I even had my desk perched up in the office of the Managing Director, the amiable Brian Stonier, while he was overseas.

Again, Brian did a bit of lateral thinking. 'Why do you need to keep working in the office?' he asked. There was no reason at all. Macmillan lent me the money to buy my first computer at home, and I paid back the loan as a percentage of my monthly fee for the next year or so. In August 1986, again I became a freelancer working from home.

Brian made possible my golden years. It was the only period when I ever earned anything approaching the average weekly income. That period paid for the CD collection and some pretty good issues of *Metaphysical Review* and *SF Commentary*. Should I have saved all that money? Maybe. I suspect it would have just disappeared anyway, and I wouldn't have had my little silver treasures.

Anne said that Brian had always wanted to work at home himself, but gained this advantage only in the mid 1990s. Glimpsing a way by which he could set up his own educational software business, he announced his retirement in 1996. He was not a minute too soon. Changes in the educational scene and Macmillan itself meant that suddenly humanities were out, and maths and science textbooks became the main business of Macmillan Education. I was given maths textbooks to 'edit', which meant simply checking proofs against originals and hoping the authors had got their maths right. When Brian did leave, it was made plain that I had been working for him, not Macmillan. By early 1998 I had become a freelance freelance again. My real annual income has dropped almost every year since then.

I wouldn't like to give the impression that Brian was a chummy boss. He was a great boss, capable of getting the best out of everyone. That's why so many of us, most of us still deeply shocked, attended his funeral in Mount Martha. But if Brian and I had been closer, perhaps we might have discovered that we had very similar musical and cinema tastes. Perhaps Brian subconsciously put me in that familiar category of 'science fiction nut', so didn't inquire into our mutual interests. In turn, I found out about his true talents only during his funeral.

I met Alex Skovron because of Brian McCurdy. Alex was working as an inhouse editor at Macmillan during most of the period I was actually sitting at a desk in at Moray Street. Alex confided that he once used to read science fiction, but these days he wrote and read poetry. One of his favourite American poets was Thomas M. Disch. Alex did not know, until I told him, that Thomas M. Disch was also one of the most highly respected science fiction and fantasy writers in the world. Alex and I would have long conversations about literary matters. Alex introduced me to another Macmillan employee, Philip Hodgins. After being diagnosed with terminal leukemia, Philip began writing vast amounts of poetry. His first book, *Blood and Bone*, appeared early in my time at Macmillan, and books followed at regular intervals until he died ten years later. Philip and Alex are the two poets whose works got me back to reading poetry.

Alex is still one of the most enthusiastic supporters of my magazines, and has published four books of poetry over the last fifteen years or so. He offered to take me to Brian's funeral; I couldn't have got to Mount Martha any other way.

At Brian's funeral, Anne, his daughter, his brother, his sister, and colleagues told his story, punctuated by the strains of Miles Davis. Most of the story of Brian McCurdy was new to me — see the obituary that Anne wrote for *The Age* (next page).

Anne said at the funeral that most of Brian's health problems stemmed from alcoholism. To people at Macmillan, Brian was the master of the business lunch, which of course led to eating and drinking a bit too much

over lunch. His health problems accumulated after he retired, but he also kept up the many interests of which I knew nothing — his devotion to jazz and rock music, from Miles Davis to the Grateful Dead, his total love of film, and his ability to hand on his enthusiasms to his daughters. 'Above all', said Anne, 'Brian was a teacher.' Yes, of course, I thought in retrospect, but we never realised we were being taught.

At the end of the funeral, a record was played of Billie

Holiday singing one of Brian's favourite numbers as the coffin was wheeled out of the chapel. It was taken out to the front of the funeral parlour, and loaded into the hearse. We gathered outside as the Billie Holiday song ended. The applause on the record resounded as Brian disappeared down the drive, and we joined in that applause. I cannot think of a more moving moment at any funeral I've attended.

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## Age obituary: Insightful publisher with uncanny educational touch

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BRIAN McCURDY

Wordsmith, publisher

12 June 1937–16 November 2004

by Anne Paterson

**[The Age, Melbourne, 10 December 2004.]**

Brian McCurdy, who has died suddenly in Frankston, aged 67, introduced a number of firsts in educational publishing in Australia.

Born in Edinburgh in Scotland, he went to The Royal High School. Although his childhood was characterised by economic hardship, his continuing education was assured by his ability to win bursaries every year.

His father, a mechanical draftsman, hoped that his eldest son would become an engineer, but Brian's passion for literature continued to lead him in other directions. In 1955 the family moved to South Australia, and he matriculated from Adelaide Boys' High School. He then studied simultaneously at teachers college and Adelaide University, where he was awarded an honours degree in English. Teachers college provided the climate for him to explore his love of the theatre. He stage-managed *Twelfth Night* and produced, among other plays, *The Lady's Not for Burning*.

In 1968, after teaching English and history in secondary schools, he joined Rigby Education in Adelaide to start a career in educational publishing. During his five years with Rigby he published a substantial list of titles, including a highly regarded anthology of verse, selected by John and Dorothy Colmer, titled *Mainly Modern*. Designed in non-traditional, attractive theme categories, this book remains popular today.

Brian travelled to Europe and became managing director for D. Reidel Holding Publishers in Dordrecht, Holland, and taught English in Turkey. Living overseas gave him the freedom to move away from his Scottish roots and to explore different lifestyles, cultures, cuisines and music.

Macmillan Education Australia offered him the position of editor and publisher in 1977, and not long after, publishing director. Over a 20-year period, he made an enormous contribution to the growth of Macmillan's primary and secondary divisions, and to the educational publishing industry in general.

In the late 1970s and early '80s, he edited and published a newly commissioned series of English textbooks by Sadler, Hayllar and Powell that heralded a new

era of educational publishing in Australia. This series was a great success, and Brian later worked with the same authors on such best-selling titles as *Senior Language*, *Enjoying Poetry* and *Secondary English 1–4*. Some of these books are still in print and have sold in South-East Asia, the Middle East, Britain and southern Africa.

Brian published *Stands to Reason* by G. M. Hibbins, which was the definitive senior clear thinking text for many years. The first edition, published in 1977, was reprinted five times in two years and the fourth edition was still selling in the early 1990s. Brian had an uncanny ability to publish the right book to meet market demands and achieved remarkable success with such titles as *Physical Education: Theory and Practice* by Davis, Kimmert and Auty, the first physical education textbook specifically written for senior Victorian students. It was first published in 1986 and is still in print.

In the key areas of science and mathematics, Brian was responsible for the successful publication of a number of titles, including the *ScienceWorld* series by Stannard and Williamson, *Mathematics for Australian Schools* by Ganderton and McLeod, and a comprehensive senior mathematics series by Rehill and McAuliffe.

He was quick to recognise new publishing opportunities and took great pleasure in being 'first out' with a textbook for a new syllabus. He embraced new technologies, and was the first publisher in Australia to publish a maths textbook that operated with a calculator.

Brian possessed not only that rare combination of academic intellect and sharp publishing acumen but also an ironic sense of humour and easy affability. He loved it when people misspelled his Christian name as 'Brain'.

The Agapi Greek restaurant in Richmond provided an exotic background for publishing dinners, and Brian's love of Turkish and Greek music often encouraged the once-shy Edinburgh boy to lose himself in the music and dance until the early hours.

Colleagues described him as having charismatic charm and urbane sophistication. He was able to read people quickly and develop mutual trust. Many authors, publishers and editors acknowledge that they owe much of their own success to his insight and guidance.

After retiring from Macmillan in 1996, Brian set up his own electronic publishing business, On Screen Education. A man of eclectic tastes, he became a talented chef, specialising in Asian cuisine. He enjoyed dining out, but often found himself editing the menu, announcing with disgust 'If they don't know how to spell it, how

on earth do they know how to cook it?’

Like Billy Connolly, he enjoyed a love-hate relationship with his native Scotland and sought relief from pain through comedy and the musicality of language. A true Scot, he had a driving need to celebrate Hogmanay, and for a number of years on Robbie Burns’ birthday, a large crowd gathered at night on the banks of the Yarra where Brian would recite the *Address to the Haggis*.

Poetry was his first love, with heroes such as Dylan

Thomas and James Joyce. Not long before his death, Brian produced a poetry anthology of his own titled *Pomes tuppence each*, declaring them to be ‘more expensive’ than Joyce’s.

Brian had health problems from childhood, yet was able to achieve so much. He never expected to have children, but became a father for the first time at 46. He is survived by his wife, Anne, and his daughters, Kate and Caroline.

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## My favourite Bruce Gillespie article

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### Maniacs with guitars and pianos

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**[First published by Leigh Edmonds in *Rataplan 8* in 1972. Irwin Hirsh did not include this in *The Incomplete Bruce Gillespie*, but I think it’s my best article. It’s certainly the article into which I put the most passion while I was writing it. I was twenty-five when I wrote it.]**

For better and/or worse, this music is also a way of life . . . To a large number of young people it seems passionately to *matter*.

— Wilfred Mellers, *Times Literary Supplement*,  
19 November 1971

So all right, the Beatles make good music, they really do, but since when was pop anything to do with good music?

— Nik Cohn, *AWopBopaLooBop ALopBamBoom*

Nik Cohn played pinball and listened to pop music for six hours a day; I studied for exams, listened to pop music during coffee breaks, and collected hit parade charts from local newspapers. Cohn knows his early rock and roll; I’m still in sympathy with 1972’s rock and roll.

But we both grew up with rock and roll, and who can shake an upbringing like that? This is the story of an obsession shared by two people, at least.

**I**

I’ve been a Rolling Stones fan since I heard their first record. Not that I heard their *first* record, of course, since no Melbourne disc jockey played ‘Come On’ or ‘I Wanna Be Your Man’, the Stones’ fist and second singles. When I first heard ‘Not Fade Away’, I hated it. The lousy voice of that lead singer! Since Melbourne radio stations had never played the records of blues singers such as Muddy Waters, I didn’t recognise the origins of Mick Jagger’s style. However, the fast, sold beat was so magnificent that I kept listening to the record. Stan Rofe (the only Melbourne disc jockey who knew much about the records he played) said that the Rolling Stones had already become the second most popular group in Britain. Why were they so popular? Because they caused riots in theatres, fought with club crowds and thumbed their noses at club proprietors. Because the Stones had much longer hair than the Beatles, and they were unbelievably ugly. They were magnificently repellent.

A few weeks after Decca released ‘Not Fade Away’ in England, London Records released ‘Tell Me’ in the USA. I still think that it is one of the three or four best pop singles ever made. Its four and a half minutes of running time made it one of the longest pop singles released up to 1964. Why did I like ‘Tell Me’ so much? *That* lead singer was still there, and he sounded no more tuneful than before, but the drummer had developed an insistent, hypnotic beat that was more compulsively listenable than the best records by any other group. I enjoyed this long single so much that it seemed shorter than the average Beatles record. I still play ‘Tell Me’ often.

Slowly I became accustomed to Mick Jagger’s voice. He sounded mean, angry and sardonic, although he could never express the full urgency of expression of the black blues singers. In late 1964 I managed to borrow a copy of the Rolling Stones’ first LP, which includes some of their best performances. On ‘Mona’, Jagger’s voice sinks into a fluid field of intricate drum and guitar syncopation. The more insistent the beat, the more nagging the sound of the guitars and maraccas, the easier it is to listen to the song. The bass guitarist (Bill Wyman) is the star of ‘Honest I Do’ and ‘Route 66’. The entire band works best as an ensemble on ‘Little by Little’. There the lead and bass guitars play off each other in an extended blues improvisation, and Jagger sings a short verse at the very beginning of the song and a chorus at the end.

The most intriguing aspect of the LP were the songwriters’ names. I had vaguely heard of Bo Diddley and Muddy Waters, but no Melbourne radio station had played their records. A friend of mine began to collect blues records at this time, and soon he bought some Chicago-style rhythm and blues LPs. Now I could hear the original Muddy Waters version of ‘I Want to Make Love to You’ and ‘I Can’t Be Satisfied’ (recorded by the Stones on their third LP). Melbourne radio stations, especially 3KZ, began to play the records of Solomon Burke, Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye and other rhythm and blues performers. Chuck Berry, to whom the Stones owed much of their style, began to make new records.

Nobody knew how to react to ‘The House of the Rising Sun’ by the Animals. The record was so long that the radio stations played the abridged American single instead of the record that EMI released in Australia. Alan Price plays an electronic organ at almost cathedral volume. Eric Burdon wails and yells the lyric for almost

four minutes. I could not quite bear to listen to his voice, but I couldn't bear not to listen to it. 'The House of the Rising Sun' was a song that had remained in the folk blues repertoire since before 1900, but I had never heard it before (probably because radio stations had previously banned its mildly risqué lyrics). As in many of the best records of 1965 and 1966, the elements of 'The House of the Rising Sun' hang suspended from an audible trapeze wire. Burdon's voice should sound flat, but it doesn't, the beat of the drummer should clash with the rhythm of the organist, and the dry sound of the guitar should make both the voice and the organ sound out of tune. The performance should have fallen in a heap. But it doesn't.

The barriers were down, and they stayed down in the streets, in the dance halls and in people's homes. For a few years the radio stations assaulted listeners instead of charming them. This listener, at least, remained constantly astonished by the stream of powerful rock music that followed the success of the Rolling Stones.

The Stones did far more for any 'revolution', real or imagined, than the Beatles ever did. I've felt this since late 1964 and early 1965, when the Beatles reached the height of their success, although the Stones had still achieved little success in the USA or Australia. But I've never been able to put that feeling into words, and Nik Cohn can.

## II

In 1970 Nik Cohn published a book called *Pop: From the Beginning*. In 1971, Paladin issued a paperback edition with the far more evocative title of *AWopBopaLooBop ALopBamBoom*. It's both the story of rock and roll and a lot of Nik Cohn's autobiography. But that makes the book part of my own autobiography — not only does Cohn agree with me, but he says everything so much better than I can. For instance, here's Nik Cohn on the Rolling Stones:

'In Liverpool one time early in 1965', recalls Nik Cohn, 'I was sitting in some pub, just next to the Odeon Cinema, and I heard a noise like thunder.' Nik went out into the street, but it was empty. The roar grew louder.

'Finally, a car came round the corner, a big flash limousine, and it was followed by police cars, by police on foot and police on motorbikes, and they were followed by several hundred teenage girls.' The entourage came to a stop outside the Odeon Cinema. The squealing girls surrounded the car. The door of the limousine opened. The Rolling Stones and their manager Andrew Loog Oldham climbed out. 'They shone like sun gods', says Cohn, 'impossible to reach or understand but most beautiful in their ugliness. The girls began to surge and scream and clutch. But then they stopped, they just froze. The Stones stared ahead, didn't twitch once, and the girls only gaped. Almost as if the Stones weren't touchable, as if they were protected by some invisible metal ring. So they moved on and disappeared.'

The Rolling Stones posed a threat to everybody. 'On no account must they appeal to parents,' warned Andrew Loog Oldham, even before the establishment had awarded MBEs to the Beatles. Cohn says that the English music business hated the Stones because they 'threatened the structure, because they threatened the way in which pop was controlled by old men, by men over thirty. You didn't need to simper or drool or suck up — the old men might hate you in every way possible, and you could still make yourself a million dollars.' English teenagers of 1965 felt quite strongly that they didn't want to 'simper or drool or suck up' to anybody.

Like the Beatles before them, the Stones declared their independence from BBC culture, although the Beatles never quite recovered from BBC acceptance. The Stones unified their personal and musical styles. They looked ugly, they made ugly music, and for awhile they angered the really ugly people of the world.

'To begin with', writes Cohn, 'they used to play the Crawdaddy Club in Richmond and they laid down something very violent in the line of rhythm and blues. They were enthusiasts then. They cared a lot about their music.' Their care about music and attention to innovation remained for some time. At first Charlie Watts played in the background, Keith Richards and Brian Jones played like a cross between Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters, and sometimes Mick Jagger managed to sound like Mick Jagger. When the Stones wrote their own songs, they gradually simplified their style, threw out the frills and, as Cohn so brilliantly describes them, their records became 'nothing but beat, smashed and crunched and hammered home like some amazing stampede. The words were lost and the song was lost. You were only left with chaos, beautiful anarchy. You drowned in noise.' 'The Last Time' (the Stones' first Top Ten record in America) and 'Satisfaction' (their first Number 1 record in America) sum up the power of the Stones' best records. 'You drowned in noise.'

The Rolling Stones gain most of their musical power from Charlie Watts' drumming, rather than anything that Jagger has ever done. In 'The Last Time', Charlie develops an onrushing beat that hypnotises me every time I hear it, even after seven years. He has recreated this beat in even more exhausting feats of distilled violence, on tracks like 'Salt of the Earth', 'Let It Bleed' and 'Sister Morphine'.

'They remain the best rock band in the world', says Cohn, although he thinks that the Stones have wasted most of their energy since 1967. For me, the film *Gimme Shelter* shows clearly that Jagger in particular has never really understood the influence that the Stones have over their audience. Asked why the Stones stayed together, Bill Wyman said, 'I guess we're too lazy to do anything else.' Most of *Sticky Fingers* (1971) is a musical disaster. On nearly every track Charlie Watts sounds as if he has forgotten everything he ever knew about rock and roll. 'If they have any sense of neatness', concludes Cohn, 'they'll get themselves killed in an air crash, three days before their thirtieth birthdays.'

## III

In late 1965, we moved to a marvellous old house in Bacchus Marsh. The stairs were steep, my room was on the mezzanine floor, and I could ignore everybody and everybody could ignore me. In spare moments I could turn up the radio loudly and try to find some good music. (1965 might have been the best year for pop music since 1956, but that doesn't mean that Melbourne radio stations played good records very often.) Occasionally I could pick up 2UW, a Sydney radio station. At that time, and for several years afterward, it was the best commercial radio station in Australia. The deejays played few advertisements after 8 p.m., and they did not talk about the weather or read the news. They played no record that was more than a few weeks old. Constantly the station replenished its 'playlist' with new records that Melbourne radio stations would begin to play months later, or never played at all.

One night, when I was huddled in my eyrie, supposedly struggling with Hofstadter or George Eliot, I heard the most extraordinary noise hurl itself from Sydney. A

vast orchestra pounded out a strange, syncopated throb while an inspired female blues singer wailed a song that became louder and louder until she ended with a perfectly controlled blues shriek. 'A new Phil Spector record!' I shouted, throwing something into the air with delight — probably the radio. I wanted to buy the record the next day and play it over and over again, but I had to wait for months before I could even *hear* it again.

Four months later, London Records finally released 'River Deep Mountain High' by Ike and Tina Turner (for that was the record) in Australia, and two months later Melbourne radio stations began to play it. Eventually the record sold very well in Australia, but it did not enter Melbourne hit parades until nearly a year after I had heard it blare out from Sydney like some distant apocalyptic celebration.

That's my story. Here's Nik Cohn's:

'Phil Spector [who produced 'River Deep Mountain High'] was demonic. He'd take one good song and add one good performer and then he'd blow it all sky high into a huge mock symphony, bloated and bombasted into Wagnerian proportions. He'd import maybe three pianos, five percussion, entire battalions of strings. Drums and bass underneath like volcanoes exploding. Tambourines by the hundredweight. And he looked down from his box and hurled thunderbolts. Added noises, Spector-sound, and the impetus.'

Spector's records sounded as if they had been made in a mile-high cave. Nobody has ever been able to copy Spector's sound. He would hire Gold Star Studio in California for three months at a time, which is the period Spector took to make 'River Deep Mountain High'. The legend goes that Tina Turner recorded the vocal tape in one night, after Spector had manufactured the entire backing. Tina Turner was 'a big earth woman, one scream of infinite force,' says Cohn, as he describes the ending of the song. 'At one time there's an instrumental chorus and everything thunders, crashes, gets ready for final dissolution. Tina snarls and wails in the background. Then she screams once, short and half-strangled, and everything goes bang. That's the way the world ends.'

'River Deep Mountain High' failed in the USA, which is perhaps why it took six months to be released in Australia. Spector, already a millionaire, foreswore America after this failure, and later made pleasantly ingenious records for George Harrison and John Lennon. Like Nik Cohn, I think that the 'daemon' had left him, although Harrison's single 'Bangla Desh' recaptures much of the excitement that is called Spector-sound.

#### IV

Nik Cohn hits the nail on the head so many times in *AWopBopaLooBop ALopBamBoom* that I didn't like to disagree with the last chapters of the book. The first two-thirds of the book contain passages such as these:

On *classic rock*: 'Rock and roll was very simple music. All that mattered was the noise that it made, its drive, its aggression, its newness. Rock turned up a sudden flock of maniacs, wild men with panos and guitars who would have been laughing-stocks in any earlier generation, but who were just right for the fifties. They were energetic, basic, outrageous. Above all, they were loud.'

On *rock and roll lyrics*: 'The lyrics were mostly non-existent simple slogans, one step away from gibberish. This wasn't just stupidity, simply inability to write anything better. It was a kind of teen code, almost a sign language, that would make rock entirely incomprehen-

sible to adults. The first record I ever bought was by Little Richard. The message went: "Tutti frutti all rootie, tutti frutti all rootie, tutti frutti all rootie, awopbopalooobop alopbamboom!" As a summing up of what rock and roll was really all about, this was nothing but masterly.'

On *Roy Orbison* (my favourite pop singer since 1960; who sang the best pop songs in the best way possible): 'The last time I saw Roy Orbison was at the 1966 NME poll winners concert. Everyone else was frantic, ran themselves crazy trying to whip up a reaction. Orbison just commanded: the big O. He banged it out so solid, so impossibly confident that he made everything else that had gone before seem panicky. He'd been around, had twenty years behind him. Almost on his own, he knew what it was all about.'

On the *best lyric writer*: 'Chuck Berry's most perfect song was "You Never Can Tell".' (Cohn quotes the complete lyric, but you'll have to buy the book to read it.) 'Chuck himself more intoned than sang, sly and smooth as always, the eternal sixteen-year-old hustler. What the song boils down to is detail. Most pop writers would have written "You Never Can Tell" as a series of generalities. But Chuck was obsessive. He was hooked on cars, rock, ginger ale, and he had to drag them all in. That's what makes it — the little touches like a cherry-red Jidney '53 or the coolerator.'

That last passage contains Nik Cohn's key word: obsessive. Cohn is obsessive: he worries about an idea or impression until he finds a word or phrase that exactly gives his impression of a performer or group, or a music fashion. The Platters 'were all coloured but the lead singer sang exactly like an Irish tenor. That's how confused they were.' The Who 'didn't have number ones but they kept hitting the top ten and, in due course, they became safe. They even stopped punching each other.' The Beatles 'were perfectly self-contained, as if the world was split cleanly into two races, the Beatles and everyone else.'

Cohn talks a lot about maniacal environments and 'maniacs . . . with pianos and guitars'. Nik Cohn makes America's southern states sound like a musical version of Faulkner-land. The South bred people like Little Richard, one of thirteen children, who sang in church choirs, and who ended his rock and roll career in 1957 when he became a Seventh Day Adventist minister. The southern states bred Elvis Presley, who made sex the main selling point of his music and inspired the hatred of Baptist preachers everywhere, but who said often that he loved his mother and sang hymns during the intervals of his concerts. Elvis was unfailingly polite to everyone, but his 'voice sounded edgy, nervous, and it cut like a scythe. It exploded all over the place. It was anguished, immature, raw'. According to Cohn, pop music was driven for ten years by the impetus of southern blues and country and western music (plus black rhythm and blues from the northern cities). The next wave of madness came from Liverpool. 'Liverpool is a strange town. It gets obsessed by everything it does. It is a seaport, and it is made up of different races. It is a city full of gangs, and outside of Glasglow, it is the rawest, most passionate place in Britain.' According to Cohn, as soon as the music hits the big cities and the promoters, it loses its intensity.

Nik Cohn writes like a genuine *naïf*. He's a person who sees an almost visionary role for pop. 'The fifties were the time when pop was just pop, when it was really something to switch on the radio and hear what was new right this minute. Things could never be so good and simple again.' Beware of people who think that wide and

powerful social movements are good and simple. For Cohn and me, rock and roll was a relief from boredom, a tingle in the veins, and endless source of conversation, a touchstone of style (although I don't think pop *style* ever touched my relentlessly puritanical background). Rock and roll was right because it annihilated the parental world of right and wrong that they had deposited into teenagers' lives like silt into clockwork. It was a secret world, with public idols, incomprehensible to adults, but something that they had to take notice of.

I part company with Nik Cohn during the last third of the book. According to Cohn, the Beatles abandoned the faith when they began to improve the quality of their music. 'Musically, *Rubber Soul* was the subtlest and most complex thing they'd done and lots of it was excellent' but 'The Beatles were softening up. *Revolver* was a big step forward in ingenuity and again, there was a big step backwards in guts.' Cohn admires the idea and musical quality of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* but 'it wasn't much like pop. It wasn't fast, flash, sexual, loud, vulgar, monstrous or violent. It made no myths. The Beatles make good music, they really do, but since when was pop anything to do with good music?'

Now, we all know that that's rubbish, don't we? Or do we? Cohn's last statement sums up the whole book, and is basically correct: if pop *had* been good music, I would not have discovered it until the age of twenty-one, when I actually began to enjoy *good* music — Beethoven, Bach and the rest. Cohn shows that he believed the publicity about *Sergeant Pepper's* broke barriers, leapt forward, had intelligent lyrics and brilliant music, and was littered with references to LSD. Even in 1963, such a publicity campaign would have ensured the failure of the record. In 1963, no Melbourne disc jockey played Bob Dylan's records ('the kids wouldn't understand him'). In 1962, a rumour spread that the Everly Brothers had failed to arrive at a concert appearance because of a 'drug problem'. If the Everly Brothers had confirmed that rumour, they would have instantly ruined their careers, which did they eventually anyway. Who wanted good music in pop songs before 1965? No one, except the people who recalled early Sinatra and Nat King Cole, and welcomed the chart successes of 'Telstar' and the 'Theme from *Exodus*'. The publicity for *Sergeant Pepper's* was a fraud because songs like 'Lovely Rita', 'Fixing a Hole', 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' and 'With a Little Help from My Friends' beat out the same relentless rock rhythm as the Beatles had played three years before. George Martin disguised the rock with some elaborate orchestration, but he couldn't hide the banality of most of the songs. At the same time, not even Nik Cohn could deny the terrifying power of 'A Day in the Life', which, by itself, lit pop's future path. But we are not talking about music, as Cohn says. We are both talking about what rock and roll meant to its audience.

Lee Harding says that 'Nik Cohn just grew up, that's all'. So did I (in a way), but not before I saw why rock and roll changed from one kind of religion to another. It changed because the audience changed; or rather, a whole audience grew up. Millions of rock and roll addicts reached their twenties at about the same time. The twenty-year-olds learned to think, love and perform music, and some of them even read books. They didn't have to fight their parents anymore, because many of them had already become parents. They did have to fight (for their lives, this time) against the people who built the bomb and staged the Vietnam War. Rock and roll supplied the battle magic against the War, and the

*raison d'être* for the fight: 'Make the world safe for rock and roll.' The rock and roll fans did not become teddy boys or truck drivers. They became editors of university student magazines and broadcasters for the BBC. Perhaps this explains why articles about 'rock' appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Listener* within a week of each other in December 1971, why *The Times Educational Supplement* featured a very learned article about the Who, and why *Rolling Stone* published one of the best recent analyses of the American presidential elections. Why did people get serious about rock and roll? Not because campus intellectuals suddenly discovered rock, but because today's thirty-year-old professors and steely-minded revolutionaries always knew rock and roll. Now they rock with their heads as well as their nerves and blood.

What can you say to Nik Cohn? He shows what rock and roll meant to him, but he fails to see why rock means so much in 1972. He underestimates the influence of acid, he calls Dylan 'boring' and he sees nothing in Paul Simon's lyrics (which I like better than Dylan's) but 'softness and tenderness, wistful ironies'. He dismisses Cream (the second-best rock band ever) in half a page, and thinks that Procol Harum 'only inept reviving "Whiter Shade of Pale" in different names and disguises'. In the last few pages of *AWopBopALooBop AlopBamBoom*, Cohn implies over and over again that he doesn't want to listen to the new stuff. He hopes that it will go away, and that his style of rock will reappear. He still thinks pop singles hit parades show an accurate picture of the pop music industry, although nobody over sixteen buys pop singles these days.

Will the maniacs with pianos and guitars ever return? They didn't go away. They have longer hair and they read books and they sell far more records than Little Richard ever did. But they remain just as mad, just as obsessive. On the last page of the last chapter of *AWopBopALooBop AlopBamBoom*, Nik Cohn says that rock and roll 'has to be intelligent and simple both, it has to carry its implications lightly and it has to be fast, funny, sexy, obsessive, a bit epic.' It still is.

— Bruce Gillespie, March 1972

Leigh Edmonds' editorial reply, 1972

Yesterday I went out to visit Bruce and he gave me this article. At the same time we listened to a few records, the Faces' *A Nod's as Good as a Wink to a Blind Horse* and Rod Stewart's *Every Picture Tells a Story* and a couple of others, what you might call new rock. Also, recently I've been leaving the radio on a bit and listening to whatever it is playing. I haven't been listening to much rock and roll recently — that means for the last two years — and when I consider why I find that it is because, for me, the guts went out of rock sometime in 1970.

Well, I suppose that the guts did not really go out of rock and roll. All that happened was that the music changed and took a new form. Some people can relate themselves to this form and still call it good rock and roll but to me it's gone soft and useless; and, like Nik Cohn, I end up complaining that it's no good any more.

Cohn had his golden age a long time ago and it seemed to come to an end in the middle of the sixties. My golden age dates from then on until the beginning of this decade. Cream, Jimi Hendrix and Big Brother and the Holding Company were my idols. The Cream laid down such music that even now I can't fully believe that it exists; Jimi Hendrix was the greatest of all 'maniacs

with guitars' and he was everything that either Nik Cohn or I could hnope for: 'fast, funny, sexy, obsessive, a bit (more than just a bit) epic' . . . the whole bit. Hearing Big Brother for the first time was something like how Bruce tells of hearing 'River Deep Mountain High', only much, much more so. And while all this was going on, there were the Beatles, Stones, Who and a couple of other groups releasing records enough to make each visit to the record shop a delightful nightmare of decision making.

As Bruce pointed out, rock and roll is obsessive. If it isn't, it isn't rock. Rock is a whole culture, a way of thinking and living. The music is the obsession that occupies your mind; it's like driving down the road at seventy with Jerry Lee Lewis or the Stones or the Cream or the Faces (it all depends which year) pounding something into your head and making everything seem magical. Modern rock seems far more introspective than the rock of earlier years. It seems more the music to sit and listen quietly to and if you are sitting and listening quietly and thinking about what you are listening to you are always making judgments on the music and you are not obsessed. You are not involved in the music; you are a listener and a bystander.

As I remember, in the early pages of the book Cohn says that in periods of social stress the music is soft and luxuriant because people want to have something gently wash away fears and frustrations. Only in the times when things are going (or seem to be going) right with the world do people feel able to get involved in music that carries and is concerned with fears and frustrations. The fifties were years when people could indulge themselves in various flights of fancy and rock and roll was what happened. As the years passed things got tougher and the world is not in a very good way these days. The music is going soft because the people listening to it want to hear something more pleasant.

And, well, things change, and if rock and roll is no longer something which I enjoy being current with, I am not going to complain. I grew up with it and it is still with me, but only when I pull records out of my collection and play them again — and only records I seem to buy are the ones that I didn't buy earlier and the further releases by groups I still dig.

Apart from all this there are an awful lot of things I don't see eye to eye with Bruce or Nik on. Phil Spector is one of them, for I can hardly stand to listen to anything that he has messed around with. The lauded Spector sound is musical forgery. I don't know how many times I've listened to George Harrison's 'Wah Wah' and been frustrated to find that all that fine musical backing is nothing at all . . . nothing at all that you can actually listen to. But this is the end of the page and I stop.

#### — Leigh Edmonds, 1972

Bruce Gillespie in 2005 tries to remember what it was like listening to music in 1972

I can remember 1972 pretty clearly — better than I remember most years since. Years had shapes in those days. 1972 was the year when Chris Winter announced in his sepuchral voice on 3LO's night program when he was actually allowed to play LP tracks instead of singles: 'Here is the best rock and roll band in the world.' It was one of the tracks from the Faces' *A Nod's As Good as a Wink to a Blind Horse*, their third LP, which had just

come out. Until then, all I had heard from the Faces on regular pop radio was one of the tracks from that album: Rod Stewart and the Faces' version of Chuck Berry's 'Memphis, Tennessee'. It was okay, but nothing to justify Chris Winter's judgment.

I bought the album, and found several tracks that proved to me that rock and roll was back! 'Stay with Me', 'Too Bad' and 'That's All You Need' had that ferocious energy of the early rock and roll singles and the best Stones albums. They were all a lot better than Rod Stewart's 'Maggie Mae', the rather plodding track that was a hit at the same time. That track came from *Every Picture Tells a Story*. I looked at the liner notes. They were the same band members as on the Faces albums. Rod Stewart sang on the Faces albums. It was all one act, so I bought the first three Rod Stewart albums as well. And most of the tracks on *Every Picture Tells a Story* were as good as those on *A Nod's as Good as a Wink*. The combination didn't last long: four Stewart albums and four Faces albums and a concert LP. Stewart got a big head, toned down his sound, and hired a new band. Ronnie Lane left the Faces. Ronnie Wood joined the Rolling Stones. By 1975, it seemed, rock and roll really was dead.

Rereading my own article, I cannot believe that I ever disliked the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*. I still play it constantly. A few years ago, it was finally remastered for CD, and I could enjoy it doubly. But it was very different from the previous two Stones albums, *Beggars Banquet* and *Let It Bleed*. Like any fan, I wanted the Stones to stay the same, and not progress. In 1975, they got the message, and they haven't changed a thing ever since. The first rock group to discover it could make a half a billion dollars a year by becoming a museum to its own past.

My article reminds me of the 1972 I didn't know existed; you can see all my references to the policies of our AM radio stations. Until FM radio came along in 1975, what in America was called 'underground music' was *really* underground in Australia — just names mentioned in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Except for odd late-night programs such as Chris Winter's and Graeme Berry's, no radio station in Australia played the LPs that actually provided the soundtrack for the seventies. I discovered them much later, through friends. In 1972, Leigh Edmonds had his ear to that indefinable ground by which people communicate news about music that isn't played publicly. He already had LPs by Janis Joplin/Big Brother and the Holding Company. That's the only way I heard them. Leigh had heard Jefferson Airplane. I had heard *about* them, but heard almost none of their music until the late seventies. In the last twenty years I've kept buying groundbreaking albums, released in 1972, of which I knew nothing in that year. Two great albums were played on radio here in 1972: Neil Young's *Harvest*, whose wispy hippy ditties put me off his music for four years until Roger Weddall played for me the LPs that show Young as the greatest rock and roll performer since the Stones and the Faces; and the Stones' *Exile on Main Street*. The rock critics hated it, then decided it was the definitive Stones album. And the Stones have been trying to make another *Exile* ever since, and that's how the story of rock and roll ended.

Except, of course, it upped its tent, left pop radio, and set up camp in something called 'alt.country'. But that's for an article I haven't written yet.

#### — Bruce Gillespie, January 2005

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