

Moon Dance Memories from the Shepherd Era

Fast fading recollections of an iconic Brisbane band by Bruce Dickson (June 2013).

In some meaningful ways *Shepherd* were the original 'indie' band back in the 70s.....they certainly did their own thing, and definitely their own way.

In hindsight, they were also if anything 'pre-punk' in outlook with the relative simplicity of their approach to music itself and their focus on non-mainstream industry values. Even if (because of the extent of their actual talent and training), each band member was outstanding musically and when playing as a group they were probably anything but your average garage band!

Besides their top 40 hit *Birmingham Station* (a song listing on the 4BC charts), *Shepherd* were renowned for their periodic but highly anticipated Moon Dances — staged at slightly remote, but highly atmospheric places like that magical old rural community hall out at (then unspoilt) upper Brookfield. Of course they played at other venues too on that western side of Brisbane, including the University campus and as a featured act at the odd Triple Zed Joint Effort.

I seem to recall that these Moon Dances had such powerful word of mouth promotion that all it seemed to take was the posting of a few posters on street poles around Toowong and the Western Suburbs to result in a large and enthusiastic turnout. Issues of avoiding any undue police attention may also have been lurking in the background I suspect, because this was the era in which authoritarian Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's henchmen were happily setting out to bust anyone they could. Moon Dances would certainly have been qualifying as totally subversive events in their minds!

And the atmosphere at those which I attended was absolutely amazing, very friendly, trippie and a highlight of the times. With the diverse influences of *Shepherd's* heady music becoming the finishing touch to it all. They had really built up their own family of avid followers and fans. A 'cult' band and following of the best kind! Think there was always that shared sense that people were watching a bunch of truly great musicians in action.

What we were hearing from the stage spoke loudly for itself. Also there was the attention they paid to delivering outstanding vocals and harmonies. And by playing within the context of, for example moon dances and country halls, they in effect really took the experience of 'experiencing their music' up to a higher plain of enjoyment. Music, full moon, nature, tropical scents in the air, rural sounds and sights, illegal substances and more — it was definitely one of the definitive personal and communally based experiences of the times for so many sitting on the edge of Brisbane and authoritarian Queensland life back then. Definitely very relaxed and no bullshit, again being totally in keeping with the band's general outlook.

In the early Seventies I had worked with *Shepherd* on a collaborative project called *A Scar on the Mind* which (thanks to a risky but thankfully repaid bank loan) was able to be co-produced with Alan Davies and staged at the University of Queensland's Schonell Theatre for a week. The theme was the Vietnam War which even then was still inexorably dragging on. And for this show, *Shepherd* had generously written a remarkable original set of songs, which formed the first, scene-setting half.

The second half was a total change of pace, comprising a spoken series of five powerful letters written by a drafted US soldier (who if I recall correctly had been an artist when called up) to his wife which over the eight months leading into his death in action traced his changing thoughts, fears, premonitions and growing sense of insanity. All responses to the then little acknowledged process of becoming brutalized by the violence of war. These letters were powerfully and emotionally read by his wife and recorded for replay on tape. (She was revisiting, and basically reliving them, after a period of not having read them for some time.)

The most appropriate but edgy way in which to play the taped letters seemed to be simply focusing the attention of the audience on them by darkening the theatre and allowing a single blue spot to hit the stage. It was a gamble that such a simple technique would be accepted by audiences, but on the whole they were really emotionally moved and engaged. Some gaining an insight into the psychological madness of war and its tragic consequences via a seemingly far more personal route. And for all involved, in a manner that years of 'talking about Vietnam from a distance', or even via TV, most likely never achieved to the same extent.

Co-producer Alan Davies had met the wife of the soldier in San Francisco while on an extended visit and she had given him permission to use the recorded letters in such a show to bring home a deeper understanding of Vietnam and its impacts. As well as the mental dilemmas and sense of loss for all involved. (As with *Shepherd's* original score and soundtrack, this tape also still exists and may yet surface again on the world wide web.)

While for younger generations the show's content undoubtedly hit hard, I recall anti-war activist and Union leader Hugh Hamilton, who had attended one night, commenting that (because of pre-existing understandings) for someone of his generation, its impact was not quite as strong — as the horrors of war were already strongly personally understood. But he recognised its value to others as an experience capable of building greater personal insight in these regards and over the continuing Vietnam conflict itself.

Shepherd's original score for *A Scar on the Mind* was of course inspired by, and linked into the soldier's letters and their powerfully articulated contents. Particularly the war's tragic and 'real time' conveyed, psychological impacts and powerfully felt human experiences and insights.

To build a bigger live onstage ensemble and sound for this show, *Shepherd's* band members — who had special enduring links to the Queensland Conservatorium of Music — invited various musician friends (including string players), who were still studying at Gardens Point, to join them.

There were also artistic innovations in relation to the first half's backdrop through the use of what was described as 'painted film'. Under the name 'Red Circle', Paul Memmott and John Mainwaring creatively played with some spliced together 35mm film strips — the transparent celluloid being painted and/or holes cut and other techniques applied to great effect. This film strip was projected on to a cinemascope sized, suspended backdrop comprised of long adjoining sheets of shining roofing steel — donated by a BHP offshoot (as an acknowledged sponsor) for the purpose. (Unbelievably heavy and would certainly have killed or maimed if they had fallen!)

Above and beyond this specific project, *Shepherd* members were otherwise very engaged in the era politically and socially.....all very aware and activist of mind, but naturally primarily through their music.....being such an important and influential medium during those times.

I subsequently also had dealings with some of the band members and fellow musicians for my Uni Revue film (a dream sequence which was linked into live stage action) for the 1977 student production *Life wasn't meant to be.....* again presented at the Schonell.

I had shown this and a series of *Bjelke Bitter* satirical beer ads on the full Schonell Theatre screen, projected in Super 8mm from the normal projection booth (using the best projector available at the time). Seem to recall how surprised Australia's now award winning documentary maker Larry Zetlin was after seeing the films and hearing that they were shot in Super 8 and not 16mm, as he had initially thought was the case. Making do in the best way possible or affordable at the time was certainly the only way to go in this pre-digital era.

If we are talking about formative and potentially powerful social and political influences and growth through cultural and specifically music related means, *Shepherd* assumed a highly respected position and influential role in this activist era within the Brisbane context.

I admire very much the way they so deliberately engaged with their own 'community' and locale, particularly a basically limited place (in terms of experience options) like Brisbane back then. But nonetheless a place whose residents and youth still had the same important cultural and musical needs and desires of young people anywhere. Brisbane at the time truly was a make your own fun and pleasure place because of such limitations. An essential/life affirming process that *Shepherd* contributed to so rewardingly and wholeheartedly.

And because of their remarkable and 'mature' song writing and musician skills (some formally acquired at the Conservatorium) let alone their great levels of self-awareness of their cultural and most talented of Australian musicians from that era.

Somehow they seemed more comfortable in their own skins (that quiet, not loud, maturity thing often seen amongst folk and roots influenced musicians) than many fellow musicians.....no pretense, no airs, no BS, just doing what came naturally and without undue fanfare or egotistically based self-promotion.

Very much a reflection of a lot of the musicians commonly found across America and Australia these days who believe in music for its own sake and don't automatically attach notions of fame or wealth to their reasons for playing — instead just loving the music and its roots, and reaching people and audiences with it for reasons not based on money or commercialized notoriety alone.

As most of us soon learn, musicians and the music scene — besides being a vital source of pleasure, enjoyment and revelation — can too often also be so full of egos, crap and superficiality. *Shepherd*, being totally tuned into the times (including the somewhat oppressive nature of Queensland in particular) — whether they fully realised it or not — were the personification musically (and personally) of what was so necessary to us all in that era. Namely a very joyous and additional antidote to the political extremes, disillusionments and downers of life in the 'Deep North'. Not surprisingly, given these years also marked the arrival of the psychedelic era (as well as 1973's landmark *Nimbin Aquarius Festival*), there was also the opportunity that some of the era's music provided to journey previously unexplored sensory and inner dimensions to life.

Shepherd helped remind people of the power and importance of seeking and taking pleasure in the essential celebratory aspects and pleasures to life.....no matter what was being dealt with in these other ultimately more transitory and more overtly political respects. Retaining a sense of awareness and injustice and acting on that was one thing, but allowing Joh Bjelke-Petersen and the National Party to keep you defining life by the latter alone was another!

So maybe that is the key 'take away' in terms of their legacy.....that *Shepherd's* true gift may well have been the way they generated music and experiences that were fully conscious of the times, but which also totally delivered on the most life affirming, sensory and mindful aspects of what music (at its best) is always capable of.....regardless of other externalities.