

2016

## Nothing happens here: Songs about Perth

Jon Stratton

*Independent Scholar, Perth, Australia, jon\_stratton22@outlook.au*

Adam Trainer

*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013>



Part of the [Australian Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stratton, J., & Trainer, A. (2016). Nothing happens here: Songs about Perth. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616657884>

[10.1177/0725513616657884](https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616657884)

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of: Stratton, J., & Trainer, A. (2016), Nothing happens here: Songs about Perth. *Thesis Eleven*, 135(1), 34-50. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. Available [here](#)

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/2163>

## **Nothing Happens Here: Songs About Perth**

Jon Stratton

Adam Trainer

### **Abstract**

This essay examines Perth as portrayed through the lyrics of popular songs written by people who grew up in the city. These lyrics tend to reproduce the dominant myths about the city, that it is isolated, that it is self-satisfied, that little happens there. Perth became the focus of song lyrics during the late 1970s time of punk with titles such as ‘Arsehole Of The Universe’ and ‘Perth Is A Culture Shock.’ Even the Eurogliders’ 1984 hit, ‘Heaven Must Be There,’ is based on a rejection of life in Perth. However, Perth was also home to Dave Warner whose songs in the 1970s and early 1980s offered vignettes, which is itself a title of one of Warner’s tracks, of the youthful, male suburban experience. The essay goes on to examine songs by the Triffids, Bob Evans, Sleepy Township and the Panda Band.

**Keywords: Perth; songs; music; place; isolation; lyrics**

### **Myths of the City**

Every city has its myths. These both convey the experience of that particular city and help to construct that experience. These myths are key elements in the formation of each city’s idiosyncratic identity. They develop in addition to the more general post-urbanisation, western myth of city life, that in John Connell and Chris Gibson’s words: ‘The city was a promise of things illegal and forbidden elsewhere, of drugs and deals and strange liaisons, a

place of excitement and danger, of decay and difference, but not a place of boredom and tranquillity' (2003: 74). At least since the early 1960s popular music has played an important role in the reproduction of ideas about cities. As Ola Johansson and Thomas Bell put it more generally: 'Popular music ... is a cultural form that actively produces geographic discourses and can be used to understand broader social relations and trends, including identity, ethnicity, attachment to place, cultural economies, social activism, and politics' (2009: 2). Connell and Gibson note how myths relate to place, and indeed to cities, and not just cities in general but help to construct and reproduce the mythic understanding of particular cities: 'Myths of place are often reinforced in music itself ... [for example] the many music texts dedicated to the cities of New York or Los Angeles (from Frank Sinatra and Billy Joel to Public Enemy and 2Pac)' (2003: 6). There are, as we shall see, many music texts about Perth. These produce and reproduce dominant myths of the city. Indeed, one of the most important myths about Perth is that it does not have the kind of city life described in the quotation above from Connell and Gibson.

In this essay we are concerned with the mythic construction of Perth in popular music by those brought up in the city and who either lived there when they composed their songs or composed them reflecting back on their experience of life in Perth. For a long time, until at least the advent of the web and, later, of social media, Perth musicians have often felt it necessary to travel and live elsewhere, usually Melbourne or Sydney in the first instance, to find a place accepting of their creativity and to get their music recorded and heard by an audience outside of Perth. Some would argue that this is still the case. In 1988 the novelist Rodney Hall wrote a travel book called *Home: A Journey through Australia*. His description of Perth combined the dominant myths about Perth:

People assure me that Perth—the world's remotest city—is vivacious, exciting and beautiful. I have to admit that I find it dull. I returned to the west last year,

hoping to encounter the place I still hear reported as being there. For me, it doesn't exist: just a little city fully absorbed with navel-gazing. Its loyal citizens, obsessed with cleanliness and sunbathing, congratulate each other on living in a place so vivacious, so exciting and so beautiful. On weekdays Perth strikes me as half-dead—and totally dead on Sunday. The location is fine, the Swan River describes a broad sweep around parklands and freeways, which usurp all the most interesting sites. People are friendly, this cannot be denied, and the pace is leisurely. Yet the city seems to have no heart, no shape, no character. In search of character you should catch the first available train (or taxi, if desperate) to the port of Fremantle. ([1988] 1990: 119-120)

Here, Hall reproduces four of the myths that shape the experience of Perth; that it is isolated, that it is inward-looking, that it is small, that its inhabitants are concerned with superficial things and with having a good time; that Perth is, as he puts it, dull.

An essay dealing with the reproduction of myths is not the place to debunk those myths but it is worth pointing out, if only to show how the strength of myths can overwhelm empirical reality, the fallacies in some of these claims. On the matter of Perth's mythic isolation it is worth quoting David Whish-Wilson from his book on Perth:

Perth is often described as the world's most isolated capital city. It's a title less relevant than it was for most of the twentieth century, when flying interstate was expensive and the Nullarbor Plain was crossed via dirt track. Before the 1890s gold rush, people didn't see themselves as being isolated from the eastern states, where almost nobody came from (because nobody wanted to come). Instead they measured distance from the mother country, and of course Perth is closer to Britain than either Sydney or Melbourne. Perth became by definition an isolated capital after Federation in 1901, only eleven years after

the colony had been granted self-government, and only thirty-odd years before it tried to secede from Australia. (2013: 12)

Perth's isolation is relative to where one is describing Perth in relation to. Perth is also closer to south-east Asia, to Bali and to Singapore than are the eastern cities of Australia. Even as a capital city Perth is not the most isolated; that prize goes to Honolulu. Perth's distance from the eastern cities has led to a certain self-sufficiency as Whish-Wilson indicates which can easily be read by Australian visitors from 'over east' as navel-gazing.

In 1980 Perth's population was a little under 900,000. This was not small. For comparison, in 1980 in the United States, Dallas had just over 900,000 inhabitants and San Diego just under. In Britain, Sheffield at this same time had a much smaller population of rather over 500,000 which was roughly the same as that of Liverpool. By 2000, Perth's population had increased by about a million to nearly 1,900,000. Nevertheless, the rhetoric that Perth is small has, as we shall see, been perpetuated in a number of song lyrics. It is a central theme in the Bank Holidays' 'The City Is Too Small' released on an EP in 2004. Here they tell us that: 'The city is too small for honesty/I guess I'll keep it quiet now.' Lyricist and vocalist Nat Carson is arguably referring here to the small town mentality that becomes part of the myth of Perth as small – an assertion that in a town with a close-knit population personal grievances are best left unsaid for fear of causing social disharmony. In relatively contained music scenes, which have become a feature of Perth's music industry,<sup>1</sup> and to which the Bank Holidays arguably belonged, such secrecy becomes not only an internalised personal characteristic, but one that has implications for an entire community.

Secrecy has also been a defining element of Perth's political history, in particular the notorious WA Inc scandal of the 1980s, the time when Carson was growing up, in which government and industry grew so entwined that many questionable and sometimes illegal deals took place. Whish-Wilson explains that:

In 1982, author and poet Dorothy Hewitt wrote that in the case of Perth, ‘the corruption is partly hidden, the worm in the bud is secretive, and mainly bears only silent witness.’ Perth’s aura of manufactured innocence, one that presents itself as ‘naive, self-congratulatory and deeply conservative’, was in fact, ‘the perfect field for corruption’. By the late 1980s, and the dealings that became known as WA Inc, the cronyism was very much out in the open. (2013: 76)

Carson’s lyrics describe well the experience that keeping honesty hidden smooths over the problems that could rupture Perth’s pleasant life-style in a city experienced as small but, as we shall see, this also generates a feeling of claustrophobia.

It is in addition important to comment on Hall’s description of Perth as dull. In the early 2000s dull became a key negative rhetorical trope for the experience of Perth. It was most probably popularised in the form of Perth being labelled ‘dullsville’ by the Lonely Planet’s travel guide in which in 2000 Rebecca Chau and Virginia Jealous wrote:

When many a traveller came to visit in the 1990s, the city was dismissed as ‘dullsville’. The streets were dead, there was nowhere to party. Locals were just too lackadaisical, at home, in their boardshorts and desert boots, tinkering with the barbecue. (2000: 52)

Most likely in response to the travel guide’s use of the term, Perth’s daily paper *The West Australian* started a debate about its applicability in their November 16<sup>th</sup> issue of that year. Tara Brabazon has critiqued this perception arguing that: ‘The problem confronting Perth planners in particular is that the denizens like living in the suburbs and have no great need to travel to ‘the centre’’ (2014: 55) She writes that:

A key weakness [in policy discussions of Perth] is the excessive policy attention to Perth’s Central Business District. It is—as with many modern cities—a dead centre. The impact of this dead centre is that the suburbs become

more important to social cohesion and the building of identity. The majority of Perth's population hugs the coast and creates clusters of community from Mandurah to Mindarie Keys. The water is blue. The local shopping is adequate for both the weekly grocery shop and the occasionally [sic] extravagant purchase. (2014: 53)

Here, Brabazon is celebrating the suburban lifestyle that Hall, and then Chau and Jealous, deride as dull. This celebration of the city's relaxed pace and leisurely life-style is echoed in a later publication by Lonely Planet, which in suggesting that 'easy-going Perth rivals its east-coast brethren for quality of life' (2009: 306), arguably sought to rectify its initial assessment.

### **Depicting Life in Perth: the Triffids and the Panda Band**

There are two songs by the Triffids that should be discussed at this point because of their depiction of life in Perth. They are 'Spanish Blue' and 'Bottle Of Love'. They have key similarities and important differences and can be understood as bookending the Triffids' career. The Triffids were a highly regarded Perth post-punk group led by David McComb which began in 1978 and disbanded in late 1989. We will expand on the Triffids and their attitude to Perth later (on McComb's lyrics about Perth see Stratton, 2008). The Triffids second single, released in 1982, was 'Spanish Blue'. Although it doesn't mention Perth, the life-style described fits well with the ways, both positive and negative, that have been linked to Perth being dull. Spanish Blue is a colour. In McComb's lyrics the colour becomes a code for Perth. Technically, Spanish Blue is 100 percent saturated and 75 percent bright. It is the colour of the sea that Brabazon mentions. In McComb's lyrics we are told: Nothing much happens here/Nothing gets done/But you get to like it/You get to like the beating of the sun/The washing of the sun/In Spanish Blue.' Whish-Wilson comments on the quality of Perth's light:

‘Ask many Perth expatriates what they miss about the city and the answer is often the light. It’s not a romantic or a nostalgic light, not the playground light of our childhoods, but a light so clean and sharp that it feels like an instrument of grace, seeing a new world with new eyes. (2013: 217)

It is this light that creates the Spanish Blue of Perth’s coastal sea. For Whish-Wilson and others including, it would seem, McComb, it is a cleansing light, a light that washes away cares and, perhaps, sins.

In 2004 the Panda Band released ‘Sleepy Little Deathtoll Town’. It won the WAMI (West Australian Music Industry) Song of the Year award. The track’s refrain carries a similar idea of being scoured clean: ‘And it rains down so damn hard in this city/Don't it cleanse our souls man/Don't they shine pretty like a crown/In my sleepy little deathtoll town.’ Here it is not light but the heavy winter rain that cleanses people. Grace is achieved through the commutation of sin. We have been told that the Panda Band meant the lyrics literally; that is, the song is about the death toll on Perth’s roads. However, the lyrics are embedded in the Perth experience. What the Panda Band’s track signals in its titular use of ‘deathtoll’ is the sense of a Gothic substratum to Perth’s cleanliness. The deathtoll is best read as referring to the Bell Tower which is centrally positioned on Riverside Drive overlooking the river. Twelve of the bells were a gift to Perth during the Australian Bicentennial Year of 1988. They come from the London church of St Martin-in-the-Fields. Combined with a further six bells they are now known as the Swan Bells. They hang in a purpose-built tower and are rung four times a week. The tower was opened in 2000. For many it has become another symbol of Perth’s blandness—the tower itself has been notoriously described as ‘like a cockroach humping a praying mantis’ (quog, 2007) while crankynick has commented: ‘I’ve always thought that I’d quite like it if they’d built it 3 times the size. It’s the mediocrity that shits me, to be honest’ (crankynick, 2007). In describing the tower as having a deathtoll, analogous to a



death knell, there is a suggestion of the understanding of Perth as stultifying. The bells in the tower toll for death rather than life. Perth's grace, its cleanliness, overlays Perth's darker history from dubious mining deals to the treatment of Aborigines to the reoccurrence of serial killers from Eric Edgar Cooke who was hung for murder in 1964, to the Birnies who in 1986 raped five women and murdered four, the fifth managing to escape, to the Claremont Serial Killer, responsible for at least two deaths of young women and one disappearance in the mid-1990s.<sup>ii</sup> The Claremont Serial Killer has never been brought to justice. Yet Perth offers a pleasant and mundane face to the world. As the Panda Band's lyrics tell us: 'And all the girls are dreaming/Of screen stars and health spas/Of facials and massage/And all the boys/The boys just want the girls to settle down.' Here is the Perth life scrubbed clean, indeed in a state of grace. There is no suggestion of the terrible things that have happened, and continue to happen, in the city. The girls fantasise about unobtainable film stars and making themselves look pretty while the boys want to marry them and settle down in suburban respectability. In this town the worst that people think can happen is, 'Crash your cool cars kids and watch the citizens all gather round.' We assume that in this distraction, this destruction of private property, nobody gets very hurt. We should note that in this song Perth is not only sleepy, that is not really a part of the world of cities described by Connell and Gibson, but, again, it is a little town—not a city of nearly two million people.

Returning to 'Spanish Blue', the lyrics go on to describe sitting on the footpath and drinking; it would seem that this is nothing more than a way to pass the time. We are told: 'Once I felt some pain/But it was gone in a flash/A flash and dirt and ash'. Well before dull became a common description of the city, McComb identifies how the life-style is one in which even pain is dulled and disappears in this pleasant environment. 'Bottle Of Love' is on *The Black Swan*, released in 1989, at the end of the Triffids' existence, their last studio album. It is a song about neediness and resilience: 'I'm a little man/But I need more love than

the next man/I'm a starving man/I take all I can/Oh, from that bottle of love.' At the end of the song, there is a reprise of the lyrics of 'Spanish Blue', but slightly transformed: 'Well nothing happens here/Not too much gets done/But you get to like it/You get to like the drinking and the swimming around/Oh, passing around the bottle of love.' The bottle is both a bottle of love, as in the first verse, but also a bottle of alcohol, as in 'Spanish Blue'. It dulls the pain and helps to make life pleasant. Now the Spanish Blue is translated into the sea itself where people swim, enjoying a life-style where nothing much happens. In 'Bottle Of Love' this final verse contrasts with the previous verses in which the singer identifies his neediness and his inner strength. The return to Perth's sybaritic life-style functions as nostalgia and also as a kind of mnemonic for a life lost to a harsher world beyond Perth.

### **Perth and suburbia**

At the core of the experience of Perth's dullness is the myth of Perth's suburbia. Central to any discussion of the Perth music scene in the 1970s and 1980s is the question of whether Perth had an inner city—or, better for our purposes here, whether Perth musicians and fans experienced Perth as having an inner city. The reason for this is that in the eastern cities of Sydney and Melbourne inner cities were where the alternative rock scene, which in general terms we can say began with punk, was situated. Graeme Turner contrasts the subcultural affectations of Sydney's inner urban alternative rock subculture with those of rock fans from the city's suburban west during the 1980s:

The inner city fans dressed in black, adopting an internationalised urban style that referred for its signifiers of cool to the centres of Europe, or at worst New York; the Westies looked like surfers, in pastel T-shirts and blue jeans, styles purpose-built for the mythic Australian beach. (Turner, 1992)

Turner's history is a part of an argument about the evolution of Oz Rock as a suburban music form.<sup>iii</sup> More experimental forms of music from punk onwards are usually located in the inner

city. Elsewhere Jon Stratton (Stratton 2006), following Donald Horne, has argued that Australian cities only started generating inner cities in the 1970s. In *The Lucky Country*, published in 1964, Horne notes that Sydney, even with the densely populated King's Cross, was only then just beginning to imitate 'a really sophisticated city life'. Australia's punk scene, then, was almost coterminous with the establishment in Sydney and Melbourne of an inner city life-style.

One of the problems for Perth was the lack of an appropriate built environment for such an inner city life-style. Kate Shaw argues that:

Alternative cultures have a curious relationship with place. ... They find [space] in the interstices of the urban form: in the disinvested inner city; in the derelict buildings, deindustrialized sites, under-used docks and railway yards of advanced capitalist economies; in unregulated, unpoliced 'no-man's lands'. Underground clubs have low overheads; empty sheds and warehouses often come at low or no rent, bars and pubs in run-down inner city areas do not charge at the door and drinks are cheap. The low costs create for interaction and formation, and economic space for experimentation and flexibility. (2009: 149)

Little of this building stock existed in Perth. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century Perth's population was 111, 400. However, already it was becoming a suburban city:

By 1911 Perth was ringed with suburbs. Suburbia developed rapidly in the 1920s, fed by immigration from Britain and natural population growth and shaped by new tramways, bus routes, and the motorcar. (Gregory, 2014: 96)

When Perth's population increased significantly in the 1970s and 1980s, there was little in the way of older building stock suitable for the development of an inner city life-style. In 1970 Perth's population was around 611,000 people. In ten years it had grown to the 898,000

people we have mentioned earlier. Over a forty year span from 1960 to 2000, Perth's population increased by 221 percent compared to Sydney's increase over the same period of 71.7 percent and Melbourne's of 72.3 percent. This new population spread in new suburbs mostly up and down Perth's coastline. Writing about changes in retailing, Jenny Gregory tells us that: 'The suburbanization of retailing ... was fundamental to long term economic shifts that were impacting on the metropolitan area as a whole' (2003: 183). She goes on to connect this with 'the growth of large residential developments in the outer suburbs. Between 1969 and 1973 ninety-two new shopping centres had been approved by local government authorities' (183-184). This is the beginning of the suburban spread about which Brabazon writes.

How was this suburbia experienced? Beginning their argument with Britain, Connell and Gibson argue that:

If rock celebrated the inner city, suburbia was a place of contempt and comedy, at least in the British music of the 1960s, with the Kinks' 'Well Respected Man' (1966) and Manfred Mann's 'Semi-detached Suburban Mr James' (1966); ... Two decades later, Blur reprised 1960s pop, satirising suburbia and again delineating a dreary, repetitive and soulless landscape (Medhurst 'Negotiating the gnome zone'), while Suede celebrated suburban alienation, repressive stability and the sense of lives going nowhere, where 'home' is a place of unease (Frith 'The suburban sensibility in British pop and rock'). Suburbia exuded unfashionability and boredom; glamour and excitement necessitated transcending the suburbs. (2003: 74-75)

They extend their argument to Australia by discussing Sydney band, the Whitlams, and their championing of inner city community life against 'suburban blandness and materialism.' Here we find that, in Britain, as in Australia, there was an inner-city, cosmopolitan rejection

of suburbia and its values. Michael Bracewell similarly identifies all that he sees wrong with British suburban life by comparing it to life in the inner city. He quotes EM Forster from *Maurice* writing about suburbia: 'It was a land of facilities, where nothing had to be striven for, and success was indistinguishable from failure' and expands on this:

Fair or not, Forster's anatomy of the suburban condition suggests a breeding ground for disaffection. But this is not the suffering and struggle for reform by the industrial or inner cities, bringing with it its own cultural response; rather, it is a reflective state—a brooding non-conformity in which preparation for rebellion may well be foreshortened by the very comfort and complacency of the suburban surroundings. (1998: 121)

Inner cities are thought to breed the excess of revolution, or at least of transformation, however suburbia offers an easiness of life which leads to stultification and alienation and little else. Here we find a critique of suburbia which is similar to the identification of Perth as dull.

In Perth, as in other Australian cities, the beginning of alternative rock, which roughly coincides with punk, is the true beginning of musicians writing songs about their own cities. However, in other cities, the songs were about parts of the city. Perhaps the best example is Skyhooks, a glam precursor to the more radical inner-city groups, on whose first album, *Living in the 70s*, were songs located in Carlton, Balwyn and Toorak. In Perth, in the main with a crucial exception to which we will return later, the songs were about Perth as a city, about the experience of living in Perth. Perth punk rejected Perth entirely. British punk, in contrast, was much concerned with critiquing the country and its mores, for example Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy In The UK' and the Clash's 'White Riot'.

When punk evolved in Perth during the later 1970s it took as its theme a rejection of Perth's suburban sprawl and the values and life-style that accompanied it. This was most

obvious, in the first instance, in the names the groups chose. Writing about Britain, Dave Laing has argued that ‘punk names, like those of the earlier psychedelic underground groups, aimed to signal some kind of overturning of established meanings and hierarchies of values’ (1985: 47). Laing is thinking of, among others, Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned. Living within the myth of suburbia, how could Perth’s punk groups overturn the meanings and values of suburbia? The Victims chose a name that showed their alienation from the all-embracing niceness of Perth suburban life; similarly, and from an opposing position, the Exterminators. These are names that situate the extreme against the banal. The Cheap Nasties, who formed in 1976, picked a name which marked the group as just the kind of disgusting things—video nasties would be so named a few years later in the early 1980s—that respectable suburbanites would want to eradicate. The Manikins’ name suggests people who appear human but are not. It is a name that has similar connotations to the people taken over by aliens in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a film which happens to have been remade in 1978, and the women replaced with exact but more obliging replicas in *The Stepford Wives* (1972). Both these films function as critiques of suburban life in which it is argued emotion is drained away and people go through the motions of life without any real connection to living. The Triffids named themselves after the alien plants which start growing in suburban gardens in John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids*. These plants look so innocuous that people actually cultivated them before the plants started destroying them and their lives.

The Exterminators, a group which only existed for a few months in late 1977, used to perform a track about Perth of which unfortunately there is no further record, titled ‘Arsehole Of The Universe’. The criticism of Perth’s suburban life is clear from the title. Around 1977 and 1978 the Victims used to perform ‘Perth Is A Culture Shock.’ It was written by James Baker and Dave Faulkner, both of whom would go on to higher profile careers in Australian popular music. The story goes that Baker had gone abroad to New York and London where

he had been in contact with the evolving punk scene. Faulkner tells it like this: “He had been travelling overseas for about six months and he met Sid Vicious [who was the bassist in Sex Pistols from early 1977] and things like that,”

“Sid bought him a beer!”

“James was familiar with all that, so returning to Perth, he felt was a long way down from the excitement he had been feeling elsewhere, so he wrote that lyric” (Wilkinson, 2010).

The lyrics of the first verse describe how the singer has to spend his time at home watching television. The refrain repeats ‘Perth—it is a culture shock’ three times followed by ‘But this is where I’m born’ suggesting that, in the end, there is no escape. The song’s narrator will always carry the taint of Perth’s blandness. The second and final verse is a more direct attack: ‘Everyone says this town is right/But I’m telling you it’s so wrong/No-one wants to change a thing,/You’re all so content with nothing!’<sup>iv</sup> What is unsaid is that what is wrong with Perth is its suburban self-satisfaction and the effect of this is the lack of any intensity and desire for change described in the lyrics. We should remember the EM Forster quotation here. The track suggests that Perthites are prepared to accept anything so long as it does not interfere with their suburban life-style.

These punk attacks on Perth form the beginning of a tradition. In 1984 the Perth pop group Eurogliders released ‘Heaven (Must Be There).’ As a single the track reached number 2 on the Australian chart and number 21 on the American chart. Written by band members Grace Knight, a recent immigrant to Perth from Britain, and Perth-born Bernie Lynch, it was the group’s most successful international hit. Often read as a song about striving for somewhere different, or something better, it is more appropriately understood as, in the first instance, an expression of dislike of living in Perth. The song has few lyrics. It insists that: ‘I want to find a better place’ and ‘I’m searching for a better place’. We are then told: ‘I’m tired

of living in the sand' and 'I'm searching for a better land'. Notoriously, Perth is built on sand. Perthites are known colloquially to those in the eastern states as sandgropers. This lyrical repetition of the search for somewhere better to live emphasises the singer's desire to leave where she is. The refrain makes this desire even clearer: 'Heaven must be there/Well, it's just got to be there/I've never, never seen Eden/I don't wanna live in this place.' If Heaven, or Eden, are elsewhere then in binary logic where she is may well be Hell. The rest of the lyrics repeat these motifs. The total effect is a yearning to escape the present place—Perth, where the group was formed, which goes undescribed but which the lyrics imply is a Hellish place to live.

And yet, as with Baker and Faulkner's lyric for 'Perth Is A Culture Shock', there is a sense in 'Heaven' that Perth cannot be left. If it is left then it follows you and, like Baker, people return. From at least the late 1970s, Perth musicians, along with other creative artists, left the city. James Baker and Dave Faulkner reconvened in Sydney to found the Hoodoo Gurus in 1981. That same year, the Scientists, Kim Salmon's group, for another example, also went to Sydney. Salmon notes that: 'My main memories of [Perth] feature a huge inferiority complex about what was referred to as the "Eastern States", i.e. not some hierarchy of levels of enlightenment but all that was to the east in fact, everywhere in Australia!' (Salmon, 2004). In 1983 the Eurogliders relocated to Sydney. In 1984 the Triffids went to London. This leaving of Perth by young creative artists continued into the twenty-first century. In an article in *The Australian* in 2011 Guy Allenby, invoking the myth of isolation, writes:

'But Perth, which is, along with Honolulu, one of the most remote cities on the planet, apparently remains a less than pulsating place to live, at least for the creative young wanting to hang their hats in a metropolis that hums. As the research project Comparative Capitals (compiled by independent organisation



Form) found, Perth's educated young adults have been leaving the city in significant numbers and relocating to Australia's eastern states. In fact, between 2001 and 2006, while Western Australia's population grew by 157,000 people, the net loss of 25 to 34-year-olds with a university degree was 3 per cent from Perth. During that period the most popular destination among people who left Western Australia's capital was Melbourne, at 39 per cent. Sydney followed with 32 per cent. (Allenby, 2011)

What the article does not talk about is the large number of these diasporic Perthites who return after a shorter or longer period of time to make their life, often their family life, in suburban Perth. On this topic there is Sleepy Township's track, 'Sleepy Township', released in 1996. As the title suggests, the lyrics describe Perth as sleepy, as does the Panda Band's track six years later, for which we might read dull, or at least not vibrant, and as small, as a township. The first two verses sum up precisely the relationship to the city we have been outlining: 'It's been 3 months/Since I left Perth/And in that time I've come to see how much my time there was worth//I've been back twice/Can't keep away/I know I'll probably end up living there some day.' Perth's life-style may not suit Perth's creatives but, it seems, it is a great place to settle down. Sleepy Township's lyricist and vocalist Guy Blackman did not return to Perth to live, settling in Melbourne and building the independent record label that he established in Perth, Chapter Music. In 'Sleepy Township' he name-checks a number of Perth bands from the 1990s, suggesting that part of what he misses, despite Perth's sleepiness is the connectedness of the social groups and sense of community that the city's music scene provides. Blackman wrote about Perth again in 2008, in the song 'Carlton North', referring to the city yet again as a "sleepy town", and suggesting that "boys/in sunny Perth/oh what a waste/with a bucket in every lounge room." These lyrics again reinforce Perth as a town

where there are few options but to pass the time smoking pot, echoing Baker's reliance on television as an escape from Perth's blandness.

It is the ambiguity in the Perth experience, often played out as an ambivalence towards the Perth life-style, which permeates many lyrics about the city. We have already seen some of this ambiguity in Dave McComb's lyrics for the Triffids. Released in 1986, *Born Sandy Devotional* was the group's second album not counting the anthology *Love in Bright Landscapes*, a title which, as we have already seen, was very apt. The cover of *Born Sandy Devotional* is a photograph of Mandurah taken in 1961. It shows the Peel Estuary and a few shacks. By the late 1980s the town was already becoming suburbanised and in the 2000s it has become swallowed up in Perth's coastal suburban spread. Recorded in London, the album is often said to capture a particular understanding of the Perth experience. Whish-Wilson writes that: 'The sound was, as described by Butcher [Bleddyn Butcher wrote a biography of the Triffids], 'both spacious and claustrophobic', exactly how I'd felt as a teenager in a city where it seemed that the brightness was always turned up but the volume turned down' (2013: 148). In a long and sophisticated appreciation of *Born Sandy Devotional*, anwyn, who sees the album as an Australian artefact rather than expressing a specifically Perth experience, writes that:

*'Born Sandy Devotional* deals in immoderate and unrequited love; love in bright and distant landscapes; love and homesickness commingled, and when at last I did come to understand it – one day I put it on to listen to, a last-ditch attempt; I thought, if I don't get The Triffids this time then I never will – I had to be old enough to appreciate the drama but not want to flinch away from it; old enough for it to not sound overwrought and anti-pop; young enough to still know what the drama feels like. I put the record on and then listened to it back-

to-back at least twenty times in two days. I finally got it, suddenly and completely. (2010)

The album is perhaps best understood as an expression of love for a city that rejects all excessive expressions of emotion; a city that people experience as claustrophobic and leave, or want to leave, but to which they almost inevitably return—for the life-style.

This ambivalence is possibly best summed up in one particular track on the album, 'Wide Open Road'. Now regarded as an Australian classic, when it was released as a single the track only reached number 64 on the Australian chart. Ostensibly the lyrics present the feelings at the end of a relationship: 'I wake up in the morning/thinking I'm still by your side/I reach out just to touch you/then I realise/It's a wide open road.' The road, often identified as the long ribbon of tarmac across the Nullarbor Plain that connects Perth with the eastern cities, becomes a metaphor for the possibilities at the end of the relationship; anything is possible. But none of it is wanted. The wide open road is too much space. The song can be read as a metaphor for leaving Perth—which the Eyre Highway offers the possibility for, and is the road much travelled by musicians heading east on tour or to relocate. Perth produces a feeling of claustrophobia while at the same time it is home.

### ***The Perth suburban life***

There has been one more way that musicians have related to the experience of Perth as suburban. This has been to become immersed in the suburban life and write songs which express that suburbanism. The most important Perth artist to take this course was Dave Warner. Warner might best be described as the troubadour of suburbia. On his website Warner writes that he,

set out to do what a couple of years earlier I would have thought of as impossible and certainly un-artistic – to make art from mundane suburban Australian life. Before Howard Arkley or *Neighbours* I decided to celebrate my

ordinariness as a young white middle-class Australian male, not using the fake iconography of Meat Pies and Holden Cars, or an outback I had never known but Football. Bus Stops. Rejection. My life. For me the key was to make it really local – There was *Australian Heat*, there was *Living in WA* but even more locally songs about Bicton: *Bicton Breezes*, *Bicton versus Brooklyn*, *Vignettes*, which was about Fremantle, *Old Stock Rd* and so on. (2013)

Warner was born in Bicton, a Perth suburb between Perth and Fremantle. He formed his first band, Pus, in 1973 and performed songs influenced by the literary American group, the Fugs. His later band, the one with which he is most associated, plainly states his creative interests in its name, Dave Warner's From the Suburbs.

Warner's songs offer a sympathetic exploration of middle-class suburban life in Perth during the 1970s. Sometimes the lyrics directly reference roads or suburbs in Perth. At other times Warner uses his own experience to make more general comments on suburban life. In 'African Summer', a song that compares the heat of a Perth summer with that of southern Africa, he begins by situating himself: 'I'm stretched out on Scarborough Beach right in front of the OBH.' The OBH is the local, Perth acronym for the well-known and much patronised Ocean Beach Hotel which, as it happens, is in Cottesloe rather than the more downmarket Scarborough. Nevertheless, the point is made. This is about a local, Perth experience. 'Old Stock Road' is a track about steamy sex in a car but by using the name of Stock Road Warner places this in southern suburban Perth. 'Phantom' is Warner's most political song from this period. It offers a critique of Perth life under Premier Charles Court. Most particularly, Warner is critical of the equation of development with progress. Talking to the comic strip superhero Phantom, he asks: 'What you gonna do/If the MRPA builds a freeway through your skull cave/Where you gonna screw, Diana and Guran?' The MRPA is the Metropolitan Regional Planning Authority which came into existence in 1963 taking on responsibility for

establishing Perth's transport network. Warner asks Phantom to come to Perth to save us: 'And, I know you'll just love Garden City/Though Devil might have to stay outside/Still Hero can become a police horse/Providing you teach him how to take a bribe/The capitalists are ripping out our jungle.' Garden City is a 1984-style misnomer. It is a huge shopping mall in the southern suburb of Booragoon which opened in 1973 with almost a hundred shops. Indeed, Garden City is part of the suburban expansion of Perth in the 1970s discussed earlier. Warner's sardonic lyric emphasises the disjunction between name and reality. The reference to bribes is a commentary on the many dubious transactions that took place during the building boom of the 1970s.

Warner also wrote songs about the, predominantly male, suburban experience. 'Suburban Boy' is a description of this life, of waking up and being roused at by his mother, watching television on Saturday nights rather than going out, supporting the local Aussie Rules team and getting rejected by the girls he asks out. As Warner sings in the lyrics: 'I'm sure it must be, easier for boys from the city.' The city here is that inner city of bright lights and liberated life about which, it seems, Warner's suburban boy fantasised. 'Mug's Game' is also the title of Warner's first album, released in 1978. It is a song about being average, not being a failure so much as an outline of the ordinary lives of suburban boys. It's about going to the pub on a Friday evening 'looking for a root' and finding yourself still there at the end of the evening having had no luck, and about girls who have been deceived by smiling boys. Warner offers three vignettes, of Zongo the surfer, of Robert whose father is an American consul and his mother a French novelist, of Derek who hang-glides and water-skis and who goes to 'score' at the night club. All three are given to us as totally lacking in self-knowledge but outwardly successful. Warner's ordinary suburban boy can only watch and envy what he sees as their 'success' as compared to his 'failure'. Warner was a master of narrative and it is

no wonder that later in life in 1996 he won the Western Australian Premier's Award for Fiction with *City of Light*.

Following Warner almost a generation later in writing about Perth suburbia from within has been Kevin Mitchell in his alter-ego as Bob Evans. Mitchell was one of the founders of the alternative rock group, Jebediah. He was brought up in the suburb of Bull Creek which he describes like this:

“Bull Creek is a very ordinary little suburb. And I'm not saying that in a negative way. But yeah, it's a little brown brick 1970s kind of southern suburb, working to middle class. There was nothing incredibly unusual about my existence there.” (Mitchell, 2009)

Jebediah's first album, *Slightly Odway*, was released in 1997. The lyrics show little obvious Perth influence, however the cover of that album features a photograph of Kardinya Bowls Club. Above it flies a Futuro house that for a long time was positioned next to Leach Highway on the border of Rossmoyne and Willetton. Kardinya is a suburb of Perth on the southside of the city a little south of Leach Highway and to the west of Bull Creek. Like Bull Creek, and indeed Warner's Bicton which is just up the road, there is nothing special about the suburb. *Slightly Odway's* cover image emphasises this mundanity with white-dressed bowlers going about their pastime. The Futuro house is a Finnish design from the late 1960s and 1970s. It was prefabricated and planned for easy transport and construction. It looks very much like a 1950s idea of a flying saucer and this, indeed, is realised on *Slightly Odway's* cover. The suburbs, the cover suggests, can generate strangeness that is ignored and unseen by the suburban inhabitants. In 1999, around the time of the release of Jebediah's second album *Of Someday Shambles*, the cover of which is a suburban BMX track like the one that Mitchell mentions as being in Bull Creek when he was growing up,<sup>v</sup> Mitchell started performing as Bob Evans. His purpose was to acknowledge more fully his suburban origin.

His first album as Evans was *Suburban Kid* (2003), a reference back to Warner's track 'Suburban Boy'. One track on the album was titled 'Ode To My Car' which celebrates an old, blue Mitsubishi which should be taken to the wrecking yard but which continues faithfully to get the singer from one place to another. This is the same kind of suburban ordinariness which interested Warner.

Mitchell's second album as Evans was *Suburban Songbook*, his third, released in 2009, was *Goodnight Bull Creek!*, an assertion of Mitchell's/Evan's Perth suburban background. Mitchell has said that this album was the last of a trilogy set in the suburbs. The album's title is taken from the first line of the first track on the album, a song called 'Someone So Much.' The lyrics personify Bull Creek: 'Goodnight Bull Creek/You were the world to me/Now you're just a well-worn postcode for the memories'. Mitchell/Evans sings about driving 'down your road' and of taking '[t]he road less travelled'. He is leaving Bull Creek and Perth's suburbia behind but, as we have seen, leaving Perth's suburbia is very difficult. It is, as Mitchell implies, like leaving someone you love: 'When you love someone so much it hurts.' There is an echo here of McComb's anguish in 'Wide Open Road'. In the Perth experience affect appears at the moment the suburbs and their life-style are left behind.

## **Conclusion**

Public discourse surrounding Perth's character as a city continues. In 2014 *New York Times* travel writer Baz Dreisinger, in reference to the city's trend towards boutique bars and restaurants, labelled Perth "hipster heaven" (Dreisinger, 2014). This led to a heated online discussion featuring a flurry of opinion pieces from Perth expats (Jimmy the Exploder, 2013) and current residents (Baron, 2014; Burnside, 2014) debating whether Perth had truly shrugged off its status as a dull city. With Western Australia having sustained an almost a decade-long mining boom, debate was concerned with Perth's resulting gentrification and the price of beer and quality of coffee as markers of its status as a world city, rather than its

fundamental character, or that of its inhabitants. The fervour of this discussion suggests a continuing sense of inferiority – a pervasive desire for Perth to be considered alongside or in competition with other cities.

The myth of Perth's remoteness continues to be a defining feature of the way in which the city is thought about. Despite its sizeable population, Perth still maintains a perception as a small and insular city. The exodus of musicians and other creatives, mostly to Melbourne and Sydney, persists as a constant drain on the city's cultural profile. In song Perth artists have often lamented the city's limitations, but there also remains an acceptance of the positive aspects of small towns and suburbs – be it Sleepy Township's uncertainty about the finality of moving away or Bob Evans' nostalgic acceptance that despite leaving, the insularity and relaxed atmosphere of Perth have shaped him. This is arguably where the truest sense of the city emerges in song. Perth can here be viewed not as a wasteland or a vacuum, but as a home, albeit a suburban home, and a place that despite its flaws, or indeed because of them, has provided a birthplace for creativity.

## Author Biographies

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> For a discussion of Perth's alternative music scenes of the late 1990s and early 2000s as close-knit and socially connected see both the documentary *Something in the Water* (O'Bryan, 2008) and Christina Ballico's 'Music and Place: The Case of Perth' (2012).

<sup>ii</sup> On Erric Edgar Cooke see Elizabeth Blackburn *Broken Lives*; on the Claremont serial killings see Debi Marshall *The Devil's Garden: The Claremont Serial Killings* (2007).

<sup>iii</sup> On Oz Rock see Shane Homan *The Mayor's a Square* and Jon Stratton *Australian Rock*; see also Paul Oldham 'Lobby Loyde: The G.O.D. father of Australian rock' (2012)

<sup>iv</sup> We would like to thank Dave Faulkner for providing us with the lyrics to 'Perth Is A Culture shock'.

<sup>v</sup> Mitchell has described Bull Creek this way: "'It's a very ordinary, plain little suburb with a primary school and a shopping centre and a BMX track'" in an interview with Iain Shedden (2009).



## Works Cited

- Allenby G (2011) Southern capital shows the way. *The Australian*, 22 April. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/executive-living/home-design/southern-capital-shows-the-way/story-fn6njxlr-1226043411093?nk=df94775e5d353f213c43c885173bae6b> (accessed 12 November 2015)
- anwyn (2014) The Triffids: All torch songs, all good luck charms, all winters. *Power House*. Available at: <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/the80sareback/2010/04/the-triffids-all-torch-songs-all-good-luck-charms-all-winters/> (accessed 12 November 2015).
- Ballico C (2012) Music and Place: The Case of Perth. In: CCI Winter School Paper Jam Conference, Brisbane, Australia, 21-27 June, 2012.
- Barron, N (2014) Do hipsters go to heaven: Perth and its place in the world. *The Yarn*, 06 March. Available at: <http://www.theyarn.net.au/pop-culture/do-hipsters-go-to-heaven-perth-its-place-in-the-world/> (accessed 11 November 2015).
- Brabazon T (2014) *City Imaging: Regeneration, renewal and decay*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands
- Bracewell M (1998) *England Is Mine: Pop life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie*. London: Flamingo.
- Burnside S (2014) Hipster heaven or cultural wasteland? *Overland*, 02 April. Available at: <https://overland.org.au/2014/04/hipster-heaven-or-cultural-wasteland/> (accessed 11 November 2015).

- Chau R and Jealous V (2000) *The Lonely Planet Guide: Perth & Western Australia*. Melbourne: Lonely Planet.
- Connell G and Gibson C (2003) *Sound Tracks: Popular music, identity and place*. London: Routledge.
- crankynick (2007) Comment: Belltower: Unnatural Tendencies. In: *The Worst of Perth*. Available at: <http://theworstofperth.com/2007/10/04/belltower-unnatural-tendencies/> (accessed 12 November 2015).
- Dreisinger B (2014) Catching Perth's wave in Western Australia. *The New York Times*, 27 February. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/travel/catching-perths-wave-in-western-australia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/travel/catching-perths-wave-in-western-australia.html?_r=0) (accessed 11 November 2015).
- Gregory J (2003) *City of Light: A history of Perth since the 1950s*. Perth: City of Perth.
- Gregory J (2014) Scoping Perth as an Energy Capital. In : Pratt JA et al. (eds) *Energy Capitals: Local impact, global influence*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Hall R (1990) *Home: A journey through Australia*. Port Melbourne: Minerva.
- Holden T and Metcalf A (2009) *The Cities Book: A journey through the best cities in the world*. Footscray: Lonely Planet.
- Homan S (2003) *The Mayor's A Square: Live music and law and order in Sydney*. Newtown: Local Consumption Publications.
- Jimmy the Exploder (2014) Comment: Mate, Perth is not a hipster city. *The Guardian*, 05 March. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/05/mate-perth-is-not-a-hipster-city> (accessed 11 November 2015).

- Johansson O and Bell TL (2009) *Sound, Society and the Geography of Popular Music*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Laing D (1985) *One Chord Wonders: Power and meaning in punk rock*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Marshall D (2007) *The Devil's Garden: The Claremont serial killings*. Milson's Point: Random House.
- Mitchell SP (2009) It's not me, it's you ... Bull Creek. *Out in Perth: Gay & Lesbian Life & Style*, 03 April. Available at: <http://www.outinperth.com/its-not-me-its-you-bull-creek/> (accessed 11 November 2015).
- O'Bryan A (2008) *Something In The Water* [DVD]. Perth: WBMC Productions
- Oldham P (2012) Lobby Loyde: The G.O.D. father of Australian rock. *Thesis Eleven* 109(1): 44-63.
- quog (2007) Comment: Belltower: Unnatural Tendencies. In: *The Worst of Perth*. Available at: <http://theworstofperth.com/2007/10/04/belltower-unnatural-tendencies/> (accessed 12 November 2015)
- Salmon K (2004) Liner Notes for "Pissed on Another Planet" [CD]. Citadel.
- Shaw K (2005) The place of alternative culture and the politics of its protection in Berlin, Amsterdam and Melbourne. *Planning Theory & Practice* 6(2): 149-169.
- Shedden I (2009) The name's Bob Evans, for now. *The Australian*, 03 April. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/the-names-bob-evans-for-now/story-e6frg6n6-1225697652001> (accessed 11 November 2015)

Stratton J (2006) Nation building and Australian popular music in the 1970s and 1980s. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 20(2): 243-252 .

Stratton J (2007) *Australian Rock: Essays on popular music*. Perth: Network Books.

Stratton J (2008) 'Suburban Stories: Dave McComb and the Perth Experience' in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 22(2): 255-267.

Turner G (1992) Australian Popular Music and Its Contexts. In Hayward P (ed) *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism: Popular music and Australian culture from the 1960s to the 1990s*. North Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Warner D (2013) The importance of local in literature. In: Dave Warner's Blog Thoughts of a Suburban Boy, 32 January. Available at: <http://davewarner.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/page/5/> (accessed 11 November 2015).

Whish-Wilson D (2013) *Perth*. Sydney: New South Publishers.

Wilkinson C (2010) Gurus break Dullsville Hoodoo. *In My Community*, 12 April. Available at: <http://www.inmycommunity.com.au/going-out/gig-guide/Gurus-break-Dullsville-hoodoo/7553416/> (accessed 12 November 2015).

### Author Biographies

Adam Trainer is a researcher, musician and broadcaster from Perth. He obtained his PhD from Murdoch University in 2006, and has taught film, cultural and popular music studies at Curtin University and Edith Cowan University. Adam has worked on research projects investigating various Western Australian musical communities, and oversees the Western Australian New Music Archive.

Jon Stratton is an Independent Scholar and retired Professor of Cultural Studies. He has published in Cultural Studies, Popular Music Studies, Australian Studies, Jewish Studies and on race and multiculturalism. Jon's most recent books are *Uncertain Lives: Culture, Race and Neoliberalism in Australia* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011; Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi eds. *Black Popular Music in Britain since 1945* Ashgate, 2014; *When Music Migrates: Crossing British and European Racial Faultlines 1945-2010* Ashgate, 2014.