



Bodgies, widgies and moral panic in Australia 1955 – 1959

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Introduction

In the latter half of the 1950s, concerns that Australia's teenagers, and especially working-class teenagers, were becoming delinquent reached a crescendo. Law-abiding citizens observed with concern bodgies and widgies congregating in milk bars and on street corners. Violence and sexual license were their hallmarks, they believed, with alarmist and sensationalist media reports having established and fuelled these understandings. Without recourse to reliable statistics, many people embraced the opinion that a substantial proportion of the country's teenagers were uncontrollable. Some advocated punishments such as sending 'bodgies to the Nullarbor to work on a rail gang' (Perth *Daily News*, 7 October, 1957), sending them 'to sea under a tough [navy] skipper' (Perth *Daily News*, 16 November, 1957) and inflicting harsh corporal punishment upon them. Others, however, were more concerned about the adoption of preventative measures. Parental alcohol consumption and gambling, lack of discipline, high wages and youthful access to unsuitable comics, horror picture shows, and after 1956, rock and roll music were among the factors that generated delinquency, they suggested. Their views, popularized by sensationalist press reports, contributed to a 'moral panic' throughout the Australian community.

Stanley Cohen explained

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people (Cohen, 1980: 9).

He continued: there is not much doubt that 'delinquent and troublesome youth subcultures signify a reaction ... to growing up in a class society' (Cohen, 1980: xxv). Dick Hebdige agreed, explaining that youths for whom future opportunities for material success seemed bleak frequently joined teenage gangs 'to develop alternate sources of self esteem'. He continued:

In the gang, the core values of the straight world — sobriety, ambition, conformity, etc — were replaced by their opposites: hedonism, defiance of authority and the quest for 'kicks' (Hebdige, 1987: 76).

Although the moral panic that was especially overt in the latter half of the 1950s focused on juvenile delinquents and particularly bodgies and widgies, apprehensive people feared that 'good' youths could be attracted to lawless and antisocial behaviour, hence they extended their concern to all teenagers.

The social and political climate of the 1950s fuelled this community paranoia. The fear of a nuclear World War was ever-present. As John Murphy explained, two thirds of adult Australians believed peace 'could not last beyond 1958' (Murphy, 2000: 92) and Stuart Macintyre elaborated that 'a fear of communism permeated almost every aspect of public life, at once impelling the government to improve the welfare of citizens and inhibiting the opportunities for critical dissent and creative innovation'. (Macintyre, 2004: 209) In such a climate, for older people who had lived under the straitened conditions of an economic depression and the disciplined demands of wartime, the rebelliousness of these teenage dissidents was both unnatural and treacherous. As Lesley Johnson elaborated, 'in a world

that had been torn apart, ... youth became both the hope for, and those most at risk, in the attempt to create a different world' (Johnson, 1993: 53). Hence, to use Stanley Cohen's terminology, juvenile delinquents and especially bodgies and widgeys were in the minds of 'respectable' people, 'folk devils' (Stratton, 1992: 23).

History

Larrikin gangs of 'lower class' males had existed in Sydney from as early as January 1850 when the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the 'Cabbage Tree Hat Mob' were insulting wealthy residents and knocking off their tall black hats which were symbols of 'high status' (Stratton, 1992: 52). The same newspaper had also reported that in the early hours of the morning on New Year's day in 1850, 'a yelling, rabid mob' of teenagers had pelted stones and bricks through 'peaceful citizens' windows, spreading 'terror, ... dismay', confusion and bewilderment. 'In Europe and America, when the masses break out into violence, the passions have been inflamed by some real or imaginary wrong', but this was 'without provocation or pretext of any kind' the journalist had lamented. Pursuing a theme that was to achieve mass acceptance a century later, he stated:

The parents are in fact more blameable than the children. The responsibility to society for these unpardonable outrages against the public peace rests chiefly on their heads; for had the parents done their duty, the children would have been incapable of such misdeeds (*SHM*, 12 January 1850).

During the 1860s in Australia, numerous working-class delinquent gangs existed, including 'The Plunket Street Boys' in Sydney and 'The Bowerie Street Push' in Melbourne' (Stratton, 1992: 51). In examining the larrikin pushes of the 1880s and 1890s in Sydney and Melbourne, Bruce Kneale explained: 'The larrikin was a mob-man. He rarely attacked alone; safety lay in numbers. The solidarity of the Push was pre-eminent. Fight one and you took on the lot'. In May 1896, *The Australasian Insurance and Banking Record* had this to say about the phenomenon:

Whence comes the larrikin? That pest of these so-called over-educated colonies; the young loafer of from sixteen to eight and twenty. Who does not know him, with his weedy, contracted figure; his dissipated pimply face; his too small jacket; his tight-cut trousers; his high-heeled boots; his arms with out-turned elbows – swinging across his stomach as he hurries along to join his 'push' as he calls the pack in which he hunts the solitary citizen – a pack more to be dreaded on a dark night than any pack of wolves (*Australasian Post*, 11 July 1957).

Violent working class youth gangs remained a feature of Australian society, despite the concerns of civic authorities. As the Melbourne *Sun* editorialized in a 1926 issue; 'The unhealthy "push" war is becoming serious, and the young ruffians who compose the pushes are growing more impudent'. In discussing the youths' threatening behaviour, the newspaper asserted that 'The push problem ... can be traced to weak parental control, the early school leaving age, the lack of technical training and the absence of legitimate interests' such as sport (*Sun News Pictorial*, 3 August 1926). These themes were to recur in analyses of bodgie gang members thirty years later.

The first bodgies were World War 2 Australian seamen who as well as impersonating Americans were black marketers and the first bodgie gang was the 'Woolloomooloo Yanks' who congregated in Cathedral Street Woolloomooloo. By 1948, about 200 bodgies were regularly frequenting Kings Cross milk bars. Soon, bodgie gangs formed at other inner-Sydney locations. After a time, moccasins and American drape suits complete with pegged trousers replaced their attire of blue jeans and leather American Airline jackets or

zoot suits. For bodgies, almost all of whom were working class, emulating the high status Americans who had so recently occupied Australia as military personnel was easier than achieving upward social mobility (*SMH*, 21 January 1956).

Even the term 'bodgie' denoted the rejection of mainstream values. As Jon Stratton explained, the term referred to something that was fake or bogus — although the female equivalent 'widgie' had more flattering origins, with the term possibly an abbreviation of the word 'wigeon' that meant girl or female teenager and was in use in Australia around 1946 (Stratton, 1992: 71, 96).

Juvenile Delinquency

Stanley Cohen argued that the press played a critical role in the creation of moral panics and folk devils. He explained that 'their very reporting of certain 'facts' can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation or panic' (Cohen, 1980: 16). Of relevance to the newspaper coverage of the bodgies' behaviour, Cohen asserted that misleading headlines with the inclusion of emotive words such as 'violence' and 'attack' and abuses of language, where incidents became disturbances and disturbances a riot created the impression that there were additional unreported incidents or that acts of delinquency would recur on an even more serious scale unless something was done (Cohen, 1980: 32, 53).

Australian newspaper editors have consistently promoted juvenile delinquency as a subject of concern. In the mid and late 1950s however, this concern reached a fever-pitch of irrationality. In 1954 New York psychiatrist Fredric Wertham identified horror comics as an undesirable influence upon the social adjustment of youth. His book, *Seduction of the Innocent* was widely read. Like many of the 'so-called' causes of juvenile delinquency, the concern was not entirely without foundation. As Mark Finnane related, in Australia, 'at their worst, comics were pornographic, displayed excessive violence against women and 'coloured races' and interfered with the healthy psychosexual development of their readers'. (Finnane, 1998: 49-53). By 1955, all states except Western Australia had passed laws that effectively limited the availability of comics with an 'undue emphasis on sex, violence, horror or crime', (Openshaw and Shuker, 1987: 9-10; Brown, 1995: 189) however in the years following, concerned adults believed that many of the non-offending comics that children bought encouraged juvenile delinquency.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* article citing the views of a Waverley social worker, Reverend Arthur Oliver, reveals the search for causes and solutions to teenage delinquency. Oliver suggested that delinquency was 'spreading beyond the slums. ... The forces that debauched American youth – crime comics, films and radio shows accenting violence – [were] operating here' he warned, and he predicted that it would be 'worse' when television arrived (*SMH*, 18 January 1955). In another article in May 1956, Donald McLean, an educationalist 'attached' to the Child Welfare Department of NSW, explained that it had been proven beyond doubt that juvenile delinquency was attributable to the absence of the father or mother in the child's early years. 'The upheaval of war or ... the limitations of poverty' could cause this, he believed (*SMH*, 30 May 1956).

With the introduction of television to Sydney and Melbourne in 1956, picture theatre managers increasingly screened horror films to obtain an audience. An Australian censorship law, passed in 1948, prohibited the viewing of films of 'a hideous, revolting or gruesome nature', but in the late 1950s cinema staff frequently admitted children to matinee screenings of adults-only films such as *Revenge of the Zombies*. The signage outside a 'lower-class Sydney' theatre showing the film in 1957 referred to the experience as a 'bloodcurdling carnival of terror' (*Pix*, 27 April 1957, 7 March 1959).

Magazines, usually read by men, such as *Pix*, *Australasian Post* and *People* were particularly concerned with the morals and safety of young women. In July 1957, *Australasian Post* devoted three pages, commencing on page three, to discussing how 'wild gangs of girls, as tough as men but more dangerous and treacherous [were] worrying police in the United States' (*Australasian Post*, 18 July 1957). Illegitimacy was another worrying circumstance. As a *People* article titled 'Our Schoolgirl Mothers' explained, the percentage had declined slightly in Australia, but in the United States the rate was 25% higher, and this circumstance could occur in Australia too. Putting religion 'back into the home' was an answer the magazine advised (*People*, 1 October 1958). In June 1957, *Pix* also investigated the reason for 'the many unwed mothers' in Australia and concluded that the number would not fall until families again embraced 'Victorian traditions of God-fearing principles' (*Pix*, 1 June 1957). Other articles in these magazines during 1958 and 1959 included 'The Perils of Petting', 'Should a girl tell?' and 'So many pitfalls for girls' (*People*, 25 June 1958, 8 July 1959, *Pix*, 21 March 1959).

Calls for more stringent punishments accompanied the view that parents were largely to blame for the perceived escalation in juvenile delinquency. When a magistrate convicted sixteen-year-old Adelaide lad Robert Hill for damaging a car that he stole, the sentence required his stepfather to administer six batten strokes across his backside in front a detective. After the lad received the specified punishment, plus 'one for good measure', he acknowledged that he deserved what he had received, while his mother warned other mothers: 'Don't be too soft with your boys and girls' (*Sun Herald*, 8 January 1956, 22 January 1956). Six months later, under the headline, 'Use the Birch on Delinquents ... ', Delcia McLarty, a Melbourne Children's Court magistrate who was concerned about the 'increasing dangers to ... youth' declared: 'It needs bodily pain for boys to realise they've done something really wrong'. 'Billiard saloons had a big influence in the growth of juvenile delinquency' and should be closed, while 'boy scouts and girl guides were doing a great job and should get as much financial help as possible from the Government', she argued. (*SMH*, 20 August 1955; *Melbourne Herald*, 16 May 1956, 17 May 1956, 23 May 1956)

Rock and Roll

In August 1955, the Sydney *Sun-Herald* warned that the rock and roll 'dance music craze' that was sweeping America would soon reach Australia. Alerting readers about the 'hysterical ... abandon which characterize[d] its primitive rhythmic beat', the feature warned that the music was 'a contributing factor' in juvenile delinquency and banned by police in a number of United States communities (*Sun-Herald*, 28 August 1955).

As rock and roll erupted across Australia, the public's alarm over teenage delinquency escalated, especially because many bodgie gang members dressed similarly to the rock and roll singers and embraced rock and roll music. In September 1956, just as Elvis Presley's *Heartbreak Hotel* reached the top of the hit parades, Sydney's first rock and roll riot occurred following the screening of *Rock around the Clock* in the Victory Theatre in George Street. Wild dancing in the street took place, with those defiantly dancing outside police headquarters charged with offensive and indecent behaviour (*Melbourne Herald*, 22 September 1956).

In November 1956, Brisbane experienced its first rock and roll riot. Following a Brisbane Stadium concert by Frankie Thornton and Barry Erickson, hundreds of teenagers began jiving in Albert Street. When police arrived, the teenagers abused them. One fan threw a stone that hit a policeman's head and another smashed a bottle over a police car while yet

another jumped onto the back of a detective while he was trying to arrest a demonstrator. The police charged six young men and two women (*Courier-Mail*, 20 November 1956, 23 November 1956). Brisbane's citizens divided on the issue. 'Old Timer' of Red Hill suggested 'the reintroduction of the birch rod for delinquents', while 'Perplexed' felt that the youths involved did not deserve 'the bashing' that the police handed out to them (*Courier-Mail*, 23 November 1956, 27 November 1956, 29 November 1956).

The immodest behaviour of rock and roll stars on stage encouraged delinquency and immorality critics claimed. At a Sydney concert in 1957, Little Richard, considered one of the most radical rock and roll entertainers in the world, substantiated their concerns. As the unstoppable reverberating rock and roll beat penetrated every corner of the large tin stadium, the entertainer mounted the piano and removed his shirt and singlet amid disbelieving screams and encouraging cheering from his 11,000-strong audience (McGregor, 1992: 90-91; Sturma, 1991: 14).

To the country's moralists, Elvis Presley was 'Satan personified' as his 'erotic' gestures on stage seemed designed to corrupt the most demure of teenagers. When reviewing an overseas Elvis concert, Perth's *Daily News* complained that his performance was a 'frantic sex show', and under the headline 'Filth [and] eroticism', the same newspaper a week later advocated that Presley's records should be banned (*Perth Daily News*, 14 November 1957). Nevertheless, teenagers flocked to his films, with many ignoring the warning from the Sydney newspaper, *Sunday Truth*, that the Elvis movie *Jailhouse Rock* was 'sex-crazed and disgusting'. It depicted 'an unsavoury nauseating and muddy brew of delinquency, sentiment, bad taste and violence', the newspaper asserted (*Sunday Truth*, 9 February 1958). A month previously, the same newspaper associated mass gang fights in the Newtown area of Sydney with midnight screenings of rock and roll movies. More than sixty police had moved the participants on, the *Sunday Truth* related, but the gangs had re-formed and, armed with fence palings, carried out successive battles in differing locations throughout the night. (*Sunday Truth*, 26 January 1958).

Bodgies and Widgies

Concerns about sexual experimentation and petty vandalism amongst 'good' teenagers were minor compared with the hysteria that surrounded the behaviour of bodgies and widgies. The ceaseless barrage of sensational and alarmist headlines about this youth phenomenon created anxiety and worry amongst many 'respectable' citizens. A brief sample of newspaper headlines indicates the nature of some of these articles. They include 'BODGIE RAZOR ATTACK', (*Daily Mirror*, 30 April 1957), SAVAGE BODGIE BRAWLS (*Daily Mirror*, 22 January 1957) and 'BODGIE IN BOTTLE ATTACK' (*Melbourne Herald*, 7 January 1956). However, these and hundreds of other examples of headline sensationalism do not negate the violence that bodgie gangs inflicted on innocent people with G. Pearson explaining in Cohen's book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 'Of course it would be easier to defend hooligans if they were not so badly behaved' (Cohen, 1980: 16).

Bodgie delinquency began featuring in the Australian press in the early 1950s with the Melbourne *Herald* reporting upon a St Kilda Police 'declaration of war' against a local bodgie gang in December 1951 (*Melbourne Herald*, 4 December 1951) and in November 1952, the Melbourne *Sun* relating that about 200 bodgies and widgies had clashed with police in a Swanston Street milk bar (*Sun News Pictorial*, 17 November 1952). Reports of the bodgies' criminal behaviour continued. In N.S.W. in September 1954, a court convicted a bodgie of housebreaking (*Sun News Pictorial*, 22 September 1954), in Brisbane in

February 1955, bodge gangs fought in the city's streets (*Sun News Pictorial*, 12 February 1955) and in South Australia in April 1955, police and magistrates declared their intention to stamp out bodge gangs (*Sun News Pictorial*, 9 April 1955). In the same month, Melbourne police prematurely declared that the bodge 'cult' was 'dead' (*Melbourne Herald*, 9 April 1955) only to have a Melbourne police officer estimate in June 1956 that more than 1000 youths were members of the city's bodge gangs, with additional gangs operating in Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo. (*Sun-Herald*, 17 June 1956).

Concerned psychologists and educationalists discussed the causes of the bodge phenomenon, at length. In August 1955, Dr H.S. Wyndham, the Director General of Education in NSW, suggested that the 'bodge and widge cults were symptoms of a malaise in the whole community and not just the teenage group'. The young lack a 'common objective', he suggested, adding that 'Hitler and Mussolini gave youth a goal' as had Communist Russia. Extending the school leaving age could assist young people to embrace a 'more mature' approach to life, he explained (*SMH* 17 August 1955).

In the same month, at a meeting of the College of Radiologists at Cranbrook, a judge addressed the problem of juvenile delinquency including the bodge phenomenon. After criticizing 'the community' for allowing 2000 NSW youths to be imprisoned, he argued that the 'the main reasons' for criminal behaviour from youths were alcohol, prosperity, lax discipline, uncaring parents, horror movies, and comics that glamorised immoral and lawless behaviour (*SMH* 20 August 1955). Five months later, the Headmaster of Ashfield Technical School in Sydney added that classroom overcrowding in Australian schools was 'breeding' boddies and widdies (*SMH*, 11 January 1956).

Between 1956 and 1958, Australia's newspaper editors generated a heightened and sustained climate of trepidation and fear through their articles about the violent behaviour of boddies. A brief synopsis of some of these articles offers an understanding of the public's paranoia. In January 1956, the *Melbourne Herald* related that a 'drunk, crazed, half-naked' bodge at Padstow, near Sydney, slashed a man's face with a broken wine bottle (*Melbourne Herald*, 7 January 1956) and a year later, the *Daily Mirror* informed its readers that in the Sydney suburb of Lidcombe, a 'pack of boddies' had 'viciously slashed' a man who attempted to assist a friend that they were attacking. The cut-throat razor attack left the rescuer with 'deep gashes' to his leg and chest, with the wounds requiring sixteen stitches. His friend was indeed fortunate. Although bundled into a car and later beaten up by the gang members, a widge travelling with him had probably saved his life when she seized the razor, gave it to him and screamed at him to throw it out of the car window (*Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1957). Four months later, the same newspaper related that in another razor attack, a gang of boddies inflicted 'hundreds of razor slashes' to the arms of a twenty-three year old man that they were holding down in a school ground at Croydon Park in Sydney. If he told the police, they warned, he would 'get it in the face next time' (*Daily Mirror*, 30 April 1957). The *Daily Mirror* also reported that in another incident in 1957, an 'all-in' fight occurred outside the Paddington Town Hall between Sydney boddies and British sailor teddy boys. The next day about thirty boddies in hot rods went in convoy to Woolloomooloo. The newspaper recorded that 'even hardened local residents said it was frightening to see the bodge pack backing, filling and deploying their six cars — like tanks on manoeuvre before challenging the sailors aboard the liner *Orsova* to 'have a go'. Just as the boddies were about to leave, three seamen appeared on the wharf. One escaped but two were knocked to the ground whereupon the boddies began 'laying in the boot'. With the police arriving, the boddies hurriedly departed the scene. An observer overheard one exclaim 'I nearly broken my ... foot on the ...' (*Daily Mirror*, 22 January 1957).

Through press reports, the public learnt that there were gradations of anti-social behaviour amongst Australia's bodge gang members. Their challenges to public order and the safety of innocent citizens ranged from infantile and foolish to dangerous, brutal and vicious. In 1957, the *Courier-Mail* reported that in Brisbane, boddies stopped a train by placing a 44-gallon drum on the line, and in another incident, the same newspaper related that about thirty boddies threw stones at a train (*Courier-Mail*, 15 July 1957). In the same year the Melbourne *Herald* informed its readers that a bodge gang, armed with sticks, knives and .22 rifles attempted to stampede elephants from Worth's Circus through crowded Sydney streets (Melbourne *Herald*, 4 May 1957). In March 1958, the readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* learnt that over a weekend, in the Melbourne suburb of North Fitzroy, police confronted a 50-strong pack of boddies aged between eleven and fourteen. Their weapons included knuckle-dusters, a chain attached to a handgrip and a stack of pennies rolled in adhesive tape, that when held in a fist could dislocate a victim's jaw. The police also felt compelled to visit six cinemas screening horror films at various times over the weekend to break up 'brawling gangs of bodge-type boys and girls', the newspaper related (*SMH*, 13 March, 1958). In the same year, the readers of the Sydney newspaper, *Sunday Truth*, learnt that in Newcastle, the behaviour of wiggies soliciting sailors, and boddies engaged in larceny and violent assaults, had dismayed authorities. Detectives had confiscated pistols, stiletto knives, knuckle-dusters and gelignite from the juvenile offenders. The newspaper asserted that with such behaviour and circumstances frequently occurring in all of Australia's major cities, alarmed citizens were determined to confront and reverse what they saw as an increasingly apparent and worrying trend of youthful offenders openly displaying abject contempt towards the country's laws and its populace (26 January 1958).

Reports about the sexual behaviour of boddies and wiggies also concerned the press and therefore the public. In January 1957, the Melbourne *Herald* explained that scores of boddies and wiggies had participated in a five-day 'rock and roll orgy' at a house in Pascoe Vale in Melbourne while the owners were on holidays (Melbourne *Herald*, 17 January 1957) and under the headline 'BODGIES IN SEX ORGIES', the *Daily Mirror* related that following a game of 'spin the bottle' in a Newcastle park, the participants had engaged in group sex. (*Daily Mirror*, 26 January 1958). The unwilling female subjects of bodge aggression received particularly sensational press coverage. During the final months of 1955, this escalating concern for supposedly defenceless women was evident in a *Sun-Herald* article titled 'Wolf Packs on the Prowl'. With an accompanying diagram of four obviously loutish youths whistling at a woman, the journalist announced that 'a sinister factor' had re-entered the story of juvenile delinquency in Sydney. This new breed of young hoodlum lurked in shadows, 'robbing lonely old men and attacking girls and women' and terrorizing dance hall patrons, he explained (*Sun-Herald* 27 November 1955). Furthermore, the reading public was aware that the sexual harassment of passers-by was relatively minor compared to the violent attacks that boddies could perpetrate. There was substance to this understanding. In his autobiographical account of his involvement in a bodge gang, William Dick described the members' foiled attempt to rape a widge. Author Morris West, referred to Dick's book, titled *A bunch of Ratbags*, as 'a sad, comic, violent document, the true record of a human spirit, struggling to grow like a flower in a weed patch' (*Australian*, 23 September 1965).

In August 1957, *Australasian Post* reported: 'the madcap suicide game 'Chicken', introduced to Australia in October last year ... is spreading faster than official efforts to keep it under control'. Many of the teenagers who 'played' chicken were boddies, the magazine related, further explaining that initially the chicken gangs challenged each other in their hotted up jalopies along Sydney's major highways. Once the 'champs' and 'chickens' had been determined, they began playing chicken with other motorists, with an

Army officer receiving injuries when swerving off the highway and colliding with a bridge railing that tore through his radiator, dashboard and front seat. The same article informed readers that on the Brisbane River, a youth had anchored his small boat in the path of an ocean liner. Assuming that he was intent upon committing suicide, the crew managed to avoid him. He had yelled 'chickennnn!' as the liner moved past. In addition, at Traralgon in Gippsland, youths and girls had walked in front of oncoming traffic and shouted 'chickennnn!' as the drivers swerved and at Ashburton in Melbourne, motorbike gangs had deliberately ridden their bikes out of side streets only to stop in front of the on-coming traffic and shout 'chickennnn!' at the braking motorists (*Australasian Post*, 1 August 1957). Similarly, in the Five Dock area of Sydney, bodgies played chicken with motorists travelling along the Great North Road, by deliberately walking in front of the traffic, the *Daily Mirror* reported (*Daily Mirror*, 8 May 1957). The public also witnessed the behaviour of bodgies and widgees first hand. In his account of a bodgie gang at Manly, John Ramsland related that members frequently rolled across the bonnets of cars travelling along the road near the jetty. Although not exactly a game of chicken, this activity required perhaps even greater courage. Following each 'accident', the gang-members feigned injury, but on one occasion, the leader required an extended period of hospitalisation following a miscalculated stunt (Ramsland, 2004: 511-512; Dunphy, 1969: Ch. 6). Reacting to sustained press criticism and no doubt the safety of motorists, W.R. Lawrence, a NSW MLA, urged the 'use of the lash for youths found guilty of causing accidents by playing chicken on the roads', and the President of the NRMA suggested that 'a long term in gaol' was the appropriate remedy (*Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1957). No doubt, Lawrence's threat also applied to the gang of bodgies that frequented the small kiosk near the Manly pier and others who played derivatives of the 'game'.

The Moral Panic subsides

Responding to public concerns that had largely arisen through sensational media coverage, entrepreneurs began embracing a more persuasive and perhaps more effective approach to limiting juvenile delinquency. Marketing a homogenised version of rock and roll designed for mass acceptance was a beginning. As British historian, Iain Chambers explained, in 1958 in Britain, 'High School' with its focus on teenage angst and sentimentality had replaced rock and roll with its sexual overtones and its wildness. This circumstance was also strikingly evident in Australia. (Chambers, 1965: 40; Evans, 1997: 119). The producers of Brian Henderson's television program *Bandstand* that commenced in 1958, clearly intended that the show would contribute to the taming of rock and roll and with it, juvenile delinquency. As James Cockington commented, the show's host Brian Henderson 'looked about as wild as the local librarian'. (Cockington, 2001: 78). Its competition, *Six O'clock Rock*, under the influence of its host, Australia's 'Wild One', Johnny O'Keefe, was raunchy and 'blatant' but also did little to challenge conventional norms of behaviour. As Bob Rogers and Denis O'Brien explained, the show exposed parents to rock and roll music, and although 'it would be too much to claim that it was responsible for breaking down many barriers of adult intolerance towards the music', it familiarised them with it, thus diluting its rebelliousness (1975, 74-76).

In March 1960, the *Sun-Herald* reported the release of Elvis Presley from the United States Army. He was returning to a society where numerous radio stations no longer played the distinctive hard-edged rock and roll of 1956, 1957 and 1958. 'Modified rock and rollers' such as Ricky Nelson, Fabian and Bobby Darin had sprung up in Presley's absence, the newspaper report related. 'I'm going to put all I have into bringing rock and roll back' Presley declared, but his manager had probably already decided that his future career direction would be as a singer of modified rock and roll numbers and insipid ballads

in unexciting and characterless love movies (*Sun Herald*, 13 March, 1960). Meanwhile in Australia, Johnny O'Keefe also felt the need to offer a tamer version of rock and roll to capture a wider audience — and the approval of television executives. He was reborn as the 'mild one' and hosted a family orientated television program, titled, *Sing Sing Sing*.

Although many saw the modification of rock and roll music as influential in curbing youthful lawlessness, the overt actions of Australia's police probably contributed more substantially to the demise of the country's bodgeie gangs. As early as mid-1957, the police had formed special patrols to 'stamp out bodgeie hooliganism' in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney, and the authorities had effectively triumphed by 1959 (*Courier-Mail*, 16 July 1957, Evans, 2001: 96). In Adelaide too, a special squad devoted their attention to destroying the bodgeie phenomenon, with Police Sergeant H.A. Gollan announcing in September 1959, that he had eradicated most of the city's principal bodgeie gangs (*Sun-Herald*, 27 September 1959).

Gradually too parents of teenagers began to receive less criticism and more understanding from the press, with the *Sydney Morning Herald* actually admitting in 1958 that juvenile delinquency had decreased over the past fifty years and that statistically cases of youth violence were low. The newspaper further explained that juvenile delinquents were not a cross-section of society, and that frequently they were the offspring of parents who had prior convictions for misbehaviour in their youth (*SMH*, 24 March, 1958). The following year, R.C. Wheeler, Liberal Member of Parliament for Mitchell announced to his Blacktown audience: 'It is time to close the open season on so-called delinquent parents'. Wheeler complained that through the press, parents had received unfair criticism for being too lenient, too indulgent or too disinterested with their children's welfare. Generalities had been made based upon 'the example of a few', he argued. Although acknowledging that many teenagers were overassertive, he suggested that that was better than the 'tongue-tied product of the last generation' (*SMH*, 16 December 1959).

Juvenile delinquency remained a feature of Australian society in the early 1960s, but bodgeie gangs were no longer a source of moral panic. Many of the perceived remedies were in operation. Counsellors and psychologists had established youth groups, the police had more effectively concentrated their efforts on controlling the behaviour of bodgeies, the proprietors of radio and television had curbed the rebelliousness of rock and roll entertainers, and teenage films had become more sentimental and moralistic. Most effectively however, the press had decided to refrain from writing sensational headline accounts that glamorised bodgeie thuggery, with John Medley having complained,

'elevating 'these ridiculous young people' to the status of a 'social problem' ... would simply provide these 'posturing teenagers' with the 'great kick' they were looking for. (Johnson, 1993: 100)

Increasingly the term 'bodgeie' was absent from reports of teenage gang violence. Journalists reverted to the old-fashioned and therefore less glamorous term, larrikin, when commenting upon juvenile crime, while articles about youth became less censorious and increasingly indulgent and accepting. In addition, amongst young males, bodgeie clothing had become mainstream. Wearing bodgeie attire and behaving like a bodgeie was no longer rebellious. (Johnson, 1993: 100, 105; *Melbourne Herald*, 20 September 1960).

Conclusion

In *Modern Girl*, Lesley Johnson explained that in the 1950s, the Australian media had differentiated between 'good' and 'bad' teenagers. She explained

'Bad' young people, it appeared, became juvenile delinquents; 'good' young people merely became the misguided but harmless 'teenage fans' [of rock and roll music] (Johnson, 1993: 108).

Fears that delinquent youth including boddies and widgees could corrupt those who abided by the mores of conventional society and shared the aspirations of the country's political leaders had fuelled the much-publicised moral panic over teenage behaviour. Magazine and newspaper editors had perpetuated this hysteria, exploiting it for profit. However, by the late 1950s, the media sensationalism over the welfare and behaviour of teenagers had run its course. The press had recognised the irresponsibility of sensational reporting while the public now understood that much of the so-called data that had fuelled the panic was erroneous. Furthermore, 'responsible' entrepreneurs in the music and entertainment industry had decreed that the country's principal rock and roll stars would no longer encourage rebellious and angry behaviour amongst fans. From about 1959, teenage idols had begun discarding their brooding, disaffected personas and instead embraced the 'wholesome' values of middle class respectability. The portrayal of teenagers as well-adjusted and valuable community members in countless movies and television shows as well as magazines and newspapers from about 1959 onwards was particularly effective. Reinforced since then by the American television show, *Happy Days*, along with re-runs of numerous late 1950s American television series and movies, the public continue to hold the erroneous view that the 1950s decade was a golden age in our history where social stability, community harmony and stable families were the norm.

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