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*International Association of Music Librarians*

*Local History/Local Music*

*September 29 and 30, 2016*

*Ship Inn, Southbank, Brisbane*

Keynote presentation:

**Folds in Time – Performing the Archive**

Hello, I'm John Willstead.

In 2010 I started, formally, making a Brisbane music history. More specifically, a history of the subculture/counterculture of the late 70s and early 80s. And I say formal, in the sense that this was the focus of my doctoral research.

This period is, to some extent, fertile ground. These punk/post-punk years in Brisbane have been written about by journalists, novelists and academics ever since the early 80s.

Clinton Walker's excellent *Inner City Sound* came out in early 1982, followed two years later by *The Next Thing*. These books gathered together writings about, and interviews with, Australian musicians in order to capture a sense of this flood of new music that was insinuating the cultural landscape. The books were a validation – and they were an antidote to this.

In 2007, Andrew Stafford released *Pig City* as the logical extended outcome of his Masters research at QUT. The book is probably the most well-known publication about the Brisbane music scene and lays out the confluence of popular culture and politics that was peculiar to Brisbane in the 70s and 80s.

These books were always about the bands. But my experience in this scene was a much richer social and cultural experience than what I was reading.

I had a story as much about audiences as bands -  
About the music that was never in shops or on labels,  
and about all the stuff that ISN'T music – posters and handbills and  
photographs and film

And about steamy evenings like this, at The Foresters Hall in Paddington, in the early autumn of 1979. And to illustrate the transformative nature of the culture and the times, I offer an illustration: sometime in the summer of 1978 .

So, that was me then. Here I am, now.

I'm John Willstead. I've been playing in bands for 40 years. I joined the anarcho-feminist Zero in 1978 – I was the only boy. I am currently a member of an 8-piece indie-rock, alt-country Brisbane band called Halfway – I'm the only one over 50. Decades of original music, mostly written by other band members, but embellished by me.

In 1998 I graduated from the AFTRS as a sound designer, and for the next 15 years I helped make factual and fictional narratives come to life.

But it was only since I started this thesis that I realized what I have been up to all this time. All this music and performance and movie-making. It's very simple: it's just storytelling.

Julie Anne Lambert, in her paper *Immortalizing the mayfly: Permanent ephemera: An illusion or (virtual) reality?*, sees ephemera as lying somewhere between book and print culture (Lambert 2008, 145) and surviving largely "by chance, not just in libraries, but also in museums, archives, local studies collections, and other institutions, each of which has its own ways of describing the objects in its care" (Lambert 2008, 152).

This is undoubtedly true here in of Brisbane, where there was, historically, no clear-cut home for sub-cultural ephemera. These bits and pieces have, over time, found places to rest in the libraries and museums, in the hands of art galleries and private collectors but mostly on the walls or under the beds of the general public.

In 1978 I lived in a house in New Farm that has long since burned to the ground. We started making, among many other things, small format magazines. We didn't know what to call them, they weren't fanzines. They were more like the pamphlets of the damned.

These were handmade, for fun. We used ink and photocopiers, scissors and glue. We used methods gleaned from the Beats and the Dadaists to lighten the burden of boredom and political oppression that was carried by all young people in Brisbane in the 70s.

After numerous paper releases, hand-delivered or posted as surprises to happy faces in the suburbs, we moved in, in 1982, to these cassette magazines – Zip START, ZIPTOO, ZIPIII. Music recorded on ¼” tapes or Portastudio cassettes, with magazines getting smaller every year – mostly A6 by now, but a couple of A7s. Offset printing now, with screen-printed colour covers and inserts. The pamphlet had become a sample bag of deranged ramblings. These were less fleeting than the previous mags, and went into record and bookshops, here and interstate.

The culmination, and end of this particular experiment in collective art-making, was this: ZIP/EYE/EAR was a 7” vinyl EP in the back of a 56-page offset printed book in an intriguing square format, funded by the Australia Council for The Arts.

And it wasn't just the mags. It was posters – hand screen-printed in the shed or out at the University

Colourful, stylish, ludicrous

These busy handbills, filled with information about nights out on the town – the heat, the beer, the smokes and the stars.

The reason that I run through this list of things, is because some years ago, having, to my surprise, survived that long, I decided to donate a bunch of them to this library. And really, no-one knew what to do with these items. They were

scattered, catalogued in quite novel ways, and basically misunderstood. Which was symbolic of Brisbane's lack of interest in its recent past.

But in any looking back on scenes like this, scenes that existed in the pre-digital age, these ephemera are pivotal to the story because they were expressions of the core of the culture. This was a social scene which produced artefacts: venues, music, magazines, posters . . . and of course, photographs.

About the same time, I started writing my "book"

I was tagged in some photos that were being uploaded to a Facebook page by someone I had known back in the late 70s.

Paul O'Brien was Bo, and Bo was always around, and often had a camera. He was moving to Hobart from Brisbane, and wanted to get rid of some stuff. After some to and fro, Bo decided to donate his collection of nearly 900 negatives to the State Library. These images became essential to my story, and when combined with available video and film footage, and the images of the many printed ephemera, my presentations morphed into a different entity. Rather than the ephemera illustrating the written story, they began to become the story.

And just as I wasn't the first person to be writing about this scene, there were numerous examples of curated stories about this time and this place.

The Institute of Modern Art has held two critical retrospective surveys:

Know Your Product in 1986 – Ross Harley’s excellent survey of Brisbane’s sub-cultural art that filled the large space with posters, handbills, photographs, fanzines, and record covers and commissioned 10 hour-long radio documentaries on various aspects of Brisbane’s post-punk scene.

And David Pestorius’ The Brisbane Sound in 2008, in some ways an echo of Ross’s show but with a particular take on those times.

Young Fast and Non-Boring at the Qld Performing Arts Centre Museum was an exploration of the world in which the punk band Razar emerged.

Live, here at The State Library, was a much longer story about live music here in Queensland, and involved instillations, interviews and video works.

And un the last decade there have been exhibitions of counter-cultural history at The Museum of Brisbane, the Queensland Art Gallery and The Queensland Museum.

All of these shows, to some degree, rely on largely ephemeral artefacts, many from this library and these other institutions here on the riverbank, and the local, largely embodied, knowledge of the raft of curators. These were vibrant exercises in preserving the present, or the near-past at least, for the future. So even though there had been confusion in the past about the value of these things, the institutions had, over time, stepped up as the centre of collecting, preserving and presenting Brisbane’s sub-cultural past.

I'd like to just have a quick chat here about curation. And I must preface this with the fact that I am not an expert in this area and am happy to be called out on what I'm about to say.

The role of the curator in the institution is historically someone who enables sense-making of the collections based on their topical expertise, acquired for this very purpose. And although the notion of the artist as curator may bring another layer of expertise, I would suggest that this is, likewise, an acquired knowledge.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul O'Brien's photographs were appearing on his Facebook page, and they drew a flood of interest. People were sharing memories - names and places and times were discussed and disputed. There was also a lot of very real emotion. It is a given that this sub-culture was, in its nature, a dangerous one. Many people died young, or just disappeared into the ether. Lifestyle choices, like alcohol and heroin use, reduced life expectancies and had profound impact on many of us as we moved into our middle age.

But this too, was a curatorial activity, like citizen journalism. Items were identified, and authenticity was contested and settled. Sense was made, and stories were formed around the images. But it was chaotic, and happening over an ever-widening social media spread. Although it has the strength of rising from the community, it was also unreliable in that people close accounts, delete posts, and Facebook itself is a constantly shifting entity.



But in the case of this project, I found that I could fill a curatorial role that bridged these two: the institutional and the social. In fact, it was necessity that drove me to this place.

This story, as it evolved, required sophisticated, situated interpretation. It required inside knowledge to make the contextual connections. My connection to the time and my hand in the making of the culture, but most importantly, my 40 years as a professional story-teller, enabled me to see that performance would be the transforming aspect of this project.

In October last year, at Brisbane's Powerhouse, using hundreds of images from the State Library collections, my own archive, and many bits of media kindly placed in my hands, I performed *It's Not The Heat, It's The Humidity* for the first time.

It was split over two nights. I wrote a script that was filled with memories and impressions rather than dates and facts. I sang songs, very badly. I figured out ways to draw the audience into this time using my voice and the faces and voices of other players interviewed on camera in my shed. I edited hours of 16mm and 8mm film footage and used hundreds of photographs. The ephemera, the discards, of our lives. The things we thought we would never see again.

Here's an example of a segue between stage and projection, between present and past.

Here's the end of the show, which is another little example of what the thing looked like. I see this as a method of presenting recent cultural history, by using the collections of the library and the other institutions, the skills of the situated artist as story-teller and the essential presence of the audience in performance as a way of making sense which is true and meaningful and powerful. Of taking the collections out of the institution and placing them, if not in the hands, then in the hearts of the community.

It's all a way of trying to redress what a dire horrible place this was back then by sharing how strong the culture was, and is, that blossomed beneath.