

## Sunbury Festival

# Sunbury: four years of love, peace and beer

By MICHELLE SYMES

MELBOURNE film maker Paul Murphy was enjoying time out in the northern suburb of Eltham when his attention was caught by a pub poster flagging Australian blues legend and Chain lead singer Matt Taylor's performance inside. Three years on, the meeting between a former teenage fan and '60s blues idol has inspired the making of a documentary on Australia's own Woodstock, the Melbourne Sunbury Festival (1972-75).

*"They sang, danced and swam in the creek ... Some were clothed, some half clothed ... Hundreds stripped naked."*

So said a front-page article in *The Herald* on 27 January 1973 (when that paper cost five cents) reporting the wild and free expressions of some 40,000 under-30s in a paddock 30 minutes' drive from Melbourne.

Soon after Murphy was reunited with Matt Taylor three years ago, he took his car to the old Sunbury Festival site, opened the boot and let blast Taylor's song: *I Remember When I Was Young*. On that empty site he remembered hearing it live for the first time, as a 16-year-old lugging a schoolbag and sleeping bag.

Murphy says the Sunbury Festival marked a brilliant time in history when artists were seizing a new, self-inscribed identity for Australia. Peter Weir and Fred Schepisi were making films, David Williamson was writing plays, and days before the first Sunbury Festival, expatriate writer Germaine Green returned to promote her best seller, *The Female Eunuch*.

The month before the second Sunbury, Gough Whitlam took Labor to power for the first time in 23 years and Murphy says that by the time the third Sunbury was over, Australia had discarded its cultural cringe.

"Sunbury was one of the battlegrounds, a Eureka Stockade-like stand for Australian cultural identity," he says.

They're still finding people with mementoes of the festivals. "They have kept old Sunbury T-shirts, old Sunbury beer cans. It is a badge - I was there - very much like Woodstock."

Murphy says the renaissance in Australian film making and writing in the '70s has been well recorded and now it's the turn of the blues and rock 'n' roll.

Ed Nimmervoll, editor of the first national youth-orientated newspaper in the '70s, *Go-Set*, who is writing the documentary's script, agrees. Rock 'n' roll is the last to have been honored, he thinks, because it doesn't get the same respect as literature and other creative forms.

He says the Sunbury Festival did the groundwork that helped bands such as silverchair go straight to EMI for a recording contract. Matt Taylor's Chain was the first Australian band signed by Mushroom.

Nimmervoll says that music played at the festivals was "purely" Australian until the last, which ultimately ended when organisers tried to introduce an international act.

"The unknown group called Queen had one album out - no one had heard of them," says Nimmervoll.

Yet organisers, he says, treated Queen members like stars, taking them to the festival in a limousine.

Taylor, who performed solo and with various permutations of Chain at the festival, will narrate the documentary. Other anticipated participants include Billy Thorpe, the Dingos, Skyhooks, Spectrum, Daddy Cool, Queen and Deep Purple.

Taylor says that when Sunbury started, Australian bands were doing exceptionally well on music charts. In 1973, *Black and Blue* by Chain was No. 1 for 18 weeks, followed by *I'll Be Gone* (Spectrum),

for about seven weeks. Then there was Daddy Cool's *Eagle Rock*, which endured for 22 weeks.

"If I add that all up, that's virtually a year that Australian bands were No. 1," says Taylor. "I do not think you would be able to find that in any other place or time in Australia. At that time we thought it could never end."

He says that when the festival started, the free love, peace and brown rice it offered was inspiring - and "getting pissed and having fun was in".

But "when Billy Thorpe called out to the crowd to 'Suck more piss', that was probably a stronger call than hippie love and peace".

"For those that were there, it was probably their first taste of freedom."

"Kids of my generation were very suppressed. Sunbury was an explosion of expression."

Taylor is in Melbourne tonight for a special Chain performance at the Prince of Wales Hotel in St Kilda, where he will be joined by other "Legends of Sunbury", Madder Lake and Ariel. A screen behind them will show footage of the bands that played at Sunbury. M

