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Local rock’s proud day

Sunbury legacy lives on

By NUIE KOHA

THE first Sunbury Pop Festival delivered on the famous hippie festival credo of peace, love and music.

But more significantly, it turned attention to an overlooked breed: the classic Australian rocker.

“It was a landmark event at a watershed time in the sense that, before Sunbury, anything Australian was regarded as second rate,” entertainment mogul Michael Gudinski said.

“Import record shops were all the rage, and people really thought of Australian music as being second rate to what was going on overseas.”

The inaugural Sunbury Pop Festival — held 30 years ago today on a dusty hilltop north of Melbourne — changed that perception.

It was a gathering that hoped to mirror the popularity of Woodstock in the US, though with a risky drawcard: a lineup of strictly local rock acts including Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, Chain and Spectrum.

Thirty-five thousand people showed up at Sunbury, wallowing in a three-day celebration of proud and loud rock, with the option to binge drink, smoke drugs, skinny dip or make love outdoors.

“That all went on,” said Gil Matthews, drummer in Thorpe’s Aztecs.

“But it was the nature of the culture. Everybody seemed to be drinking, smoking dope, swimming nude or having sex because, to them, it was the natural thing to do.

“It was about rebellion, going against authority and the norm. We wanted to do whatever we could and be happy.”

“It wouldn’t happen today,” said Matthews, now the managing director of



Big break: members of Daddy Cool on stage.



Peace, love and music: the 1972 Sunbury Pop Festival.



Star: Billy Thorpe.

a film and music company which will soon release a documentary on the first Sunbury Pop Festival.

“Back then, there was a lot more freedom,” Matthews said. “Today, you’ve got jobs and mortgages. There is a lot more responsibility.”

Music guru, Ian “Molly” Meldrum, who went to Sunbury to front a documentary about the festival and act as master of ceremonies, had been given a preview of the site.

“I can remember looking at this dusty mound thinking: ‘This is going to be a huge dud.’”

But Meldrum found his assessment was a dud.

Meldrum said the event was an important forum for Australian music, and Gudinski agreed.

“It was the start of people standing up and feeling proud of their own music,” he said.

The hedonistic carry-on made headlines, Gudinski said, “but you look at that footage today, people jumping in the creek nude, and it looks farcical.

“In history, Sunbury is significant because it was a pioneering all-Australian musical event.”

For Thorpe and the Aztecs, their performances at Sunbury — often described by critics as the most definitive of their career — established them as a true force in Australian rock.

“The thing about Sunbury is that, even 30 years on, I keep meeting people who were there,” Matthews said. “Somebody’s mother went to Sunbury, he went, she went. Those gigs are indelibly stamped on people’s minds.”

Sunbury folded in 1975, after its all-Australian band policy was abandoned for international glamour, and the freight and performance fee for expensive UK headliner, Deep Purple, ran the festival into the red.

Yet it remains a much-mythologised event, played at by AC/DC, the Angels, Captain Matchbox, the Dingoes, Rose Tattoo and Skyhooks.