

# Sunbury '72 revisited: The potent legacy of a lost weekend

Can it really be 30 years? **Steve Waldon** reflects on a defining — or deafening — moment in rock.

Ian Meldrum's long hair flaps stiffly at his neck as he stalks the railway platform at Diggers Rest. The interviewer who would soon become Molly leans forward as he walks, like a man who knows he has to go somewhere but has forgotten where it is.

There they are: the young people, bright-eyed but reticent, leaving the train with their sleeping bags, felt hats and post-Woodstock clothing — the accoutrements of the dissipating hippie movement are still in evidence, yet they are merely hours away from the fateful first notes of a truly Australian event.

"What bands are you coming to see at Sunbury '72?" Meldrum asks his slightly startled targets.

"La De Das, Chain, Thorpey . . ." says one uncertain girl. She looks as though she fears the next question — as though Meldrum might just as easily catch her napping with a quick one about the theory of relativity. But he moves on.

So does the camera, to *Glencoe*, the Duncan family's property through which runs the hitherto anonymous Jacksons Creek, a dirty watercourse that is about to become a playground for daredevil refugees from suburbia, doing bombs from overhanging branches, and an inappropriate bathing facility for others who will ignore the little-known dental admonition: brushing your teeth in Jacksons Creek can strip the enamel.

Hmmm. Sunbury 1972 — the first of four music festivals at the improbably suitable natural amphitheatre. Was it really just like this, the footage on a video celebrating the 30th anniversary? Molly and Thorpey and Lobby Loyde, a rudimentary stage, a 10,000-watt PA system to monster everything within a few kilometres?

Yes, it really was like that, and the spirit of the occasion nestled happily and neatly with the cultural and societal developments of the period.

Sunbury '72 was held on the Australia Day long weekend, at the same time as the Aboriginal tent embassy was being set up outside Parliament House in Canberra and Australians were made to confront land rights claims. Daylight saving had just been introduced on a trial basis; Victoria had just introduced late-night shopping.

Within a few months of the Sunbury festival, the Women's Electoral Lobby was formed, Bruce Beresford's landmark lampoon film *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was out, so was Thomas Keneally's book *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*; and Clifton Pugh had won the Archibald Prize for his portrait of Gough Whitlam.

Most everything seemed mercurial, possible, attainable — and worth fighting for. Either that, or you could get a job. And right among the blossoming cultural milieu was the Sunbury Rock Festival.

Much has been written about the annual event, which finished in 1975 for myriad reasons, but chiefly because the crowds treated the importing of English bands Queen (1974) and Deep Purple (1975) as a betrayal of the all-Aussie ethos that had united fans and artists in 1972.

The original spirit, as difficult to define as it was to reproduce, had largely evaporated — but the legacy is a slow-burning reappraisal of the festival's place in the development of modern music in Australia.

More specifically, it is how bands such as Madder Lake, Lobby Loyde and the Wild Cherries, and Chain galvanised the transition from the pop/rock scene of the late 1960s by playing a sonic brand of rhythm'n'blues-based rock to an outdoor crowd of thousands, whose only defence against the high-decibel affront was to drink or smoke their way to a place where loudness was not necessarily their paramount problem.

Then, out of that nascent Australia Day weekend bash, came an album that belled: "Wake up! This is where we're at right now. THIS is Aussie rock!"

"My God. Thirty years ago this weekend," says drummer Gil Matthews, talking in Mount Eliza about the recording of *Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs: Live At Sunbury*.

"It was a bit of a nightmare to record — acoustically (the amphitheatre) was a pretty awful area.

"And at Sunbury '72, there was no soundcheck for any band, they just got up and played."

Matthews was just 23 when he sat behind the drum kit at Sunbury, and his musical background did not predispose him to life as an Aztec.

"I'd come from clean-cut, poppy sort of groups, playing drums for people like Grantley Dee," he says. "I didn't really know about this bluesy, dirty, smoky, loud sort of music — but I loved it, I absolutely loved it."

For Matthews, the first clue that destiny was taking him in an unexpected direction was the (now legendary) May 1971 concert at the Melbourne Town Hall: Thorpey and the Aztecs, with the fledgling Daddy Cool as support act.

He had not been with the Aztecs long, and he remembers the venue being packed and jumping. "And then a few months later it was Sunbury . . . no one knew how big it was going to be," Matthews says.

Looking at the footage now, the time-tunnel effect is not unpleasant, if you are in the right age group; the soft hum of nostalgia tempered by the jolt of recognition.

Lobby Loyde, long-haired and ginger-bearded, takes the Wild Cherries through a 12-bar rocker, which he ends by whipping up some feedback and bending the sound with his guitar's tremeloe arm. Molly emerges from a tin dunny doing up his fly; Molly asks a naked young woman in the crowd (not unreasonably) whether she would do the same at St Kilda beach; Molly dances; Molly interviews the police. (Really, *Countdown* had to happen.)

But what people still remember about Sunbury '72 is that Aztecs album. Big, big versions of *Be Bop a Lula*, *C. C. Rider* and *Rock Me Baby*.



Billy Thorpe in his Sydney studio and, below, with Gil Matthews at Sunbury '72.



Thorpe's exhortations to "clap your hands! Clap your h-a-a-a-nds just a little bit louder". The public debut of *Most People I Know Think That I'm Crazy*.

And if Matthews' transformation from cabaret drummer to rock thumper is a surprise, Thorpe's metamorphosis is the complete package. The 1960s pop singer is now a guitar brute, wringing notes from the fat neck of a Gibson Les Paul and shaking his pony-tailed head from side to side.

The set has the night crowd captivated, and Matthews thinks it is something to do with the energy propelled from the stage, bowling people over, surging up the hill and not dying until it is halfway back to Melbourne.

"I couldn't hear a bloody thing," he says with a wry cackle. "It was just so loud. Billy was using 600 watts of Strauss Warrior amps, the Jands PA was 10,000 watts . . ."

Well, how did the band perform so tightly?

"We were rehearsed," Matthews says. "Though we did have a running joke in the group for the start of a song: '1, 2, 3, 4, see you at the end!'"

Perennial screacher Jimmy Barnes recalls seeing the Aztecs at Sunbury, when he was about 13 or 14.

"I ran away from home to go to Sunbury to see Thorpey. He was one of my heroes. We stood up the front to see the loudest band in Australia. Thorpey taught me to scream," Barnes says.

The legend of Sunbury is mixed up with the compulsion to evaluate: was '72 the best thing that ever happened to Australian music?

Go ahead; argue about it at your weekend barbie, with *Live in Sunbury* pumping next to the cricket stumps at the end of the yard.

And think about what a dazed Thorpey told Molly after that iconic set: "I feel really good. I didn't have any idea we were that popular, you know?"