

FOREWORD FROM MY EYES

When No Fixed Address showed up in the mainstream music industry in the early '80s, they pretty much kicked the door open. They shook everyone up because they not only broke through but they stuck around; they held their ground and demanded attention. They were here to stay.

Coincidentally, in May 1981 the great reggae man Bob Marley died. He was also a breakthrough artist, coming from the ghetto to the mainstream, and many people felt that loss very deeply. NFA with their own brand of Australian reggae helped to ease the pain for many people at that time.

No Fixed Address's presence in the mainstream music industry in Australia changed the algorithm – people working in all areas of the industry had to come to terms with Aboriginality at close quarters. Every interaction brought change, making it an easier fit for other Aboriginal performers to inhabit the space. Their ongoing presence changed the conversation in the rock scene forever by introducing Aboriginal concepts into the mix. They were creating the environment for change and all that would flow from that. I'm not so sure that the music industry changed that much, as it is a money-making machine. It was more that Aboriginal performers now knew their own value, and that the audiences knew what to expect from them (as there had been no Aboriginal people on the scene since Jimmy Little in the '60s).

NFA played the mainstream music industry circuits on the east coast, getting bookings through Harbour in Sydney and Premier in Melbourne – just check out their gig lists. They worked hard like most bands playing those circuits, but they had to contend with much more than any of those other bands could imagine.

The change that happened in their wake instigated more change as other Aboriginal performers showed up in the east coast music scene. Us Mob, who were more for Metalheads,

N O F I X E D A D D R E S S

had also featured in the movie *Wrong Side of the Road* and played a few gigs around Sydney after the release of the movie. Then along came Warumpi Band and Coloured Stone from Central Australia, changing things up again as they too hooked into the mainstream circuits.

Like Frank Sinatra, NFA broke through with some help from the shadowy side of life; they had to, they had no choice, nothing else was available to them. Things changed after that and by the '90s there was much more tour funding available through the government. Yothu Yindi, Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter became household names with chart-topping hits. Performers like Kevin Carmody and Tiddas also experienced commercial success and were very big in the alternative scene.

They were followed by Gurrumul in the 2000s with huge hits and much international recognition, while back at home, the Pigram Brothers from Broome were wowing audiences on the festival circuit and getting strong airplay on the alternative airwaves. Today, Aboriginal performing artists are found in many genres. Acts like A.B. Original, Emma Donovan and the Putbacks and Thelma Plumb, all exciting artists, are excelling in their specific genres.

More power to Aboriginal musicians everywhere who are bringing our stories to the world – may you all live on in the music that you make. VIVA NFA.

– Maxine Briggs

Victorian Aboriginal woman of Taungwurrung and Yorta

Yorta Nations

Lighting engineer in the No Fixed Address crew, 1980-82

Chairperson, Songlines Music Corporation 1994-95

Events Manager, Koori Arts Collective, 1992-97

Koori Librarian, State Library Victoria from 2008

INTRODUCTION

I was living in Adelaide and editing *Roadrunner* magazine when I first met No Fixed Address. A bunch of young Aboriginal musicians at the University of Adelaide's Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM), bouncing around Adelaide from gig to gig, they were about to start filming a movie, *Wrong Side of the Road*, loosely based on their lives and experiences, and songs from their demo tape were getting strong airplay on Adelaide public radio station 5MMM-FM.

They sounded like nobody else in my experience and they were the first band in a long, long time to send shivers down my spine. I got to know them and, as they didn't seem to have a manager, I tried to help them out. I found them some gigs, took Don Walker from Cold Chisel to see them one night – which resulted in a support slot on one of Chisel's national tours – and when the combination of the magazine and the band got too much, I introduced them to Redgum's manager, Chris Gunn, who took them under his wing. And off they went to (some) fame and (I suspected, not very much) fortune in the Australian music machine of the 1980s. But they left their mark.

As Graeme Isaac, co-producer of *Wrong Side of the Road* and its soundtrack album points out, No Fixed Address was the first Indigenous band to be playing mostly original material in a contemporary idiom with songs about their own lives – years before Warumpi Band or Yothu Yindi. 'They were trailblazers for these bands in an Australian music industry that wasn't quite ready for them, and never really allowed them to fully realise or capitalise on their talent,' he says.

Wrong Side of the Road was an eye-opener for both black and white audiences. White audiences could hardly believe the casual, everyday racism that was portrayed – racism that, if anything, was toned down for the big screen. On the other hand, Indigenous audiences could hardly believe seeing

N O F I X E D A D D R E S S

the struggles they faced in their daily lives being acted out. 'Can they really say that?' they whispered wonderingly. But all agreed about the freshness and power of the music, the original Aboriginal reggae of No Fixed Address and the hard rock stomp of Us Mob.

In some ways, says Isaac, the film's biggest achievement was in legitimising the idea of an urban Aboriginal community and identity. 'At the time, for most white Australians, urban Aboriginals were seen as inauthentic, not really "Aboriginal". When we went to school in the 1950s and '60s, we were taught that Aboriginals were a dying race; so, in the '70s and into the '80s urban Aboriginals were seen as these poor souls on a journey of assimilation. Until the political protest movements of the era – the land rights movement, the tent embassy, the bicentennial protests etc. ... began to turn that around. And of course, No Fixed Address (along with Jimmy Chi and Kuckles in Broome, CAAMA in Alice, the Black Theatre Movement etc.) were a significant part of that new positive assertion of identity.'

~

Both No Fixed Address and Us Mob were stalwarts of the Rock Against Racism concerts of the early 1980s, but after *Wrong Side of the Road* their paths quickly diverged. Us Mob struggled in Sydney and broke up after they couldn't work out why they were running on fumes during a sold-out outback tour. No Fixed Address based itself in Melbourne and proceeded to clock up thousands upon thousands of kilometres crisscrossing the country on the booming Australian pub rock circuit. A highlight was the headline spot at a Rock Against Racism concert in Brisbane, part of the Indigenous protests against the 1982 Commonwealth Games.

After signing a recording deal, No Fixed Address's debut release *From My Eyes* was launched by future Prime Minister Bob Hawke and the band performed the title track on

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Countdown, the first Aboriginal band to appear on the iconic ABC-TV program.

There were downs as well as ups. The band's record label folded. There were disagreements, even fights. Members came and went as the grind of the road took its toll, and the band was down to a three-piece when it went to play in England in 1984, becoming the first Aboriginal band to mount an overseas tour. Warmly received by English audiences as well as the notoriously anti-Antipodean music press, the band attracted a number of high-profile admirers, from dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson to Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page.

No Fixed Address broke up in 1985 but reformed two years later, and the distinctive drone of a didgeridoo underlined their messages in song when they ventured behind the Iron Curtain in 1988 on a white-knuckle tour of Eastern Europe. The stress told, however, and on their return, they broke up again.

~

The band reunited for a handful of performances in 1996 and has got together intermittently to perform ever since. Acknowledgement of their ground-breaking role came slowly; but it came. In 2008, the version of 'We Have Survived' from the *Wrong Side of the Road* soundtrack was added to the National Film and Sound Archives' *Sounds of Australia* collection, the sounds that 'make up Australia's history, the sounds that are among the most important to our collective memories as Australians'. In 2011, the band, along with fellow CASM outfit Coloured Stone, was inducted into the National Indigenous Music Awards Hall of Fame. In 2013, *Wrong Side of the Road* was fully digitally restored by the National Film and Sound Archive and in 2016, No Fixed Address was inducted into the South Australian Music Hall of Fame. Then in July 2020, the City of Adelaide said the fifth home-grown music artist to have a city laneway renamed in their honour – following Cold Chisel, The Angels, Paul Kelly and Sia – would be No Fixed Address.

N O F I X E D A D D R E S S

I was delighted at the news and delved back into my *Roadrunner*-era scrapbooks to see what I had kept about the band. I found a draft schedule for the 1980 Cold Chisel tour and some press clippings about a 1981 Royal Charity Concert attended by Prince Charles at Adelaide's Festival Theatre. I sent these on to the band's guitarist Ricky Harrison and out of the resulting conversation I asked if anyone had ever written their story. He said no – and would I be interested? I said I would, if everyone would be happy to participate.

Harrison gave me contact details for the band's remaining original members Bart Willoughby, Les Graham and John John Miller and they all thought it was a worthy project. As well as sharing their memories, they put me in touch with others who were around and involved with the band. Graeme Isaac was incredibly helpful in providing me with leads to people who could contribute to the story. Then, when I went to Adelaide for the opening of No Fixed Address Lane I met their manager Michael Fisher. Michael subsequently put aside his dream of writing a book about No Fixed Address and generously shared his thoughts, memories and insights about the nitty-gritty of managing an Aboriginal band in the 1980s, as well as providing me with access to the remarkable archive he had collected and preserved. My sincere thanks to Michael and Graeme for their contributions to this book.

~

One of the things that struck me as I spoke to people, particularly white people, about those days in the late 1970s and early '80s, was the shock they experienced when they were first confronted by the blatant racism against Aboriginal people. It's a sad commentary on Australia that the racism and other issues that No Fixed Address wrote and sang about so powerfully in their songs are still with us today.

One can only hope that initiatives like the Uluru Statement from the Heart, with its call for a constitutionally enshrined First Nations voice to parliament, along with a Makarrata

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations, and truth-telling about our history, bears some fruit.

Because, as Henry Reynolds puts it in the conclusion to *The Other Side of the Frontier*, his masterful account of Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia:

If we are unable to incorporate the black experience into our national heritage we will stand exposed as a people still emotionally chained to our nineteenth century British origins, ever the transplanted Europeans.¹



PROLOGUE NORSEMAN

It was Easter 1982. No Fixed Address were on the road, driving back east from Perth, heading to Alice Springs. Although they'd been impressing audiences and slowly building a live following in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney for a couple of years, the release of the film *Wrong Side of the Road* the previous November had brought the group to the attention of the national media. A drama about 48 hours in the lives of two Aboriginal bands, No Fixed Address and Us Mob, it had won the Jury Prize at the 1981 Australian Film Institute Awards and had been playing to capacity audiences on the independent film circuit.

Four shows to packed houses on Cold Chisel's Summer Offensive tour in December 1980 had opened the eyes of No Fixed Address to how big things could be. Supports to Ian Dury and the Blockheads (November 1981) and The Clash (February 1982) had just put the group in front of a whole new audience of Australian punk and new wave music fans. The soundtrack album to *Wrong Side of the Road*, with six tracks from each of the two featured bands, had received solid airplay on alternative radio across the country and sold well over the summer. They had management in the form of Mick Pacholli, publisher of *tagg* (the alternative gig guide) magazine; had a music publishing deal with Michael Gudinski's Mushroom Music; and after signing with hip Melbourne independent label Rough Diamond, had just completed recording tracks for a mini-album. The producer was David Briggs, former guitarist with Little River Band, who was fresh from doing the honours on Australian Crawl's five-times platinum debut *The Boys Light Up*. No Fixed Address were a young band that was definitely going places in the Australian music scene. But the difficulties of being young Aboriginals were never far away.

'We'd had trouble in Perth,' says guitarist Ricky Harrison. 'We had about twenty gigs booked and thirteen of them were

cancelled when the promoters found out we were an Aboriginal band. Cold Chisel were in town as well and helped us get some gigs.’

‘They got to Perth and I had all these gigs booked,’ says Mick Pacholli. ‘Two grand a gig. And all the Italians over there said, “These are blackfellas – we’re not putting ’em on.”’

‘I said, “What didn’t you understand about Australia’s premier Aboriginal rock band? What is wrong with you people?”’

“‘We’re not putting them on.”

“‘Well, that’s a big slice of my budget. You’re leaving me stranded.”’

Local promoter Kenn McMillan managed to cobble together enough replacement gigs to cover costs. But the episode – which closely mirrored an incident of discrimination depicted in *Wrong Side of the Road* – left a sour taste.

The cancellation of the gigs was just the first setback on the trip. While in Perth, drummer Bart Willoughby broke his right arm. While he could still get up on stage to sing, the band’s two recently engaged percussionists, Joe Geia and Billy Inda Cummins, had to cover for the lack of drums. For the final show of the Perth run, which was filmed by ABC-TV’s *Rock Arena*, local drummer Reg Zar was drafted in.

When the Perth engagements were completed, the touring party loaded up their two cars and equipment truck and set out on the next leg of the tour, to Kalgoorlie. From there it would be the long trek across the Nullarbor Plain to Ceduna, South Australia and then up to Alice Springs. But at 1:30 am on Tuesday, 13 April, on the Eyre Highway 20 kilometres east of Norseman, disaster struck.

‘I was in the lead car, with our roadie Angelo DiCarlo, who was driving,’ recalls Ricky Harrison. ‘His mouth was going a hundred miles an hour. Maxine Briggs was in the back seat. She did our lights. Also back there was Joe Hayes, our bass player and his wife, Jean. Behind us was the truck with the PA

P R O L O G U E

and drums and our amps and guitars. Then behind them was the second car. Like a convoy.

‘So, we’re going down the road and there’s this car coming towards us, in the middle of the road. There’s a ditch on the side of the road, so we couldn’t go off the road. Angelo just managed to scrape past it. Then in the rear-view mirror I just saw this ball of flame, like a bomb had gone off. The car had gone straight at the truck and the truck had driven over the top of the car and exploded.’

Edward Claude Love [Woody] was driving the truck with John Parker [Car John] and Les Graham [guitarist] next to him in the cabin. ‘Woody was saying to me the guy wouldn’t turn his lights down,’ Graham recalls. ‘I just knew straightaway, he’s asleep or he’s ... I didn’t think about him being pissed, I really thought he was asleep. Driving over the Nullarbor is so far, it’s so easy [to fall asleep at the wheel]. I reached over and pulled Woody towards me. Car John was in the middle. It was instinct, just natural instinct. We were all hugging together like a big ball, so we were too big to go through the front window. Otherwise we would have been splattered out through the front window from the impact.’

‘Then the car come into us. It came in so hard it threw us up in the air. We flew up and our petrol tanks blew up. We went up in a mushroom, like explosives, like a bomb. This is amazing; it didn’t put the truck on the side, it put us on the roof. It actually flipped us right over on the roof. Then it slid down the road while we were still in the cabin. There was the most endless screeching noise. I can never forget it. It was just continuous, this noise. The back of the truck was scraping on the bitumen. I know it was a matter of seconds but it was just forever, that noise. I was waiting for it to stop but it wouldn’t. It all happened in slow motion. Even the sound.’

‘The truck was in flames while we were still inside it. When it stopped we got out through the front window. The windscreen was gone. When we got out there were flames everywhere. That car went completely underneath us. It pulled

N O F I X E D A D D R E S S

the front end out of the truck. The two front wheels were on the side of the road. It came out from underneath the back of the truck and we had a car behind us and they had to do a lot of swerving to miss it.'

The driver of the car died in the vehicle and his two passengers were hospitalised for weeks. Woody, Car John and Les Graham sustained minor injuries and were held overnight in hospital for observation but were not detained.

'The truck exploded in Norseman,' says Mick Pacholli. 'I didn't know where any of the band was. Les rings me, I say, "Where is everyone?" "I don't know." "Well, you better find them because we've got a gig in three days, mate." I said, "Is anyone [in the band or crew] dead?" They've gone, "Nope." "Well, we're doing the fucking gig," I said. "I've already been down to Troy Music. I've got brand new guitars coming up boys, Bart's got a new drum kit. Just make sure the band's there." And he did.'

It was hard enough being a rock band on the road in Australia in the 1980s. Being a black band just added another degree of difficulty. A lot of the time, No Fixed Address really must have felt they were on the wrong side of the road. But not only did they survive; they persevered. And they endured. This is their story.