

## **COUNTRY AND EASTERN: MUSIC AT THE AQUARIUS FESTIVAL**

Music was integral to the Nimbin Aquarius Festival – it was the glue that held it together and expressed its soul.

The festival was motivated partly by a response to commercial rock festivals that had happened earlier in Sunbury outside Melbourne and Ourimbah near Gosford north of Sydney. Graeme Dunstan and I felt that the commercial nature of these festivals had turned the music into a commodity to be consumed, rather than an experience to be shared. Thus part of the Aquarius Festival Manifesto became "We do not need to be sold our own culture" – the Aquarius Festival was to be a non-exploitative experience where "There is no program – YOU are the festival!"

This extended to the promotion of the festival, where there would be no advertising. Rather, as Graeme expressed it, word about the festival would be spread "on the lips of the counter culture" – if people were turned on by the idea, they would tell their friends, who in turn would tell their friends – what we now call viral marketing.

Of course, we put a lot of energy into spreading the word, communicating with thinkers, artists, writers, musicians and doers of all kinds, explaining our concept of the festival and inviting them to join us. As the Aquarius Foundation toured the national university campus circuit with thinkers and entertainers such as Ralph Nader, Ivan Illich, Spike Milligan, Phil Ochs, Ron Cobb and Daddy Cool, Graeme and I would gather together the movers and shakers in each city and town, explain the concept and invite them to play a role. These gatherings often took the form of a soiree, with a curry banquet cooked by Kalahari bushman Bauxhau Stone, and music by troubadours such as Paul Joseph. Often we were met with the reaction of "sixties hippie bullshit" as people left the gathering, but there was always a small and enthusiastic group who stayed behind saying "When do we start and what do you want us to do?."

Gradually a committed group adhered to the festival concept including architecture students, led by Col James from Sydney University and Bill Lucas from the University of NSW, who took on the task of building structures for the festival; the HARPO collective from Brisbane led by Bomber Perrier and Graham Cathcart who set up a food co-op in the old Tomato Sauce building at Nimbin; and the Bush Video group from Sydney who took on the task of documenting the festival. Paul Joseph and I set up the White Company, a troupe of travelling gypsy musicians (named after a children's adventure book) including musicians Peter Thin and Geoffrey Hale, electronic wizard Stevie Dunstan from Melbourne, Finnish drummer Asko Sutinen, Moroccan acrobat Ahmed, actors John Pratt and Kris McQuade. The troupe gathered and rehearsed in an abandoned girls' school at Lawson in the Blue Mountains, and then toured the university campuses and rural communities as a living demonstration of how we wanted people to come to the festival. The group had an existence way beyond and outside of the festival, with a wide range of musicians and performers joining at various times including Ronaldo Cameron and many others.

Invitations to attend the festival reached far and wide, with African jazz pianist Dollar Brand invited by Bauxhau Stone; Philippe Petit, the Blondin of his generation, who had just completed a high wire walk between the spires of Notre dame Cathedral in Paris, on the recommendation of James Murdoch from the music Board of the Australia Council. Both of these artists were invited in the spirit of the festival, and were told that there would be no program or fees paid, though their airfares were provided by grants from the Australia Council. The networking extended internationally, and contacts were established with Richard Neville and video maker John Kirk in London, experimental theatre group BLERTA including actor Bruno Lawrence in New Zealand, and the Bauls of Bengal, a troupe of gypsy musician with an ecstatic spiritual music tradition dating back to pre-Vedic times in India through the grace of Melbourne entrepreneur Clifford Hocking.

We established a "feedback loop", with news of the gathering tribe recycled through a newsletter swapping stories and information that became global – a precursor of the Internet and Facebook.

For me, the cultural dimension of the festival was heavily influenced by the Arts Factory, an alternative venue started by Geoff Cantor in the old Anthony Hordens' stable building in Goulburn Street, Surry Hills. One hall of the building became an arts, crafts and food market, whilst the other became an alternative music venue featuring bands such as Tully, Nutwood Rug, Sun, Dharma, and musicians such as Wendy Saddington and Geoff St John, with a wrap-around light show created by resident genius Eddie van der Madden. Geoff operated the venue on the principle that he would deal only with musicians directly and not through their agents – a precursor of the indie music scene.

When he left for Bali and handed me the keys, I continued to operate the Factory on the same philosophy, adding alternative theatre with groups such as the Performance Syndicate led by Rex Cramphorne, yoga classes and film screenings. I also continued the tradition, started by Geoff Cantor and Dan Doepel from the Nutwood Rug band, of holding small informal festivals on the Rug's farm at Ourimbah outside of Gosford. I would simply announce from the Factory stage for a couple of weeks in a row that a gathering would be held on a given weekend, and several hundred people, many of them musicians, would show up. There would be an improvised stage with open jam sessions, and people spent much of their time going from camp site to camp site sharing conversation, food, music and dope. At the end of the festival, I would go around with a hat gathering donations to cover any out of pocket expenses such as truck hire for the sound system.

Graeme Dunstan had attended one of these small festivals, and when we began the task of organising the Aquarius Festival they became an obvious model. The following excerpt from "At the heart of a country fair" by Stephen Shelmerdine in The Digger newspaper after the festival provides a good description of the scene:

"With such inviting star attractions the Main Street became almost impossible to move in at certain times; many travellers were content just to spend hours wandering amongst people from all corners of the continent, digging bands, orators and street theatre, perusing jewellery, leather-goods and candle structure. Every evening Phillipe le Petit, impresario extraordinaire - a magician, conjurer and hire-wire expert – juggled, tight rope-walked, tossed firesticks and trick-cycled; the Mornington Islanders performed corroborees and dances around fires at the Aboriginal Cultural Centre. The manifold religious communities (Krishna Consciousness Movement, Divine Light Players, Children of God, Siva Kalpa, and even weirder religions performed services, satangs and musical offerings. African Jazz pianist Dollar Brand, the Magik Karavan, the White Company, Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band, Captain Matchbox, Lindsay Bourke's organ and assorted electric rockers added to the ethereal soft music that floated from the creeks from early in the morning."

"By day discussions, lessons and demonstrations were held in the Craft Centre, the Human Relations Tent and the Alternative Health Centre. By night multi-media extravaganzas rocked the Buttery. The Sheiks' Revue and the Nimbin Softlick Players performed at the Town Hall, and New Zealand's radical education group BLERTA staged children's theatrical workshops."

The vision of the Aquarius Festival Manifesto, it seems, had become a reality, leaving its mark on the Northern Rivers region, and taken back to cities and towns all around Australia in the hearts and minds of those who experienced the festival.

John Allen (27 November 2012)