

The 1973 Nimbin Festival and the Australian Union of Students

A perspective by former AUS Executive Officer, John Vines

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The Nimbin Festival was sponsored by the Australian Union of Students (AUS) in May 1973. It was the last of a series of university student festivals held every two years and sponsored by AUS. The previous festivals had been held on University Campuses and were largely focused on film, live production and music. The first was held at Sydney University in 1967, the second at Melbourne University in 1969 and the third at ANU in 1971. The ANU festival was held during the height of the Anti- Vietnam war protests and also following the anti-apartheid protests associated with the South African Rugby tour of 1971. As such, the location of Canberra provided a unique opportunity for further protest marches to the US and South African embassies.

There was a view however following the ANU festival that the next festival should have a focus on peace for mankind and love for each other in line with the flowerpower movement in the US. Thus the Aquarius Foundation was established by AUS to organise the next festival and also to conduct the AUS Cultural affairs activities.

Johnny Allen was appointed by the AUS executive as the Cultural Affairs Director and subsequently Graeme Dunstan was appointed as the Festival Director. In August 1972 they were commissioned to identify non-university sites for the festival proposed for 1973. Allen and Dunstan spent 3-4 months travelling in NSW and Queensland and eventually settled on Nimbin as the preferred site. During this time there was some concern that Allen and Dunstan were on a relatively unfocused meander through the countryside as they had been out of contact with the AUS office during their travels. They presented their report (a series of photographs) to the AUS council meeting in January 1973 and the council subsequently endorsed the recommendation for Nimbin. The Council also approved a budget \$53,000 for the festival. It was envisaged that most of this would be recouped from ticket sales leaving a net subsidy of \$7500.

The AUS Council, which comprised representatives from each Australian University and a number of Institutes of Technology, was bemused by the prospect of a "hippies" festival and although they agreed to holding the festival, there was some concern that the dope which surrounded the concept of a hippie festival might result in a less than focused approach to the delivery of the festival, particularly the associated infrastructure and logistic arrangements. Accordingly, the decision of the AUS Council included a number of milestones that would need to be met to ensure that the festival was delivered on time etc.

Immediately following the AUS Council, Allen and Dunstan went back to Nimbin to start to put arrangements in place for the festival. The contact between the AUS office and them was again virtually non-existent and the AUS executive began to get somewhat nervous about the delivery of the festival. A special meeting of the Aquarius Board was convened in mid February 1973 to assess the situation, this meeting however only served to strengthen the concerns of the AUS executive as there appeared to be very limited progress in arranging for the infrastructure, land leasing and associated logistics for the festival. As a result it was decided that the AUS General Vice President should visit Nimbin to ascertain first hand the progress in the arrangements. His visit confirmed some of the concerns in relation to progress, while the festival office had been established in Nimbin and a number of the buildings in the Main Street had been painted including the rainbow cafe, arrangements to lease the land for the festival had not been finalised along with the associated infrastructure such as water supply.

His report back to the AUS executive resulted in a number of ultimatums to the effect that unless specific milestones were met, AUS would withdraw funding for the festival. These ultimatums seemed to have the desired effect in that arrangements were put in place for the leasing of land totalling approx 200 acres which would be used for camp grounds for festival participants. Progress was also made in arranging for a reticulated water supply for the festival grounds and the erection of somewhat primitive washing, shower and toilet facilities. In retrospect it is amazing that the local Lismore Council did not intervene to enforce sanitation by-laws.

An issue for the AUS executive, given the somewhat remote location of Nimbin, was how students from the various campuses would travel to Nimbin. As the Whitlam Government had been elected in the previous December, there was the suggestion that it might be prepared to transport students by Naval ship from at least Melbourne and Sydney. The suggestion was raised with Tom Uren and a couple of other ministers but was taken no further. Then there was the suggestion of chartering a train, however that was not proceeded with. Instead various campuses made their own arrangements to assist students in getting to Nimbin. A significant proportion of students however travelled by train to Lismore and then to Nimbin by bus. In the end most participants travelled to the festival by car or by train to Lismore and then by bus.

The next challenge for the AUS executive as to work out how ticket sales for the festival would be administered. It was agreed that as all festival participants would need to use road transport to get to Nimbin and as there were only two roads into and out of Nimbin, that the best approach would be to divert all road transport coming into Nimbin from Lismore (95% of the traffic) to an area where a ticket office would be set up in a caravan. All vehicles would be directed to a car park on leased land on the outskirts of the festival as it had been decided that the festival grounds would be car free. These arrangements were discussed and agreed with by the local police on the understanding that the local s would not be impeded into and through the township.

By this stage a growing number of non-university students had arrived in Nimbin and there was a strong view that a requirement to pay an entrance fee was at odds with the counterculture and that AUS as a quasi capitalist organisation should not charge an entrance fee for the festival. Despite this view, however, the road diversion was established and probably about 50% of festival participants paid a fee.

The caravan which was manned by members of the AUS executive and staff and met with some resistance from some participants who refused to pay. After the third day of the festival, it was decided that it was unlikely that there would be much more in the way of ticket sales so the executive retreated to the leagues club in Lismore for a meal and decided to stay in a motel in Lismore that night "to get a decent nights sleep and to get away from the hippies for a night". The next morning they woke up to the first item on the ABC news being a report of a police wagon being overturned in Nimbin and a police officers gun having disappeared. The executive didn't eat breakfast but raced back to Nimbin. The tension in Nimbin was quite high, and was not helped by the presence of the 23 squad from Sydney. Fortunately later that morning the gun was anonymously returned to the police.

Overall the festival was considered by the AUS executive to have been a success although. It is fair to say that the executive had limited influence or control over the festival. It pretty much developed of its own accord. It certainly put Nimbin on the map and in its own way reflected a desire on the part of AUS to experiment with a non traditional festival and to support the development of a counterculture in Australia.

From a financial view point the festival was quite a burden for AUS. The final cost to the AUS budget was close to \$20,000 (versus a budget estimate of \$7500) after income of approx \$40,000 (ticket sales \$31k, grants \$9k) There was a cost in cleaning up after the festival in removing the infrastructure and returning the land to its previous state. Overall the total expenditure for the festival of approx \$53,000 was in line with the original budget, however the refusal of a large number of participants to pay the entry fee resulted in the much higher than anticipated final subsidy required to be met by AUS.

It is worth noting that this was the last of the AUS festivals. Either this festival couldn't be surpassed or AUS had learnt that unless it could control the event then it would put its financial position at risk. There was a widely held view in AUS that the Festival had been hi-jacked by the hippies and the big losers were Australia's university students who would not have access to a University Arts festival in the future. Some suggested that it was part of an ASIO plot to seek to financially ruin AUS.

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