

## Where have all the hippies gone?



*Michael Balderstone, at home on the outskirts of Nimbin, runs the Hemp Embassy. Photo: Peter Rae*

*Forty years after the love-in began, Damien Murphy catches up with the aged of Aquarius.*

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Educated at Melbourne's high-caste Scotch College, a stockbroker with JB Were, an uncle the chairman of BHP, Michael Balderstone was once a long way from the rebellious spirit who kept Nimbin's original flame burning bright.

So maybe it is some sort of karma that the week the northern NSW town celebrates being put on the map by the 1973 Aquarius Festival, a NSW parliamentary committee recommended the medical use of cannabis for people suffering terminal illnesses.

"*Kismet*," says Balderstone, who runs the Hemp Embassy in Nimbin's main drag. "*The medical use of marijuana should be a health issue, not a political one. I think 90 per cent of the public would support medical cannabis for people who are really sick.*"

In May 1973, Balderstone was discovering another way of getting head lice hanging out in a Nepalese village, as he puts it, while about 2000 or more mainly middle-class young Australian men and women travelled north to a dying dairy village in the Big Scrub. For 10 days they partied hard. They sang, danced, listened to poets, watched street theatre, built dome houses, smoked pot, swam naked and restored Nimbin to life.

The festival aimed to celebrate alternative thinking and sustainable lifestyles, however the celebrants' propensity to remove clothes and smoke pot openly led to the mainstream media labelling the whole thing hippie heaven.

Surfers opened up the NSW north coast to southern eyes. Nimbin lay down the template that turned Byron Bay, Bangalow and Mullumbimby into high property price New Age havens.

Nimbin residents might be living as alternatives in communes and shacks in surrounding bush, but they have done little to disabuse the idea they live in Hippie Central. There's the annual Mardi Grass, and the shops lining Cullen Street are full of the colour, paraphernalia and grunge of a Haight-Ashbury snapshot, circa 1967. Artists who first painted the town psychedelic in 1973, such as Hazelbrook's Vernon Treweeke, have returned to touch up their work. Balderstone's Hemp Embassy, a non-profit venture spruiking cannabis reform, conveniently located next door to the Nimbin Hotel, seems to be the focus.

Hailing from Victoria's Western District, Balderstone tried his hand at jackarooing and stockbroking before being sent to London where he discovered a new person.

He returned to Melbourne via the Greek islands and Afghanistan, and opened a bric-a-brac shop in then hip Greville Street, Prahran. "*He lived in one of those dilapidated Toorak mansions,*" recalls a contemporary. "*They had a sheep. Come Saturday morning, they'd take it for a walk down Toorak Road to upset the poodles.*"

Balderstone brought a similar style to Nimbin when he purchased two shares in a commune and returned permanently in the early 1980s. His lavatory offers a splendid up-close view of Mount Warning's nightcap tip. By the time Balderstone arrived, Nimbin was staggering under the weight of self-imposed freedom.

In 1972, John Allen, then the Australian Union of Students cultural director, watched an ABC Four Corners program on dying country towns featuring Nimbin. He and fellow union office holder Graeme Dunstan (a Duntrooner who lay in front of the visiting US president Lyndon Johnson's Sydney motorcade) were looking for a place to hold an alternative festival. Since 1966 there had been three such festivals staged at universities; Woodstock loomed large and rock festivals at Ourimbah and Sunbury were hits.

"*There was tension between those who wanted music and those who wanted culture,*" says Allen, an event management lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney. "*Many young people then were the children of people who had grown up in the country. There was a conscious move back to the land. Nimbin sort of naturally suggested itself.*"

Artist Treweeke who had seen psychedelia in London and brought it to the Sydney art world in 1967, recalls being told that local Aborigines had cursed the place after earlier settlers had taken their land. "*The curse was that the valley would not prosper, and we had found an almost deserted town, most of the shops were boarded up and unused. Farm houses were empty. We rented them for about \$2 a week and we bought the empty shops,*" he says.

Allen says few originals stayed: "*Most of the people who took part in the festival left town. They had their own scenes already. Those who stayed, didn't, although they mightn't thank me for saying it.*"

Some say Australia finally acquired the '60s zeitgeist with the election of the Whitlam government. Nimbin, a magnet for freewheelers, became shorthand for sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.

But the drug royal commissions of the 1970s did their job and pot dried up.

Dealers opportunistically loaded heroin onto the market and Nimbin suffered greatly. The town filled with runaways, children living in a haze. In a nod to Clockwork Orange, locals called them "droogs". A decade ago, hollow-eyed kids still sidled up to tourists pushing grass.

Balderstone says there were many mental health problems but Nimbin has cleaned up its act. "*It's a place you can hang, and that made it hard for ourselves,*" he says.

With festival alumni pulling into town, nearby Lismore has renamed itself "Lovemore" for the anniversary party. Thousands are expected with the weekend's fine weather. There is a masquerade ball next Saturday and Southern Cross University is conducting a two-day conference *Aquarius and Beyond*. "*Aquarius has resonated well beyond 1973,*" lecturer Rob Garbutt says. "*Its ideas adapted and altered as time went on, yet the Aquarius spirit - hope for the future - is still clearly alive. Nimbin became a place where ideas mixed and morphed to create something new.*"

Benny Zable is one original who kept the faith. Melbourne raised, he worked on a kibbutz before arriving in 1973 with a dance workshop that performed H. G. Wells' Time Machine in Nimbin Town Hall. "*We didn't know it then, but we were sustainability trailblazers,*" he says.

Zable helped launch a sister village relationship with Woodstock in upstate New York. Nathan Koenig, of the Woodstock Museum, is in town this month showing locals his movie about them, *Woodstock Downunder*.

"*Hey guys,*" Koenig says, "*You know what some Sunday paper called us? The aged of Aquarius.*"

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