

## ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN*

‘Andrew Stafford’s *Something To Believe In* is quite an achievement. It’s all here: part tragicomic tale of a fanboy writer struggling to translate his primal affair with music into a “real” job; part exco-riating account of his ride from adolescence to adulthood and self-discovery; and part blossoming tale of love and forgiveness. Written with great humanity and girded by a soundtrack to die for – which he almost did on more than one occasion – this memoir is a punchy, unputdownable must-read.’ **PETER GARRETT**

‘A pulsing, rattling jukebox of a music memoir. Drop a coin, find your sound. Rock and punk and pop; the rock bottom and the very top. Love, family, sorrow, pain; the birds, the blues, the brain. A pull out your heart and feed it to anyone rock & roll sock to the core, *Something To Believe In* is a soaring, sweat-soaked tribute to life’s two great miracles: music and waking up each day to hear it.’ **TRENT DALTON**

‘Lyrical, wise and full of wonder. Andrew Stafford strips himself bare with courage, candour, and vulnerability.’ **TRACEY SPICER**

‘Andrew Stafford takes us on an exhilarating ride through his life as birdwatcher, cab driver, roadie, son, lover and writer. His astute and insightful observations on music and politics in Brisbane in particular from the late eighties provide a stunning backdrop to this personal expression of his life story.’ **LINDY MORRISON**

‘This beautifully written book reminded me of how much music helps us navigate through life, in all its complicated glory.’ **MYF WARHURST**



Andrew Stafford is a freelance journalist and the author of *Pig City: From The Saints To Savage Garden*, a musical and political history of Brisbane first published in 2004. *Something To Believe In* is his second book. You can find him on Twitter @staffo\_sez and his Patreon page: [www.patreon.com/andrewstafford](http://www.patreon.com/andrewstafford)

SOMETHING  
TO BELIEVE  
IN

ANDREW STAFFORD

UQP

First published 2019 by University of Queensland Press  
PO Box 6042, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia

uqp.com.au  
uqp@uqp.uq.edu.au

Copyright © Andrew Stafford 2019  
The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

This book is copyright. Except for private study, research, criticism or reviews, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Cover design by Design by Committee  
Author photograph by Richard Waugh  
Typeset in 12/16 pt Bembo Std by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane  
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group, Melbourne



**Queensland  
Government**

The University of Queensland Press is supported by the  
Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.



**Australian Government**

**Australia  
Council  
for the Arts**



The University of Queensland Press is  
assisted by the Australian Government  
through the Australia Council, its arts  
funding and advisory body.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 978 0 7022 6253 1 (pbk)  
ISBN 978 0 7022 6365 1 (pdf)  
ISBN 978 0 7022 6366 8 (epub)  
ISBN 978 0 7022 6367 5 (kindle)

University of Queensland Press uses papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

For my parents, who always let me do what I wanted to do,  
and be who I wanted to be.

Yeah.

This book contains depictions of suicide, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

If you find yourself in distress, don't read on. Please call

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 224 636

MensLine 1300 78 99 78

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

or (if outside Australia) your local crisis support hotline.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are respectfully advised that  
this book contains the names of people who have passed away.

*The difference between movies and rock & roll is that rock & roll doesn't lie.  
It never promises a happy ending.*

– Elliott Murphy, liner notes for the Velvet Underground's 1969



# CONTENTS

Dead Wax	1
----------	---

## SIDE A

	Fade In: I Am Just A Teenage Dreamer	5
1	Bug-Eyed Monsters From Planet Claire	9
	<i>Let There Be Rock</i> (AC/DC)	18
2	Greenie Punks	21
	<i>Man Overboard</i> (Do Ré Mi)	38
3	(Don't) Gimme Danger	41
	<i>Love Planet</i> (Painters & Dockers)	56
4	Busy Being Reborn	59
	<i>Marquee Moon</i> (Television)	72
5	Uncle Meat	76
	<i>Hounds Of Love</i> (Kate Bush)	92
6	(Truly, Madly, Deeply) Stranded	95
	<i>Constant Craving</i> (k.d. lang)	109

## SIDE B

7	A Variable Inward Culture	113
	<i>Apart</i> (The Apartments)	126
8	Of Matters Profound And Loud	129
	<i>Immolation &amp; Ameliorations (1995–2005)</i> (Spencer P. Jones)	146
9	(Gimme) Deathpunk	151
	<i>Downbound Train</i> (Bruce Springsteen)	168
10	Two Different Birds	171
	<i>Hold My Hand</i> (Jen Cloher)	183
11	Euro Double-Vision (The Fear)	186
	<i>(We Are) The Road Crew</i> (Motörhead)	200
12	Dying By Degrees	204
	<i>Divorce Song</i> (Liz Phair)	220
	Fade Out: Something To Believe In	223
	Playlist 1	235
	Playlist 2	242
	Sources And Permissions	249
	Acknowledgements	252

## DEAD WAX

I ALWAYS FLIRT with death. Usually, it's familiar and sometimes even strangely comforting. There have been long periods where the ideation of it has become so ingrained that I have accepted it as part of the background of my day-to-day life, along with the mild tinnitus in my ears.

This time, though, it's serious. The depression has persisted for months, it is overwhelmingly intense, and there are things I've kept hidden from those closest to me, including my doctors. I'm in a hotel room in Auckland, ahead of a music conference. In the bar fridge there's plenty of booze to loosen the inhibitions, and in the bathroom enough oxycodone and diazepam to get the job done. Back at home in Brisbane, spread out neatly on the kitchen table, are my will, my mother's will, my birth and marriage certificates, and a note.

There's just one last thing to do.

I've hit all my deadlines except one: I have to review Neil Finn's new album, *Out Of Silence*. At this juncture, it shouldn't matter whether such a triviality is completed, but it matters to me. I don't like loose ends and it's a commitment I want to fulfil.

It's difficult. My mind is in a muddle and the music is complex. The arrangements are dense and the orchestration is layered: there are strings, horns, a small choir. Finn's voice is familiar and soothing, but this is the most ambitious album he has made. Generally, it doesn't take long for me to unpack a record, but this one is demanding.

I get stuck on the third song, Chameleon Days. It's like looking into *Alice In Wonderland's* pool of tears. The surface is shimmering. I can see my own reflection but not the bottom. I dive in and listen to the song through the headphones twice, five, ten, a dozen times in a row. I'm out of my depth.

A mouse swims past. It is Finn. I need your help, I say. He looks disturbed and swims away. Please, I call after him, I am drowning. Reluctantly, he commands me to follow him to shore.

There is a weariness in Finn's voice, but he is patient and kind as he whispers simple matters of fact in my ear. Look, he says. While you were making your plans, God was just having a little puff, observing the action. You can't control this stuff, you know; it's just life. You either accept the cards you've been dealt or you drown.

I'm not religious, but the image of God rolling a number as she watches the chaos enveloping her creation makes me smile. Finn's music wraps around me like a blanket. I know I'll be listening to the record forever, if not very often, for it will always be associated with this moment.

I file at three-thirty a.m. and immediately fall asleep, unaided by the paraphernalia I'd set out. When I wake up I feel horrendous, but alive.

You may ask yourself: how did I get here?

# SIDE A





## FADE IN

# I AM JUST A TEENAGE DREAMER

I'VE GOT TWO guitars at home. My first one, over ten years old now, is a Maton acoustic. The second is a spanking machine, a silver sparkle solid-body Gretsch I picked up in Greenwich Village, New York City. A cheap Korean knock-off, but who cares; it looks and sounds great, or it would if only I played the damned thing. It's pretty much sat idle for two years.

I can play, a little. I know enough chords, but I struggle to get from one to the next with any fluency. I could make the excuse that I'm left-handed, and that's the main reason I didn't pick up a guitar when I was younger, when left-handed guitars weren't easy to find and idiots in guitar shops told me to learn right-handed or, if I really had to, just restring it upside down.

The truth is I'm a fumbler on the fretboard. And maybe I just didn't want to work hard enough at getting better. What I really wanted to do was sing. I can do that slightly better than I play guitar. My early rock & roll heroes weren't saddled with guitars anyway, and they were incredibly physical performers: Peter Garrett, Iggy Pop, Jello Biafra, Joey Ramone.

Watching them communicated to me that rock & roll was

something you did with your entire body. When I'm at a gig and really lost in it, I still have no problem dancing like no one's watching. I barely even drank in my younger years, so I had no need of alcohol or other drugs to cut loose. The music was always enough. I'd just plug myself into the amps and go.

I sang in a band in high school. We did two gigs. One was at a house party and the other at an end-of-year school dance. We played covers of songs befitting our rudimentary skills: the Ramones; the Cramps; a three-minute version of the Velvet Underground's seventeen-minute monolith Sister Ray; the Hard-Ons' version of Then I Kissed Her.

It was a hoot. I'll never forget the feeling. Playing that kind of music, at least in high school, wasn't that common at the time; this was back when wearing the Ramones' logo or Radio Birdman's symbol was a bit like a Masonic handshake. It could at least get you into a decent conversation, if not actually laid. (Never, in my case. I was, shall we say, a late developer.) Anyway, I digress.

The next year, my final year of school, the band played again, only I wasn't in it. I found my place usurped by one of my peers, a shit-hot guitar player who went on to front one of the best and most popular acts in the country, still performing to this day. Needless to say, they were much better. I have to admit to being a little crushed.

A few years later I started writing about rock & roll instead, a painful form of growing up in public. Writing, unlike performing, came naturally to me. I could go to gigs and even get paid a small amount of money, and I was good enough to quickly climb the (short) ladder from local street press to national magazines.

But there's still a part of me that knows, deep down, I'm faking it: that if I had my way I'd be *on* that stage, not intellectualising about the experience later. I used to say that any rock journalist who denied they'd rather be a rock star was lying through their

teeth. A couple of very good writers have angrily denied this to me, though, so maybe it's just me.

This book is about being a fan and, to be completely truthful, a wannabe. A nod of acknowledgement is due to Giles Smith's *Lost In Music* and Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, both of which traverse similar terrain in memoir and (blurred) fiction. But everyone whose life was ever saved by rock & roll finds their own way in. This isn't a story of sex and drugs, though. More often it's about loneliness, escape, obsession and the odd triumph, balanced by occasional episodes of madness which the music sometimes stoked, but mostly soothed.

It's definitely a story of arrested development. On my fridge I have a photocopy of an old *Life In Hell* strip by Matt Groening titled 'How To Be A Feisty Rock Critic'. Among other things, it asks if you characterise yourself as pre-adolescent, adolescent or semi-post-adolescent. Check a box: any will qualify you for the job. And there's always lurked, as the strip says, a vague sensation that my career choice is ridiculous. But it's also how I explain much of my lived experience. This, I agree, might be a problem.

Naturally, it's personal. The brief treatises on songs or albums separating the chapters were chosen simply for the impact they had on my life at the time. They're not my top dozen, let alone anyone else's: they're just a suburban boy's reflections on his own predilections and whims. That's mostly white rock & roll, punk and pop, because apart from Michael Jackson, that's what I grew up on: blues, soul, funk and R&B were part of my later education rather than personal touchstones. At the same time, you won't find me ruminating on the Beatles, Beach Boys or Van Morrison here. Sure, I love them as much as the next person, but it's not a conversation I have much to add to.

Sometimes I think I should sell my two guitars. I'm getting a bit old, and have long since let go any teenage dreams of rock

stardom. But I can't bring myself to, because I can't sell a dream. They're a slightly embarrassing reminder of what I can't do. But they also make me smile, because the dream reminds me of why I keep doing what I do.

To paraphrase the Ramones, from whom I've pinched the title of this book (not, to be absolutely clear, from the Poison song of the same name), I don't know when to stop. But I do know where to begin.

## BUG-EYED MONSTERS FROM PLANET CLAIRE

MY EARLIEST MUSICAL memories are probably of my dad, Ron, singing. He had, and still has, a golden tenor. He's looked after it well over the years and it remains an instrument of great warmth and tenderness. While I've let my own musical dreams go, Dad rediscovered his late in life. He made his first album a few years ago at the respectable age of seventy-seven.

Dad's an old-fashioned crooner. The first song he can remember singing was Roy Hamilton's early version of *Unchained Melody*, which came out in 1955, and he can still nail it today. He's not rock & roll at all – I don't think he was even especially fond of the Rat Pack guys like Sinatra and Dean Martin. I suspect the whiff of dubious behaviour was enough to put him off. Nat King Cole and Matt Monro, especially, were more his bag.

*Born Free*, by Monro, is 'his' song. To understand why, it might help to know where Dad comes from, which is Wangaratta, in Victoria's north-east. His childhood memories are of rabbiting in the low, rolling hills of the Warby Ranges, to the town's west, and riding his bike north to a dot on the map called Peechelba to fish for cod in the Ovens River. He'd take me and my younger brother,

Mark, there as boys. I started watching birds there – my affinity for the natural world probably comes from him. More on that later.

Dad left school young, as was the way at the time, particularly for country kids. He moved to Melbourne at fifteen to work for the state railways, and a few years later started taking singing lessons from a guy called Jack White, who also worked with a young Diana Trask. Trask went on to open shows for Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr in 1959, and later forged a successful pop and country career in New York and Nashville.

While rock & roll was growing horns, Dad's training was classic light entertainment fare. He joined a vocal group called the New Tones. They made a television appearance on a variety show called *Sunnyside-Up* with race caller Bill Collins. Dad had an *Almost Famous* moment in 1962 when he auditioned for a then-unknown group, whose first singer, Ken Ray, had left to get married. Judith Durham got the gig instead. The Seekers chose well there.

Soon Dad got married too. He met my mother, Sue, at Mount Buffalo Chalet in the Victorian Alps in 1967. He'd relocated from Melbourne to work there. A few years ago, when we sold Mum's house to facilitate her move into aged care, I found a box of personal effects, including love letters Dad had written her on the chalet's letterhead. They'd divorced in 1994, but remained friends, and she'd held onto them. We're a sentimental bunch.

Dad returned to live in Wangaratta in 2001. His heart never really left the town, and he's a veritable pillar of the community now. He joined the local chapter of Sing Australia in 2009. Sing Australia is based on a simple concept: it 'accepts that everyone can sing and makes no judgement on how well that happens. It is inclusive and welcoming of everyone.' It was thanks to the contacts he made at Sing Australia that Dad, between 2013 and 2015, began to make a record. The songs are all standards: You'll Never Walk Alone (the last song and title track); Moon River; Autumn Leaves;

Two Different Worlds; When I Fall In Love. And Born Free, of course.

He sang When I Fall In Love at my wedding, a cappella. That was quite a moment. All our rock & roll friends were there, and I think they were horrified when they realised this shy and quite elderly gentleman was about to burst into song without accompaniment. He slayed them. The marriage didn't last, but memories like that always will.

In the notes for his album, Dad writes: 'Songs are part of one's life, and some songs can have a special meaning or place in your lifetime.' It wasn't until he returned to the country that he started to write a few of his own. Dad had never shown any inclination towards that kind of self-expression until he went home, and then it was as if, as the lyrics in Born Free told him, he realised he had no need to hide anymore.

A couple of years ago he wrote a potted history of his life for Mark and me. It was a page and a half long, but it still had a lot of stuff I didn't know. At the end of it was this snatch of verse:

Still waters gather round me  
The grass stirs beneath my fleet of foot  
And every last breath  
Taps the last note of music to my soul  
Grieve not, as I move ever closer to nature  
Where all creatures great and small  
Find everlasting peace.

We celebrated Dad's eightieth birthday recently. Mark and I bought him a classic Shure microphone. We had 'Born Free' engraved on the handle.

After Dad's singing, my first real musical memories are of *Countdown* on Sunday nights. For this I can thank my mother. Dad was never much more than puzzled by both the spectacle and the sound of popular music as soon as guitars and drums began to overwhelm the vocals. For him it was all about the singer.

There was a bigger generation gap between me and Dad, who was born in 1938; to this day he endearingly calls the radio a 'wireless'. Mum, on the other hand, was a baby boomer, and had emerged from considerable turmoil – her parents' separation and alcoholism, and multiple schools – which should have primed her for an adolescent rock & roll rebellion. Instead, she went the other way, seeking at church youth groups a stability that she lacked in her home life. Dad, whom she met when she was twenty, was undoubtedly a steadying influence. My parents were solid, blue-collar, Labor-voting citizens, but all the social upheaval, civil disobedience and artistic experimentation of the sixties completely bypassed them.

So there were no Beatles or Stones records in our house to discover, much less Led Zeppelin or Black Sabbath. About the only pop star I can remember Mum admitting much fondness for was Ricky Nelson, when he was a slightly anaemic teen idol in the fifties. Then *Countdown* landed in Australian lounge rooms in late 1974, right before the arrival of colour television.

Mum, who was twenty-seven by this point, must have been curious about what the kids were listening to, because it was definitely her influence, if not insistence, that saw us camped around the television on Sunday evenings, goggling at the spectacle on the box along with millions of other Australians. We'd watch the replays on Saturday too (right after Drew Morphett's VFL round-up, *The Winners*), and prime ourselves for the following night.

Sifting through the musical memories of these early years is like shaking a litter tray looking for gold dust. There are a few specks.

I remember being disturbed by the eeriness of Bowie's *Ashes To Ashes*, a mad hallucination by a man dressed like a harlequin. Much earlier was Bon Scott being shot in the back in the video for AC/DC's *Jailbreak*, in 1976: I was five, and terrified.

I'd like to claim that as my first real rock & roll memory, because to this day few things thrill me as much as the stop-start chop of Malcolm Young's rhythm guitar. But that would be dishonest, for the truth is that when I shake out that litter tray, my memories turn up more desiccated old turds than gold nuggets, the most ancient of which is *January*, by Scottish band Pilot.

Probably the main reason I remember this simpering piece of soft rock is that it sat on top of the Australian charts for two entire months in the early winter of 1975, when I had just turned four. The other reason is that it's the first song I can actually remember singing. I weep for my parents.

After all these years, only the chorus really remains, lodged somewhere in the prefrontal cortex of my brain. The prefrontal cortex is right behind your forehead, and it's where the connections between music, memory and emotions are stored. For me, the primary feeling *January* evokes now is not so much nostalgia as mild nausea.

I couldn't remember another scrap of the tune without looking it up on YouTube. It has, I admit, quite a catchy opening hook by Ian Bairnson, who plays one of those twin-necked guitar monstrosities that became a symbol of seventies rock excess. (Credit where due, though: Bairnson would soar to immortality four years later playing the climactic solo at the end of Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights*.)

According to singer and bass player David Paton – who, along with co-Pilot Billy Lyall, was briefly an early member of the Bay City Rollers – the song was not about the month but a woman, who makes him sad with her eyes as he pleads with her not to leave him. Still, the Beatles made *She Loves You* sound like genius, so the lyrics aren't the point here.

Whatever it was, the song has lots of little touches, like too many herbs on an already overcooked dish. Apart from the string section, perhaps the most striking bit of frippery is keyboard player Lyall chiming in with a flute under the guitar line, before returning to that nagging chorus that, like January herself, hangs around like a dag stuck to a bum.

There are hundreds of other *Countdown* moments, many of which I've since relived. I also remember Mum's occasional intemperate outbursts, like curling her lip with unbridled contempt at Freddie Mercury singing Queen's Save Me, muttering under her breath that she wouldn't save him if he was the last man on earth.

If my memories stretched back a month or two earlier I could probably claim Skyhooks' Horror Movie; a few weeks later and it'd be Sweet's eternal Fox On The Run. But, no. January it is, sitting at the bottom of the sandbox like the old piece of crap it is, after every last speck of gold has slipped through the yawning cracks of my early music memories.

Still, at least it wasn't Terry Jacks's Seasons In The Sun.



As a gormless young suburban boy, I took *Countdown* entirely at face value. On one hand, it seemed like a portal into another world; on the other, it was the world (and we were the children). The musicians dressed like superheroes, especially during the glam era, but that didn't seem odd at the time because Superman was real. We saw him at the drive-in cinema in 1978.

And yes, the glam era had long passed by 1978, but let's not get technical here. Childhood memories are one big fuzz for the most part, and the point is my perception between what was real and what was fantasy at that time was fuzzy too.

This meant that many other nuances, both subtle and obvious,

were lost on me. I didn't realise the performances were mimed. I had no idea that Ian 'Molly' Meldrum was gay, because that meant sunshine and flowers and ice cream. (In fact, Molly was at the very least bisexual, but rumours back then made few allowances for the spectrum of sexual experience.) All that dry ice from the smoke machine probably meant there was a fire somewhere.

I must have missed Iggy Pop's infamous appearance on the show, because I didn't have a clue when Molly, or his guest stars, were drunk, stoned or wired on the set – at least, not until I saw the B-52s performing Rock Lobster in 1980. In saying that, I can't be certain the B-52s were high on anything, but out of all the insane moments from the show's history, this set piece of unparalleled lunacy stands out as transcendent. And while I didn't know what that word meant back then, it was the first time I intuitively understood music as a vehicle for it.

Who were these bug-eyed monsters from Planet Claire? Whoever they were, they took me there. Cindy Wilson's eyes were heavily kohl-rimmed and looked as big as saucers. The drummer, Keith Strickland, was hiding his peepers behind narrow shades as he punched out a robotic beat. Cindy's brother, Ricky Wilson, buttoned up in a Mondrian shirt, was the conductor, pointing and jerking his guitar at the other members as he played the song's insistent surf riff.

Then there was Kate Pierson. How could anyone have hair that high? I wouldn't have been surprised if a swarm of bees had buzzed out of her bouffant. Fred Schneider provided the contrast: the lead singer was the straight man in this comedy act. He had a moustache, wore sensible pale blue slacks and looked like my maths teacher. But he danced like a marionette being jerked by a puppeteer and sang like he had a peg on his nose.

Again, I didn't know the band was miming – Pierson only occasionally made a pretence of playing her chintzy organ – but

Schneider's story about a groovy beach party with marine life forms was performed with such scary fervour that the B-52s couldn't have been more real if they'd burst forth from the TV, materialised in the living room and started passing the tanning butter around.

The noises the two women made were even more bizarre than the underwater scenes Schneider described. *Scoo-doo-boo-dah! Ewwwwww!* What was this new vocal punctuation? The B-52s clearly spoke English, but they were inventing a whole new meta-pop language as they cavorted about the set and smoke and bubbles blew around them. It sounded like Octopus's Garden on acid, but if the Beatles wrote many of their best songs on LSD, what were the B-52s on?

Every time Rock Lobster seemed to peak, it would kick up another loopy level. It was a long song by television and radio standards (the single clocks in at four minutes; the *Countdown* performance was a bit under six and the album version is closer to seven) but I didn't want it to end. Ricky Wilson was the master, controlling the chaos, only a tiny smirk on his angelic features betraying his bent for mischief. But his sister was completely mad. I had never seen anyone dance with such total abandon.

Various forms of sea life began appearing: stingrays, manta rays, jellyfish, dogfish, sea robins and narwhals. As Schneider chanted their names and Pierson's organ beeped and buzzed, the girls had a new sound for each. Finally, with one last shriek, the song dipped into its coda. The set went dark.

Did I sit on the floor with my mouth open, or was I bakin' potatoes in the lounge room? I can't tell you; I don't remember. But it's the gold dust in the litter tray: a moment of realisation and wonderment that music was more than aural wallpaper. Life suddenly had a fifth dimension, and it would never be the same.

Within five years, Ricky Wilson would be dead at the age of

thirty-two, following complications from HIV/AIDS. Four years on, Pilot's Billy Lyall went the same way, aged just four years older. Their illnesses, and sexualities, had been closely guarded, like shameful family secrets. And Bon Scott was already dead – not with a bullet in his back, but with a belly full of booze.

As rock deaths go, Bon's was as clichéd as it was horrible: curled around the gearstick of a car on a cold morning in London, his throat blocked with puke. The eighties were upon us.

## **LET THERE BE ROCK (AC/DC)**

I always liked AC/DC, but then, who doesn't? The music they made was so elemental that even a child could grasp it, and at least a bit of that child remains in most adults with a functioning sense of humour and a pair of ears. Hence their enormous popularity. Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister had the truest line about them: 'Everyone likes AC/DC. Even people who don't like AC/DC like them really.'

I can remember most of the early singles from Jailbreak onwards, and I definitely saw the famous clip of them playing on a flatbed truck as it rolled down Melbourne's Swanston Street for It's A Long Way To The Top early on too, though I can't be exactly sure when. I also remember Molly Meldrum on the verge of tears announcing Bon Scott's death on *Countdown*, and the triumphant comeback single You Shook Me All Night Long. They endured, but never touched such creative heights again.

In the early nineties, the first biography of Bon was published, *Highway To Hell*, by Clinton Walker. As well as being an astute portrait of a deeply flawed but loveable rascal, it made several arguments about the band that stuck. The first was that while Bon and Angus Young were the stars, the undisputed leader was Angus's big brother Malcolm (big being older: Malcolm was about five-foot-three to Angus's five-foot-one). AC/DC's music is all about swing, and Malcolm's rhythm guitar swung like an axe.

The second, made forcefully and convincingly, was that *Let There Be Rock*, the band's fourth album, was AC/DC's summit. *Highway To Hell* and *Back In Black* broke them in America later and made them superstars, with a slightly more radio-friendly polish provided by producer Robert 'Mutt' Lange, and they're the ones that are somewhat begrudgingly featured in those lists of the greatest albums ever

made. They're wrong. *Let There Be Rock*, released in 1977, is easily the meanest, toughest collection of riffs the Youngs ever concocted, matched by Scott's best and wittiest collection of lyrics.

The third, pursuant to the second, was what a fine writer Scott was: his lyrics, lascivious as they were, were sharply honed and cut to the bone, perfectly metred and phrased, delivered in a voice that could fell a tree. As for sexism, I'm reminded of Nigel Tufnel's riposte to Bobbi Flekman in *This Is Spinal Tap*: 'What's wrong with being sexy?' Nigel was as dumb as a bell, but Bon was clever (and sexy), and if anyone could have got away with a reply like that, it would have been him.

The opening track, Go Down, is about exactly what the title suggests. So too Whole Lotta Rosie, which is, as Walker somewhat indelicately puts it, 'an ode to making fat ladies sing'. But while you can find misogyny in spades in the work of any number of bands, not least the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin (and every AC/DC record after Bon's death), *Let There Be Rock* is mostly just ribald. Even the album's weakest track, Crabsody In Blue, which wasn't Bon's first crack at a song about the perils of STIs, doesn't stoop to slut-shaming, as its forerunner The Jack did: he just grins and wears it. Bon knows he's a bad boy and, as he cheerfully admits, it ain't that bad.

That's what makes listening to him a joy – a joy that dissipated very quickly after his demise, because neither the Young brothers nor Brian Johnson had anything like his comic timing or classy stage moves. As for the title track ... well, if God Gave Rock And Roll To You, as Argent (and Kiss) suggested, then Let There Be Rock was the eleventh commandment engraved on the Tablets of Stone.

Crabsody In Blue aside (it was replaced on overseas editions of the album with the much stronger Problem Child, which originally appeared on *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*), the music

is uniformly excellent. Harry Vanda and George Young's production captures all the bite, snarl and interplay between Malcolm and Angus. Malcolm's command of space and time – when not to play – is as crucial as Angus filling it with leads that are always straight to the point, short, sharp and shocking. His solos on *Whole Lotta Rosie* and *Let There Be Rock* both reach peaks of white noise that are the equal of anything by Pete Townshend on the Who's *Live At Leeds*, and eat for breakfast most of what passed for punk at the time.

It was admirable of AC/DC to keep going after Bon died, but I couldn't face seeing them after Malcolm retired with dementia, unable to remember the riffs that provided the framework for one of the mightiest, not to mention loudest, canons/cannons in rock. There were bagpipes at his funeral, which was appropriate for all the obvious reasons, but a 21-gun salute would have been even better. Bon would have approved.