

E is the Third of C

It all started with the bassplayer. How he got into the Rink and managed to get the run of the place, use it for rehearsals, parties and be-ins — and how the Rink became this great venue, this place you could *trust* to put on great music and artists at any time — how all that came about is generally fuzzy. But whatever people will write about it later, that it was like the jam band scene of the 60s, and that what we ironically called *be-ins* were really drinkfests with riotous swapping and endless music, just a buzzing mass of people feeling and being part of something larger without name or reason... That essential core was something organic that grew together, took root in the people and flowered in an event you could go to any Friday and lose yourself in. And this meant something, or rather it meant *everything* in terms of being alive and feeling connected to the core of things, in Brisbane, for about two years. For once Brisbane was at the heart of something bigger: it created something that turned people on all over. It was a bubble, a bit of discrete magic that comes when the right people get together at the right time (with the right substances); an intensely colourful and self-sufficient bubble that floats like an idea in your head, weirdly permutating in colour. All of which is to say it's easier to get carried away trying to nail down the bigger picture of it all, the Rink, the band, that funny vibe in the air and everything it came to mean, than to focus on the simplicity of how it began, with these part-time musicians opening up their rehearsals to the public — actually, with just two musicians jamming.

It was BP on the Fenderbass — we all called him BP or sometimes even BB because of his dead-on impression of BB King, right down to the headroll singing, his dislike of playing chords and long rambles about what The Blues really Means in the context of his Many Wives. But also because BP could play a very effective blues guitar, which he'd pull out on Turkey Nights when everyone else in the band was off having a smoke or checking with the wives, he'd stay solo onstage, with just a cranked amp and one of those harmonica mics plugged into another amp off to the side, no PA, and go into a long bluesy monologue about touring on the bus and phoning home in the snow. Really raw stuff, and funny and crude but also direct and emotional on a deeper level, so that you'd laugh and as well as feel a pang of recognition in your heart. Like being caught laughing at yourself over a mild pisstake. That was when we knew we had the real deal in the Beep, musically, made of solid A1 make-it material. That's what lifted our game, kept the band afloat and made everyone push harder musically. The deeper knowledge that we'd be way more likely to make it with BP on board than without him, and that we'd even drop a whole cartload of personal stuff if it meant pushing him higher, because he was big-scale-oriented, destined for fame and all those other just rewards. He got the ball rolling.

BP had an old friend in Mogely, an electrician with a deep-seated need to rescue and restore vintage instruments, on the keys. Mogely was the clichéd incarnation of everything you'd call Working Class. He had three point five cars in his front yard, dirty nails and could fix anything or offer to come and 'dodgy it up' tomorrow. As well as the lined and vaguely worn-out face of someone who *likes* working too hard and knows it'll do him in eventually, if the bottle doesn't do it sooner — except that Mogely hardly ever drank. His thing was hallucinogens, in fact it was one of his secretive contacts that supplied us with the high-grade acid we were all mad for in the beginning. Not only could he play coherently while ferociously stoned, he could play consistently, on form, for about six hours straight without dropping a note. His stamina was of a different order. Maybe because he was sitting at the console instead of standing around writhing like the rest of us; maybe the focus of his mind was just razor-tight. He just never tired. Again, this was useful during those long exploratory jams when we'd need the occasional breather. Mogely would take up the slack and keep the groove afloat, while one of us had a little mental lie-down somewhere.

So then BP and Mogely hooked up for after-hours jams at the Rink. The Red Hill Skate Arena was a burnt-out husk of an old building that'd been vacant for nearly a decade before BP got the keys. He had some big associates in the construction firm that brought the site and laid the plans for development. No builder had wanted to touch the overpriced site, which came with heritage frontage and a dusty corner of land used as an

ad-hoc parking lot, and which also came with rumours of insurance jobs and zoning issues and a mild sniff of secrecy. The company (called, strangely enough, HP Construction) eventually put enough money on the table for the original owner to let it go, and redevelop it like so many other sites in the Red Hill and Paddington area at the time.

Now, any sensible greedy developer would've put up an ugly debacle of mixed shops and apartments and reaped the rewards of skyrocketing rents in the area, but HP had different and slightly more charitable plans. Since the Rink was originally built as a movie theatre in the 20s, they thought it best to continue the entertainment line and transform it into a medium-sized performance venue; with revamped art-deco features modelled on an old Toowoomba cinema, while at the same time completely modernising the facility to allow screenings, exhibitions and of course a steady string of bands. With several small accommodations and modest parking on the side. In retrospect the whole motivation for building a *venue* — for art and performance and for the community as a whole, as opposed to yet more retail and housing and maximum return per square foot — smacked of vanity project and made me curious as to what BP's real involvement in the deal was. I overheard several mobile discussions with tradesmen or council people that made me think there was more at stake than being pals with the engineer who let him rehearse in the place at night while they finished development during the day. And it was also odd that when the lovely arched ceiling was completed and the primary structural fixtures in place, that the stage and PA should be assembled and finalised next. Apparently this came from BP's directive. My first memories were of playing on a freshly waxed hardwood stage (with boomy foldback speakers) in the middle of what was still a manic construction zone. And that BP was already living there in one of the hidden apartments should've tipped me off as well. He was there all the time. Add the fact that he didn't seem to have a regular job, and didn't want the band to play anywhere else... He was in deep with that venue.

Here's a discussion from the day I came onto the scene (it wasn't an audition so much as favourably answering BP's query 'Do you like Ringo?'):

- You want to know why there's no scene in Brisbane anymore? Want to know why bands can't make it?
- I'm guessing it's the pubs and the whole covers band scene. Either you play soothing covers for the pub-lunch crowd, or nothing.
- Right, but let's talk about venues. I don't care about pubs and the way agencies sew up the business. Pubs are smalltime. Good for getting your small break, and forever floating around with crap attendance and being average. [At this point BP screwed his face up in guitar-solo pain]. Forever pandering to Brissie pubby.
- You could head down to Melbourne...
- Yeah and Rockhampton, Brownsville, Byron. Travelling roadshow stuff. Get picked up by festivals; pray to God the festivals keep you on next year.
- Ha. Tour shirts. Play more... blues.
- But how do you ever get *big*? Being the house band at a pub? An extended residency at the Orient or St Paul's, God forbid? Going pub to pub, with a Uni bar here and there or a sticky corporate function? No. Crap sound, pissed punters, and happy times my eye. Here it is: no one works their way to the big time — not the important bands that matter — because the big venues are too big and too far away. Because between the Entertainment Centre and your local pissup the gap's become too wide. You'll never make that jump unless you're touring internationally, got a one-off hit, or market to teenagers. And what that means is small timers like us don't get the time and space to develop and grow into a bigger better act. There's too few medium or in-between venues to hatch a growing band scene and raise a ready audience. The ones we have are closing down or passing on the cost with no favours. How's a band to get ahead? Where do you go after pubs? There's more and more festivals every year with their fancy ticket prices and expensive beer and serious moneymaking. But I want to play indoors. In a proper venue. With good sound. That's the rub, Traps.

- A venue with a vibe. You're gunning for the ballroom scene in San Fran, the Bill Graham thing, right? Fillmores East and West?
- Right. Brisbane used to be stuffed with great venues: the Roxy. Festival. Orient. Britannia. Now it's the Zoo and the Tivoli... and some small bits here and there. I get sad just talking about it. And you know what? The Fillmore concept is how you make a *scene* happen. Open up a place and charge a nominal entry fee, put on some *real* bands, the kind that can work a crowd, give everyone a bar to drink at, and off you go. That kind of place will go viral. Make it open to everyone. Do a big New Year's eve, do any and every public holiday but make it about the music and the fans rather than the gross and the turnstile. Chuck in a big-ass PA and pay a half-decent soundie to tweak it. Build it and they will come. Then —
- But this ain't going to happen in Brisbane, or is this —
- Yes *this* is going to be the place.
- OK. And, er, this is big enough?
- Big enough for Brisbane and then some. The gap in the musical market is right in the middle, and we're gonna fill it.

I had to make a joke because the construction scene around us was a shambles; with all the scaffolding and unfinished bareness, it just didn't seem like the Rink (as the club was later christened with a bottle of cheap champagne) would either be wide or long and loud enough to come in as a 'medium' sized venue. But that was then. The finished product, with the smart acoustics and trippy lighting and the band in full flight with a crowd of swirling hipsters made it something more epic. Trickery by design; but the design worked.

That's how it began: Mogely all lank and gaunt at the Rhodes piano pumping out chunky chords, and BP in front of his huge speaker cabinets, long-haired with a sweatband on, nodding sagely to the groove. In terms of brass tacks, that was the essential core unit. People jamming. It was the solid earth on which we built the rest of the show. My drums and vocals kept everyone in the pocket — and because I play standing up and left of stage facing the others, that was a bit of a novelty and a giggle but made damn sure everyone was moving. Then we got Crystal and The Esdale on horns, and Marv, a ferocious guitarist we poached from a West End blues band. And a rotating series of percussionists and hangers-on to add fill and colour. Looking at us onstage, none of us were carefully-crafted lookers or showman's mammas — we were harmless, for all intents, and hairy. We were the house band. We were the Rink.

But like I said, we started by rehearsing and then simply opening up to the public as the work finished. Primary rehearsals three times a week during construction, for a full three months and then the doors opened. There was no fixed plan about the band, what it should play or which pose and attitude to strike — it was purely the meeting of six minds in a 'medium-sized' venue. With friends and associates initially making up the audience of stragglers — their small number really did make the Rink seem huge and cavernous. But a few positive hints in the press and community gossip meant the small crowd of friends became a growing mass of devotees hungry for real live music and something more.

The only real directive at the start was to make everybody dance. Not like funk or dance bands that play fast and choppy, but to be deeply danceable by nature. And always with an improvised instrumental leaning, maybe the occasional vocal refrain and a chorus, but without reverting to overt jazz. Ok so the acid may have had something to do with it, there was always a lot of swirling and bug-eyed stares in the crowd back then. And it may explain how songs started stretching to the 30 minute mark, then an hour and longer, and then the whole concept of what makes 'a song' took on these long tidal waves of energy and release, something that had to be experienced over the course of a whole night. And then again with fine shifts and variations the next night. Along with Mogely at the console I pride myself on being able to play all night. Mogely because he was slightly demented and me because any band that *can't* play like Fela until daylight is not worth being in.

By the time we went 'live' the band had solidified, really come together musically. We knew each other's full range and expression. Knew how to keep surprising each other from within our little pockets of space. We could be tight and muscular, really flex and rip with the rhythms. And more importantly, when the music called for it, we knew when to turn down low and breathe or stop playing altogether. We could do space and ambient like no other band. And when we cranked it, the heavy vortex of the music would unroll direct from our hearts and hands.

When you're in it, on stage, the music does funny things to Time, you lose yourself a bit. It just... elevates somehow. But it was the same for the audience — twice when the percussionists were going strong I dropped my sticks and jumped down into the crowd, to feel the mix and the vibe. The sound was wholly congruent. It was a small revelation to see and hear it. What was happening on the small world of the stage was perfectly mirrored in the larger world of the audience; there was no impediment. The group mind that defined our improvisation on stage was carried via amplified ether direct to the people watching and moving. It was joy and harmony in action; and it meant the audience was with us no matter what we did on stage. No ego or bollocks and none of that us/them, rich/poor attitude. Like I said, the drugs may have had something to do with it; but then again, if something feels so humanly real, why question it?

We had this near-pure acid eye-droppered around by the audience. It was one night in summer where the rains had come but the heat and humidity hadn't lifted, and the new air-conditioning was only working as a fan system and not properly cooling the air. One of those nights where the band was visited by 'the magic'. The crowd of several hundred was dancing in sync. The stage sound and the front of house were vibrating like a well-oiled machine, ready to levitate or something. We locked into a solid groove in C and did this double-step rhythm when shifting to the third of the scale, something me and BP would do to pace a long riff and bring it back extra-layered. Mogely got a spirited call and response going with the crowd, and directed them with his left hand, the sweat running down his face. Like he was conducting the crowd. Crystal was blowing long notes on trombone and The Esdale riffing little fills on top, and I was playing purely for percussion. It was six people talking at once, saying wonderfully tricky things, but only one conversation.

From the audience calling back to the stage, you don't realise how loud and powerful that sounds to us up there — this chant that hooked and lifted with the movement of Mogely's hand, this slap-back joy of the band synchronised to the power of the big group, that was everything for us. It was seeing the hundreds of faces — and not just the eyes but the emotion behind them, within every individual lit up and celebrating the intense reality of the moment, immediately grateful and generously of a mind, hot and yearning, heedless and focused. I can't do it adequate justice, and fudge pardon merely by having been the drummer and only a small part of the gestalt, but it was just so much grander than any sum of the musical parts or dynamics. It was because we let the people — the converted and loyal audience — in on it, become it. Total musical inclusion. Loud humanity.

Anyway, that turned out to be the moment, the arrested memory and apotheosis that augurs both the best in the band and the inevitable correction.

We all walked outside with the fans afterward. A bottle of Wild Turkey already aiding and abetting the post-gig adrenaline buzz. BP had looked positively ecstatic as he said 'Has freedom ever felt so beautiful?' as we walked off the stage. It had been one of *those* nights, the audience with us, we with them. I want to say it again and I know it's trite sentiment, but we played for the sheer love of playing. And that informed the way we'd grown and developed into this strangely inclusive event that was all about the give and take.

The usual swirl of conversations and huddled smoke and wired positivity in the semi-dark: our standard comedown routine under the Rink awning, consuming masses of calamari from the fish shop next door

(staying open just to serve the punters — everyone benefited, you see), fans milling about in the floating melange of voices.

Mogely listing the merits of his beloved instruments and those he dreamt of restoring.

The Beep on the phone with his engineer, talking grand expansions.

I was talking to a music distributor who wanted to lay a multi-format deal on us: the first time someone offered to throw a lot of marketing and bandwidth our way.

And fans trying to score some more.

- Did you see it, did you feel it man? I felt like my head was gonna explode. When they all came together? Have you ever felt a build-up like that before? I thought it was never gonna end. We were in there for four and a half hours! I can't even talk about it. I told you they've got spin like no other band.
- The Hammonds are great until they have to be fixed. I've had a few. The Bs, the Cs, the Ms and Ls. Souping up Leslies. Freeing stuck-up tone wheels. Like trying to do repairs on a Mini. Bent my back fixing them, and cracked it moving them around. Great sound and attack though. Like being in church, such smooth action. Great when maxed out. Easy to love. Like flying, but in a choir. Beautiful work on the wood.
- I wish you could've been here tonight Les — this was the kind of night you've got to see up close. We've never been that high before and we really shaped the sound right. Since we moved the backline around the acoustics have come alive, I think. It's nearly finished.
- We're proposing to completely throw open the pipeline for you. Live streaming and hi-def concert footage and sound, as often as you care to be filmed. Daily, weekly, monthly. Straight to the web. If you want to connect with the maximum audience, you have to give it to them here and now, on demand, all the time. The twenty-odd downloads now aren't doing anything to expand your audience base. But the name and the buzz are there and we want to take it from the roller rink to the big world online. I've heard of people driving down from Rockhampton for your show. You know we even had a call from a Kiwi newspaper asking where he could get your CDs, for God's s.
- That hophead from the Con, he called it the Spin because it's like looking in the eye of a storm or a cyclone and everything's real calm and slow and everything around you is moving and spinning around, that's what it's like when you're right in the zone tripping with them and they got this circular call and response and everyone's freakin screaming back at them and I swear on my mother man the walls start moving around and you're in this still vacuum of a sound-bubble, and when they've really got it going like tonight it's like nothing else I've ever seen. Live. The stuff just moves.
- Well, that's why. Once I'd rolled it onstage, we weren't going to move it no more. Been there, broke that. Keep it handy for the floating chords. The cheesy stuff. Never gonna move it now. The Rhodes — different story. No problems. The B can stay in the Rink forever. Soon as the stage was finished, we rolled it on. Everyone comes and goes, the B will stay. It's my gift to this place. It's had a grease and oil, the wheels replaced. Comes with its own ghosts. We talk when we play. Thing is exactly twice as old as me. But the Rhodes is the mainline. But that's another story to tune.
- Right, so, the council meeting?
- But that's just the starter — we've got enough in-house producers to handle the technicalities. We can set them up next week to start filming if your'all happy. The web is going to be your big client gateway, with thousands and thousands subscribing to every gig for a fee. The current presence will be augmented to take all your work on the community and forums and take it to the next level of inclusion. This dark little Rink will be opened up to the biggest audience of all.
- Look, next time you're up for this we're gonna do it properly. We'll stock up on ohms and suns and I swear you'll see it. I see you looking at me like some fried-out jerkhole talking about the weather. You

can't *talk* about it in words. To even come close to expressing it you gotta be in a band, like this, right now and here, in the right mind and even then it wouldn't be the same. It'd be some different spin or swirl or vibe. It's — a — phenomenon — that — only — happens — here. Next week, you're up, you're in.

- It's like the difference between an organic machine, made by hand, with moving parts. And a computer all bits and beeps and midi crap. They're not really tools or instruments but simulated approximations of sound. There's no spirit, no inspiration. No organic boundaries or limits. Nothing to push *against*. You know my car radio only goes to AM? — I like that. Gotta keep some static and aether in it. When I come home I lie on the bonnet. I look up. I got the static cranked. It's got to feel like *radio*.
- You're shitting me. No.
- True, but ninety percent of punters will think they're privileged to buy into the real experience anyway. Think, the days of recording & distribution contracts are over. Everything is moving online. We realise the live act is where it's at for you. That's OK. We'll capture what's best about the live experience and distribute as wide as possible. And, and here's the clincher, we'll help you leverage the max off all that traffic. There'll be enough left over to make a slew of studio recordings should you want to.
Distribution's in the bag.
- Are you for real man. You've got to experience it as *nature* intended. You've got your little band and you wanna do your thing and call it art, for *sure*. But this isn't about music any more. I'll pay the pesky cover charge, you can get ripped off my stash and sure as I smile on you brother you'll see it, and all that folk-rock bollocks you want to do will melt away like ever-falling dust. I — kid — you — not.
- All that's good about radio was done with valves. The connection. That's how we used to connect, huddled around. The best instruments came from the radio days. Everything that came before FM. I can't tell you how much I've dropped on valve amp equipment. It's a lot. My man Marv over there — walking argument for the return of the bearded guitarist — he's mad for the valves. Russian stuff. Old Chinese ones. And hand-made amps. Wires his own. Thousands of dollars. If not tens of.
- You... this... this is evil. And —
- We'll host it all, develop the co-branded portal and handle ongoing production costs. The net will be pleasantly favourable. And our parent can hook you up with promo ticketing and venues *internationally* — think about that — hell, they can even run up a package tour with some of the other acts you're cultivating here. Best of the old school and the new, any way you like. The beauty is that the hype and warm-up buzz happens online. We've got enough partners in the old media to deliver near-total coverage for any act we care to run up the pole.
- OK man just gimme a valium and we'll hit it. Jen's got the keys and she's out back in the bar last time I checked. I gotta take a cold shower and sample this shipment we got last week. Who knows what they're cutting it with now. Ever since Friendly flipped I gotta test it all myself.
- We split the door and div up the rest. I dunno man, Beep needs it all to pay for the place. We all get by. A funky little salary for me and the wife, the rest on gear and parts. Buying, selling. Repairs. What do you do with yours? I'm not asking where your money goes. I was talking about Soviet valves but your games are weirding me out —
- So the original planning approval meant nothing? How —
- It's a lot to take in at once and that's why I wanted to give you a quick taste of the exciting potential. We'll take your current presence and expand it, and I mean exponentially. You have to think big-picture on this one; only think *big*. We can be the first to push a musical act this big.
- Well as long as you're happy being the test-stooge then by all means you'll be doing me a favour. But it could lay you out cold for a day, and I'm not gonna be responsible for your body or cleaning up after it. We've got that hydrant hose upstairs and I swear I'll use it.
- No we don't need managers. We're a collective, old school. We only play here, nowhere else. So there's no booking hassles and shit. Look if you're serious about a chopped organ, that's fine. I can fix, I can sell. But for business stuff you go to the Beep. I don't want to know. Didn't you see the show? Did you feel it? Were you there? Right well then you shouldn't even need to ask me.

- I can't. I can't just let all that up-front come to nothing. All that investment, the time, the contractors —
- There's no rush on the timing, but the sooner we can sit down with you and Mr BP and the rest of the band and present the full scope of what we're projecting, the sooner we can make the partnership real. Take my card and let Mr B know I've given you a glimpse of the future. This dark little building won't contain you any longer. I've seen your live show six times and I know this is going to work. The pleasure is mine.
- Enough, enough for a halfway-decent solicitor to talk us into a better position. Our plans were legit. Did you know we were open to this kind of dodgy? I'm not gonna let some half-baked developer pull the —
- Yeah Jen's out back. Gimme a sec. Stay put. Man I never realised this place is so big; it's like a black box with a thousand people inside. I swear it's the drugs.

That was the night when all our forward momentum stalled. I could see from the sunken look in BP's eyes that he'd fallen very low, very fast. He dropped his mobile and went to embrace Mogely and damn near collapsed in his arms.

A shark developer with designs on the original site used loopy council procedure to retroactively nullify our development. And ultimately, inconceivably, his position proved more legally tenable than ours.

The online distribution deal was signed but became a lawsuit over rights and usage within months. The band kept playing at the Rink for a while before legalities closed us down indefinitely. We didn't play anywhere near as effectively in another venue, though we tried twice. Mogely had a tum that seems to have permanently bent his outlook. And all our great collaborative improvised music drifted off into vague and discrete side projects. It's a perverse artefact, but I've kept the Turkey bottle from that night.

Within twelve months the bubble became a memory, a devotional ritual shared among scattered fans consisting of little more than bootlegs and fuzzy phone videos. I can't think about it too much — the brain-fart fallout and conspiracy nuts and hypotheticals about BP supposedly losing a pile of secretive lottery winnings and all the ex-wife gossip and insinuations — not without a creeping, sinking feeling of dismay and loss. That it could all turn out so fragile after all. That was the real shock, looking back.

The Rink has now been rechristened Hillside and comfortably accommodates 80 to 100 residents in low-ceilinged apartments with some views west to the mountains. Four businesses occupy the street frontage under the awning, which has been extended as a design 'feature' over part of the open space in the corner, which is meant to be a small people's park but really provides open spaces for graffiti. It is not popular with the residents or children. There are still problems with parking. The architectural constraints of the facade and awning resulted in a contemporary but resource-efficient design that attracts first-time buyers but not long-term stayers.