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AMPED UP & STILL CURRENT

In the 1970s, a pack of rock dogs from Down Under took on the world. Their long way to the top was marked with highs, lows, and a few dirty deeds, too. And so for 50 years of rock, we salute the incomparable AC/DC.

by **Annabel Ross**

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There was a time in Australia – back when the hair was big, the jeans were skin-tight and *Sale of the Century* was the biggest show on TV – when rock ruled the airwaves. And rock meant AC/DC. The band had made their mark with *Highway to Hell* in 1979, their sixth album and the one that saw them snatch at commercial success and make waves in the US. It was AC/DC's last album with lead singer Bon Scott, who died in February the following year. For so many reasons, it seemed like *Highway* could never be replicated, let alone topped.

Then, a year later, AC/DC released *Back in Black*. It was an absolute juggernaut, going on to sell more than 50 million units worldwide, second only to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. They've outsold The Rolling Stones, The Eagles, Metallica, U2 and Pink Floyd, just to name but a few. It confirmed AC/DC were the biggest rock band in the world. They're still the top-selling Australian act of all time. They were forever cemented in music history.

Almost every major rock act to emerge since AC/DC has admitted to fandom of the band. Josh Homme of Queens of the Stone Age recently said that they were in

his "top one-and-a-half favourite bands". Dave Grohl credits the film *Let There Be Rock*, which documents AC/DC's 1979 live performance in Paris, with inspiring him to become a rock star. "[It's] everything that live [rock] and roll should be," Grohl said. "Sweaty. Loose. Loud. A relentless performance from the perfect band. It was the first time I lost control to music. The first time I wanted to be in a band. I didn't want to play my guitar anymore. I wanted to smash it."

Put simply, AC/DC are enormous. And after 50 years of rocking their socks off, they're still going strong. Given all they have been through personally and collectively, that's something of a miracle.

In November 1973, AC/DC was founded in Sydney by brothers Malcolm and Angus Young, who had moved from Scotland to Australia as children. Having an older brother, George, in 60s rock sensations The Easybeats no doubt helped spark their interest in a musical career. The Young brothers worshipped Jimi Hendrix, The Yardbirds, Chuck Berry and other American blues musicians.

Joined by Mark Evans on bass, Colin Burgess on drums (later replaced by Phil Rudd), and the band's original glam rock frontman Dave Evans on vocals, the boys played

their first gig on New Year's Eve 1973 in the notorious Sydney nightclub Chequers. They played two sets that night, and by the second, they had run out of songs. "So we made up songs on the spot," Evans told *The Sydney Morning Herald*. "And played them that night."

By 1974, Evans got the boot and the combustible Bon Scott replaced him on vocals. The band started recording in Sydney that same year. AC/DC found modest success with early albums *TNT* (1975) and *High Voltage* (1976). Then 1979's *Highway to Hell* brought worldwide attention.

While working on the first of three AC/DC albums, producer Robert John "Mutt" Lange (who went on to helm monster albums for Def Leppard, The Cars, Bryan Adams and his one-time wife Shania Twain) impressed the band with his talent as a trained singer. He helped Scott with breathing techniques, and offered suggestions for Angus' solos, which proved hard to argue with.

By this time, AC/DC were rapidly becoming one of the biggest bands in the world, thrilling audiences with their fierce energy. Their live performances centred on the small, svelte Scott's magnetic, rascally stage presence and throaty yell, along with Angus' Chuck Berry-inspired duckwalk – made all the more memorable by the trademark school uniform he's worn since 1973.

When Scott, the hardest partier of the group, died of acute alcohol poisoning in 1980, aged just 33, the remaining members considered disbanding. But Scott's parents encouraged them to keep going, so they recruited new singer Brian Johnson – a raspy-voiced British firecracker – and released *Back in Black* just a few months later. Managing to find someone up to the task of stepping in for the seemingly irreplaceable Scott, and then fronting the band for the better part of 43 years (and counting), is one of the most impressive transitions in rock'n'roll history.

For all their hits – and there have been many across their 50 years and 21 records – some critics have described the band as unimaginative, prone to repeating the same chords, phrases and musical



TOP: AC/DC'S ORIGINAL LINE-UP, WITH DAVE EVANS (LEFT)

MIDDLE: AC/DC (NOW WITH BON) TOUR THE UK FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 1976

BOTTOM: ANGUS YOUNG, BRIAN JOHNSON AND A STADIUM FULL OF FANS IN TORONTO, 2003



While AC/DC have been cranking out hit after hit for 50 years, artists from Shakira to Richard Cheese have also jumped on their rock'n'roll train. Check out *The Big Issue's* playlist of some of the more memorable Acca Dacca covers over the years. For those about to stream – we salute you!

bit.ly/MoreHighVoltage

motifs. But as Twisted Sister's Dee Snider tweeted in 2020, "AC/DC is derivative of AC/DC! They is what they is [sic] and I love it! They sound like no other!"

Sure, they might favour certain power chords, but that's what makes their music so immediately familiar and distinctive, sending shockwaves of excitement through listeners. Their world-conquering popularity and simplistic song structures might lead some to consider AC/DC lowbrow, but the enormity of their sound is undeniable.

The huge riffs and kick drum that open 'Highway to Hell'? The swaggering licks that launch 'Back in Black' (a song to which Aerosmith's 'Walk This Way' is hugely indebted)? The spine-chilling, silvery intro to 'Thunderstruck'? A song that can equally delight a six-year-old girl in 1990 (me!) and a 65-year-old, rusted-on fan today is not to be sniffed at. In fact, when the band played 'Thunderstruck' at Buenos Aires' River Plate Stadium in 2009 – as captured in the concert film *Live at River Plate* – the response was a 190,000-strong moshpit thrashing in unison. It's like nothing I've seen before or since.

A more valid criticism than their purported lack of originality is of the casual sexism and occasionally disturbing lyrics that chequer their discography. When the band emerged in the 1970s, "sex and drugs and rock'n'roll" was a philosophy embraced with unquestioning gusto. Women were often seen as little more than the means to a man's pleasurable end. Many AC/DC lyrics can be chalked up to immature schoolboy humour, which would not fly in 2023 but was par for the course in the 70s. This doesn't excuse the borderline rape fantasy of, for example, 'Let Me Put My Love into You' – but, as Fiona Sturges wrote in *Under My Thumb: Songs That Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them* (2017), many of the women described in these songs seem just as, if not *more* powerful than the men in them, holding lyricists Scott and the Young brothers in their thrall.

Far more so than their lyrics, the influence of their music on other bands

is immeasurable. In 2004, *Rolling Stone* ranked AC/DC at just number 72 in their list of the 100 greatest artists of all time. But Rick Rubin, who co-produced the group's 1995 album *Ballbreaker*, stepped in to clarify: "I'll go on record as saying they're the greatest rock'n'roll band of all time." They might also be considered one of the most resilient.

Losing Scott was just the beginning of AC/DC's myriad problems over the years. In 2014, the band's backbone, Malcolm Young, retired due to dementia. He died three years later. Drummer Phil Rudd, who has played with the band since 1975, was charged in 2014 with attempting to procure a murder (this charge was dropped the following day), threatening to kill, possession of methamphetamine, and possession of cannabis following a police raid on his home. He served eight months of home detention in 2015. Cliff Williams, who joined AC/DC as bassist and backing vocalist in 1977, left the band in 2016 following the departures of Johnson and Rudd. But all three returned in 2020 for the most recent album, *Power Up*.

The current line-up is Angus, Stevie Young (who replaced his uncle Malcolm on rhythm guitar and backing vocals in 2014), Johnson, Williams and Rudd. In October, they'll join Metallica, Guns N' Roses, Tool, Iron Maiden and Judas Priest to perform at the three-day Power Trip festival in California – their first live show since the 2015–16 Rock or Bust World Tour. It will also mark AC/DC's 50th anniversary.

Over five illustrious decades, their achievements include having streets named after them in Madrid and Melbourne, being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003, and supporting The Rolling Stones in Germany and Canada the same year. This was a dream come true for Malcolm especially, to whom Angus would later play the Stones' blues records in his dying days.

Few bands have been as resolutely committed to the hard-rocking cause as AC/DC. Even as the members enter their sixties and seventies, their music continues to transcend borders, cultures and generations. Angus has described being blown away by Hendrix performances as a 14-year-old, and wanting to look that cool. "When I get on a stage, it's the same thing," he told YouTuber Anders Bøtters in 2020. "I'm playing to a new kid, who's 13 or 14, who's never seen me before... A lot of those older ones out there, they've seen you before, they know what you're about. But that new kid, he's not seen you before, and I'm going to impress *him*." ■



A BON VIVANT ENTERTAINS MELBURNIANS ON A MONDAY IN 1973

(BAG)PIPE DREAMS

A flatbed and a set of bagpipes can go a long way.

On a Monday morning in February 1976, the piercing squall of bagpipes cuts through the usual thrum of Melbourne's Swanston Street. The source of this aural intrusion? A young AC/DC on the back of a flatbed truck, instruments in hand, filming the video for their latest single.

One of AC/DC's best-loved tunes, 'It's a Long Way to the Top (If You Wanna Rock'n'Roll)' is a cautionary tale of the struggles of a hard-working rock band. It's been covered by everyone from Motörhead to Hanson.

In the clip, we see Acca Dacca thrashing it out in their signature four-to-the-floor style, flanked by the Rats of Tobruk Pipe Band, as bagpipe-brandishing Bon Scott prances around the flatbed like a larrikin jester.

Incidentally, Scott is miming. When producer George Young learned Scott had previously been a member of the Freemantle Scots Pipe Band he'd suggested the frontman record some bagpipes for the song. Scott agreed...neglecting to mention he'd never played the instrument before, and was actually the band's drummer. Still, he took lessons. His piping teacher Kevin Conlon later told *The Age* it would've taken at least a year to play a tune. "He said that was fine and came down for a few lessons, but as we were only going to be miming, he just had to look like he was playing."

Filmed for *Countdown* by director Paul Drane, the clip has since become a touchstone in Australia's rock'n'roll history, pushing the song to AC/DC's then-peak position of #9 on the Australian charts and helping turn the scruffy pub band into a household name.

The band's laissez-faire attitude extended to the clip's filming, planned with minimal consultation with the authorities. "You could do something like that back then," Drane told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2005. "You could organise it with the city council and it could be done very quickly. We didn't have to shut the streets down or stop traffic. These days you'd have the street shut down for a day. It would be almost impossible."

In 2004, the City of Melbourne renamed Corporation Lane, which runs parallel to the band's route on Swanston Street, to AC/DC Lane. "As the song says, there is a highway to hell," Melbourne's then Lord Mayor John So said at the laneway's opening, "but this is a laneway to heaven. Let us rock." A bagpipe ensemble then played 'It's a Long Way to the Top'.

The song itself has not been played by AC/DC since December 1979 at the Hammersmith Odeon in London, a little over a month before Bon Scott passed away. Current vocalist Brian Johnson reportedly refuses to sing it out of respect for his predecessor.

by **Peter Whelan**, editorial intern