

Yours, Jerry Lee Lewis

ROCKIN' AT THE CITY HALL, HOBART 1959 - 1960

The End of Vaudeville

Peter MacFie © 2008

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The Platters

March 1959. The Big Show- the Lee Gordon Big Show, at the City Hall. Other teenagers were crowding the entrance, most arriving by the green and yellow Metropolitan trams and buses, or walking. Some parents dropped their teenagers off. Boys smelling of 'Brylcream' and 'California Poppy', hair slicked back. My school mate Dave Wilson and I are wearing our suits and ties which we wore to Hobart High School that day so we could go to the concert well-dressed. We line up for tickets, two middle class 14 year olds with stars in our eyes. We're going to the early evening show at 6.15pm. In through the doors.

A moment in time - in our town, our own place. Over there was The Mainland – Melbourne - Sydney- that's was where ships went - an epic journey away. Somewhere there was Memphis, Tennessee.

During the day, the crinkly-haired State Premier, Eric Reece, gave a reception for the first Big Show stars, the first performance of their Australian tour with Mr Reece, Johnny O'Keefe and Frankie Avalon in suits and ties.

I was enthralled with entertainers ever since my Aunt & Uncle had taken me, aged 9, to see a relative play the organ for the Follies at the Theatre Royal, Hobart. It was Vaudeville – a variety show, with Max & Stella Reddy, comedians, magicians, jugglers. Afterwards we met Uncle Geoff Robertson and some of the performers.

I later heard Australian country singers, the LeGarde Twins and Smoky Dawson in their tent shows at the Hobart Regatta,

The music, mostly from the USA shook my life in suburban Hobart, as much as any other city in the world, spread by radio stations with Top Ten and Top 40s. Before then, it was dreary ballads from Doris Day, Perry Como, Rosemary Clooney, and other tired jazz singers like Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole. Rush from homework to the mantle radio at 5.15, as local radio station 7HT played 15

minutes of rock'n'roll. If you were lucky, you'd hear Bill Haley, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Eddie Cochran and- wait for it - Elvis!

Don't You Step on My –

Turn the radio Down!!

Blue Suede Shoes.

Mum and Dad's old valve radio couldn't take it, and the speakers crackled in protest. Dad wasn't home yet. But Mum tolerated it, as Mums did, and, being a pianist herself, tried to hear some musicality in my new passion.

Before TV, apart from radio, entertainment in Hobart was always live. The Big Show was just more Vaudeville and featured The Platters, Tommy Sands, Frankie Avalon, and backing band, Eddie Edwards and the Sharks, with Australian act Johnny O'Keefe, just signed by Lee Gordon. An amazing line-up of talent and as far as we were concerned, unbelievable in Hobart, Tasmania. We still don't understand how we got there.

Dave recalled:

We sat in rows on banks of wooden chairs as you would for a music recital-there would be no standing or dancing in the aisles. Behind us sat a row of private school girls, (Macca was very knowledgeable about private school girls!)

I wondered if we could get the singers' autographs.

After a local rocker opened the show, Johnny O'Keefe, backed by the DeeJays, nearly stole that show. Wearing a crimson suit with leopard skin lapels, and spat shoes, he grabbed the mike stand with two hands, dancing and writhing with the microphone-stand, on his side, down on his knees, as the DeeJays pumped out a rhythm we'd only heard on radio.

Shake a Baby, Shake a Baby Shake..... You make me Wanna SHOUT....

After Half Time. Catch our breath. The curtains draw open again, and the American stars come on. The Sharks, American backing band led by Eddie Edwards. Then the American stars. Frankie Avalon was is the first on with his plaintive love song *Hey Venus...*

Please send a little girl for me to thrill...

(Whatever that meant.)

..... Shy, smooth, greased back hair, tight fitting suit, but on stage, in control. Two hits and off. Then Tommy Sands, a smooth bushy haired bloke – married to Nancy Sinatra - with a big acoustic guitar, breaks into his hit, *Bigger than Texas*

Well its Big, and its wide, room for eight other states inside...

But Bigger than all of Texas, is my love for you....

Finally, the stars of the show. The lights go down. The Platters, a five piece group of black Americans, 'Negroes', the first we'd seen in Hobart - singing or not. Four blokes and a woman, Lola Taylor, with Tony Williams the high tenor lead singer, out the front on one microphone, the other four at another.

Oh oh oh Yes, I'm the Great Pretender,

soaring lyrics from Mr Williams, no strings like the records, but it doesn't matter,

The-eh-ey, asked me How I Knew, My True Love was True...How-oh-oh

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes..

The clothes, the moves, the style, the polish. The Platters leave the stage to wild clapping that doesn't die down. After a pause, one of the group, a short bloke walks to the mike by himself, and starts singing unaccompanied in a deep, bass voice, almost too low for such a small fella.

Oh, When the saints, Go Marching In

...

After a chorus by himself, a second singer joins him and repeats the chorus a Capella

Oh When the Sun Refuse to Shine,

Oh When the Sun Refuse to Shine,

How I want to Be in That Number,

Oh When the Sun Refuse to Shine,

Lola Sheppard comes on, another verse, the Platters are clapping their hands, so are we, kids from Hobart. Wesley Church was never like this - can it ever be the same again?

Tony Williams, with the soaring vocals comes on last, as the group chants,

When the saints,

as he soars overhead,

I Want to Be in That Number...

Though we didn't know it, we were nearly at a gospel revival meeting.

After the Show, with an autograph book in hand, Doc and I walked up on stage by the steps leading from the floor on either side of the stage, and moved among the Stars, collecting autographs. No

security. Frankie Avalon and Lola Taylor are playing the piano, singing along, - Frankie and Lola sign our paper. 'Thanks.'

'Where's Tommy Sands' we ask? In the change room in the wings of the City Hall. We knock on the door and go in. Tommy is sitting on the bench seat under a row of empty clothes pegs, cigarette in one hand. Dave recalls:

Macca gave him a cool "Hey Tommy" and one of those 50's cool stiff-fingered waves that could be so intimately distancing.

He looks tired and bemused at our arrival, but signs his autograph for us.

Back on the stage, Johnny O'Keefe's talking to the Platters. We sidle up. Johnny is now singing, with Lola Sheppard on the same piano. They both sign my autograph books.

Out in the street around the City Hall, the adult crowds were surging in, getting tickets to the second show. Dave and I go home, grinning from ear to ear. We tell our mothers, and some school friends. Most don't believe us.

.....

Johnny Cash

A month later the following advertisement appeared in the *Mercury*:

Lee Gordon Presents

JOHNNY CASH

King of Western Rock'n'Roll.

This time I sat up on the mezzanine floor alone. Local rock'n'roll star, 16 year old Paul Shirley, opened the show, followed by the ever-smiling Col Joy and the Joy Boys. The American acts followed, but backed by the Joy Boys. Robin Luke, a young blond-haired teenager from Honolulu- he didn't seem much older than me. His hit, *Suzie Darlin'*, was a plaintive love song, a 'one hit wonder.' Then there's Bobby Day, a black bloke from the USA,

Rocking Robin - twiddlee-dee-dee- whew ooph-

Rock rock rocking robin

The Playmates came on, a quartet of four white blokes whose song, *Beep Beep* was a tribute to American car worship, and a world-wide hit, the novelty of the song being the rhythm gathering speed as the Nash Rambler outran the Cadillac.

Next, it's Gene Vincent, with greasy hair and denim jacket, crouched over his guitar, *Bebopalula, she's my Baby*.... Launches into a wild guitar solo, swings his leg over the mike stand as he spins on his feet – to loud applause and cheers. City Hall speech nights will never be the same.

Finally Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two appear, Johnny, tall with well-oiled dark hair and large acoustic guitar tucked up high on his chest. His sonorous country voice drawled into

.... *I keep a close watch on the heart of mine... because your mine, I walk the line...*

Other early hits follow in the American folk tradition, *Freight Train*, plus more self-penned hits, like *Ballad of a Teenage Queen*. The Tennessee Two played their joint hit, *Luther Played the Boogie*.

Another song became associated with Johnny Cash and southern Tasmania not long after. As waters from torrential rain deluged southern Tasmania, the Derwent River overflowed its banks, flooding farms and homes. In the city, the Hobart Rivulet flooded basement shops and streets, while radio station 7HT repeatedly played, *How High's the Water Mama? Five Foot High and Risin!*

At the concert, Johnny changed his routine just long enough to have a gentle dig at his friend from Sun Records. Pulling out a comb, he raked his black, well-oiled hair forward to produce make-shift sideburns, stood with his legs apart, swivelled his hips, and launched into a send-up of *Blue Suede Shoes*. Well, if we couldn't have Elvis, a Johnny Cash imitation would have to do.

After the Show, I climbed the stairs from the hall floor to the stage. Bobby Day signed my autograph book, as did the tall Johnny Cash - 'Thanks, son', and moves on to the next fan. But where's Gene Vincent? Couldn't find him, and missed the chance of a lifetime.

Hobart lad, Paul Shirley, also remembers talking to Johnny Cash in a City Hall cloak room where the star was playing poker with his guitarist, Luther Perkins.

Paul Shirley: Hello Mr Cash, it's great to meet you.

JC: Not Mr Cash, boy, Johnny will do.

P: OK Johnny

JC: Ever played stud poker boy?

Paul Shirley: No Johnny I haven't.

JC: Ever drank corn mash whiskey boy?

Paul Shirley: No Mr Cash, I haven't.

JC: I don't suppose you've done much whoren then either?

Paul Shirley: No Johnny, but I'm learnin'!

.....

Jerry Lee Lewis

A year later, in March 1960, I walked into the City Hall for the third Big Show with another schoolmate Gus- Angus Downie. This time, a year older and bolder, I walked up the stairs onto the stage by myself where the musicians were setting up their gear, carrying the same autograph book to gather names, intending to return to my seat. Col Joy's band is setting up to open the show, there's Chan Romero, there's Jerry Lee Lewis - Jerry Lee!! *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On!* My hero!

No suit this time, I'm a freckle faced 15 year old school kid in green jeans, with pink socks, in the middle of all this!

Very wobbly screen backdrops gave the semblance of a theatre in the two storeyed and echo prone City Hall. The grand piano was swung around so Col Joy's pianist – his brother Kevin Jacobsen - could see the crowd. Johnny Bogey set up his drums, Dave Bridge plugged in his electric guitar, and a *Chrwaaaaaaang* came from its speaker. Laurie Irwin adjusts the reed and mouth piece of his brassy, golden sax, and blasts a few warm up notes of nervous energy.

Before I can escape back to my seat, the hall lights go down and the curtains close. I'm trapped, and see the whole show from the wings! The other artists leave the Joy Boys onstage. Kevin Jacobsen and his piano are jammed up against the wobbly screen. He stands up at the keyboard, there's nervous energy in the air. 'Need to scratch my arse!' he says, and rubs his bum against the edge of the screen, nearly causing it to fall over. I help prop it up, as the MC announces:

The Lee Gordon Big Show,

The curtain opens to enthusiastic clapping, a little screaming, and Col Joy walks to the front microphone with an electric guitar around his neck and launches into his first number.

If you wann be happy come along with me

Oh yeah, uh huh...

Then a country song by Hank Williams.

If you only loved me half as much as I love you ...

They're followed by Nola Hirst - Nola who?- frail looking Aussie girl in a frilly skirt- she sings a hit of the day - *Dark Moon* - originally by Gale Storm and much more haunting. Nola had sung before in Hobart with country singer Tex Morton. She was followed by a smooth-looking Aussie, Lonnie Lee, dressed and singing in the American mode:

Starlight, Starbright (doo-doo-wup, doo-doo-wup.)

The curtain closes; half time. The lights come on again. Lonnie Lee's wants a bottle of Coke, but he doesn't dare put his head out the door for the fans. I offer to cross the road to the shop near the Hope & Anchor Inn with his 2 two shilling silver pieces.

'Have one for yourself,' he says.

Getting out was easy, getting back in was another thing.

'Who're you;' the bloke on the door asks? '

'I've got 2 Cokes for Lonnie Lee.'

'Oh yeah?' Says the doorman sceptically.

'I have!' I plead. 'Why would I have 2 Cokes?'

He's being pressed by other fans. Lonnie sees me through the half-opened door, says 'Let him in.'

I'm in again, hands half frozen by glass bottles.

Thanks mate, he says, didn't think you were coming back.

The lights go down again, the audience quietens.

Waiting near me in the wings is a shy, Mexican-looking young bloke with a bad case of acne verging on boils on his neck. Chan Romero clutches his new electric guitar. The lights go down, the audience hushes. The curtains open again. Chan walks past me quickly onto centre stage. He's only got one hit- but what a beauty- *Hippy Hippy Shake*- drives along, the girls are screaming a bit, the Joy Boys - the backing band - rocking along.

For goodness sake, I got the...'

His song became No 1 in Tasmania, the only place in the world. (I've still got the 45.)

Chan Romero was followed by Freddie Cannon,

*One day I took a walk in the park, down at a place called Palisade Park, (whatever that is?)
to have some fun (now we understand that!)*

Then a handsome, dark, older bloke with a deep voice. Jack Scott was a Canadian-born country singer really, with weepy, interesting ballads.

My True Love and What in the World's Come Over You – bah- wa-oooh.

I loved the backing singers on the American recordings. (Scott also sang *Burning Bridges*, serious love songs, adult love songs, about things we only became aware of later in life.)

Then Johnny Preston, best known for his hit, *Running Bear*, later the bane of every pub band, but in 1960, a brand new hit.

*On the banks of the river, sat Running Bear, young Injun brave. On the other side of the
river, sat his lovely Indian maid, Little White Dove... (Oogah, Oogah)*

The audience sings along to the chorus

Running Bear, loved Little White Dove, such a lovely sight to see....

Ah, if only race relations were as easy as the way we absorbed those simple lyrics.

After Johnny Preston comes off, there's a pause. The curtain's drawn again for the star act. Jerry Lee Lewis' pushing the piano into the middle of the stage, his backing band consisting only of a drummer and electric guitarist. He brushes his crinkly, blonde hair off his face, takes off his coat, throws it to the manager, adjusts the collar and shirt sleeves of his striped shirt, a final tune of the guitar, Jerry Lee ripples a few trial runs on the keyboard. He sits at a bentwood chair, stands over the piano.

Kevin Jacobsen is looking over my shoulder.

'Watch the way he hits the chair when he gets going.'

Jerry Lee positions the chair behind his legs.

The MC walks on stage:

*Ladies and gentlemen, the star of the show,
Mr Jerry Lee LEWIS*

Cheers of approval from the audience..... The curtain slides open, Jerry's hands are like lightning on the keys;

*You Shake My Nerves & You Rattle My Brain
Too much love drives a man insane...*

The crowd's away;

*You broke my will,
But What a Thrill
Goodness, Gracious Great balls of Fire!*

Jerry's pounding the piano, and as he rolls the rockin' piano rhythm with his left hand, he stands up, and with a sharp whack of a straightened legs, flicks the chair across the stage onto its back! The girls are screaming, and from then on it's a rolling, glorious, chaotic rocking mayhem.

The other stars find it hard not to join in from back stage, they/I/we try not to stomp our feet too hard on the floor. The crinkly hairs falling over his face, leaning back, hammering the keys with full handed chords, a rolling left hand rippling fingers over the keys, crashing them with the heel of his boots- and in time and sort of in tune.

(If Uncle Ron could see this, he'd have a fit- he never played his Bechstein like this!! But then he never made me want to dance.)

Jerry Lee goes through his hits. *You leave me... Breathless*. Then a country song, *You Win Again* before the rolling intro and drama of *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On....*

We got Chicken in the Barn –Whose Barn – what Barn? My Barn?

(What is he talking about??!!) BUT WHO CARES!?!?!)

Easy now....Shake...

And its quiet break before the final raucous finale.....

COME ON OVER BABY, WHOLE LOTTA SHAKIN' GOIN' ON!

Wouldn't mind a quid for every time I've played that 45.

Poor old Gladys Morris, the stern spinster music teacher at my High School, would be speechless - for once!

The curtains pull across, there's no more encores. Jerry Lee's congratulated by all, on a great show, as they gather round his piano, yes it was definitely his, still on stage, he was dripping with sweat.

The other stars are back stage, most smoking cigarettes. I wandered around again, just like the first Big Show- collecting autographs. Dave Bridge, the Joy Boys guitarist, and Col Joy too. Chan Romero is shy, doesn't seem that much older than me, Jack Scott's deep voice, 'Thanks son', as he moves onto other fans. Johnny Preston's on the make with a local lady in high heels and short skirt, round puffy face and virtually no eye-brows. She and the *Running Bear* man exchange cigarettes. I recognised her later as Big Bev, a North Hobart local, who don't take cheek from anyone, beating the hell out of a school mate who back-chatted her, swinging her hand-bag with damaging effect. But she was the height of coolness now.

The *Running Bear* man signed his name anyway, and I moved away to collect Jerry Lee's autograph. He was still sitting at the piano, doodling on the keys. On the top of the piano he signed in pencil:

Yours,

Jerry Lee Lewis

as I guess he did for thousands of other fans - but not many in Hobart in March 1960.

The same week the *Mercury* was advertising the Jerry Lee Lewis Big Show, the paper ran picture of the Darlec-like TV camera being tested for the ABC new TV Channel 2, about to open in Tasmania. Our island would never be the same. Local acts and audiences would imitate their filmed counterparts, with screaming girls, stage bouncers, and security guards. The days of Vaudeville's easy familiarity were about to end.

I saw other great international acts at Hobart's City Hall, including Louis Armstrong and the All Stars, Andre Segovia. The Beach Boys opened one night at the City Hall, followed by the 'Big O' -

Roy Orbison after intermission. By then I was too cool, too grown up - I thought - to collect autographs.

There was something special about our innocence.

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