

# BACK TO THE FUTURE WITH

# COUNT DOWN

CX had trouble keeping away when far too many of the old bands we once worked with were dusted off and shown off with brand new production values. Julius Grafton went way down memory lane.....

Spectacular it was, and value for money at almost four hours running time. Countdown kicked off at 7.30 with John Paul Young singing alone on the thrust stage and a bunch of dance students doing a 2006 version of the Countdown TV show audience - hands outreached, hair akimbo. Half way through 'Yesterdays Hero' the rear revolve produces the house band whose work will back most of the acts.

There was the voice from the box, Gavin Wood who bantered effortlessly with host Ian 'Molly' Meldrum. Molly was the reason Countdown was such a central part of the music industry for two decades, and he is the reason that Michael Gudinski's Frontier Touring show worked so well.

In the first fifteen minutes there were four acts rolled out, looking and sounding as good as the house band and a professional production could make them. Within the first half hour there was rock greatness with the likes of Choirboys showing that you can still manage a long career and play like you mean it. There was cheese, courtesy of the irrepressible Brian Mannix of the Unfunny X-Men, and there was deja-vu with Cheetah, the sister act that came on looking quite fabulous.

Real star quality emerged early with Leo Sayer who managed to engage with a female member of the audience, undo her hair and lay her on the floor of the stage for a kiss, without missing a line of the ballad. This was quality stuff.....

Alex Smith also managed to connect with the audience and to conjure up the sense of how it was by singing Gary Frost's smash hit for Moving Pictures, 'What About Me?' Acute memories of Mr. Smith's intense/egocentric stage persona were quickly revived this night.

By the second hour the audience had been up on their feet and back to the chair eight times, and a form of first half closure arrived with Hush, complete with fire breathing dragons and an extra guitarist. It was a strange segment made messy by the improbability of reviving a band whose singer has perhaps had some problems (and hopefully dealt with them) and who really only had one standout musician, Les Gock. They did what they set out to do, and all credit to them. Les rocked hard, but you would expect that from the guy who made a motza from Song Zu.

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*The Wolfgramm Sisters. Pic by Bob King.*

## HALF TIME

In the foyer the punter feedback was excellent and the merchandise stand swamped with people fussing over XXL T shirts and Sherbet CDs. Memo Gudinski: it was physically difficult to buy a show program. Strangely the junk food stands were swamped as well, my girl Karen and I noticed on the way in that a lot of the audience seemed to equate nostalgia with hotdogs and hot chips.

Part Two kicked off the gusto and delivered the first bumper of the night when James Reyne was hung out to dry by a technical fault that should not have happened. He stood strumming a dead acoustic for what seemed like minutes, telling the audience there were "problems with the backstage crew", and glaring at the foldback desk. After about 30 seconds of this, someone found the correct wireless frequency or patch and the guitar was heard. Reyne didn't recover, and messed up his Australian Crawl medley.

There were some 'who were they' and even 'why' moments, with performers who could have stayed home and contributed to a trimming of the show duration. Likewise I was unsure that the Countdown Dance Segment was worthwhile, the four dancers on the tour were exceptional, but adding on thirty dance school kids and doing Flashdance, Footloose,

Michael Jackson and Grease segments? Save the time and the money, I say!

If you wanted a real musical moment there were plenty, for my money it was Renee Geyer who good naturedly flounced her way through her big pop hit 'Say You Love Me', a song she no longer performs at her shows, then demolished the house with 'Man's World', made even mightier by Bruce Haymes on keyboard.

The house band were just mighty, made even more so by the three startlingly good Wolfgramm sisters - Kelly, Talei and Eliza - on backup vocals. Two guitars, two keyboards, bass, drums played left handed by musical director Peter Luscombe and two brass joined often by the omnipresent Wilbur Wilde made for a tight and almost note perfect band who were mainly toddlers when the acts they were backing first sung the songs.

Swanee and John English had presence and charisma, Grace Knight from Eurogliders looked and played the part, and four Chantoozies came on and reprised the girl band thing, looking great at the same time.

Show standouts included Frankie J. Holden who played off the aforementioned Wilbur Wilde, Joe Camileri made sax sexy again, and wow - Mondo Rock really did rock



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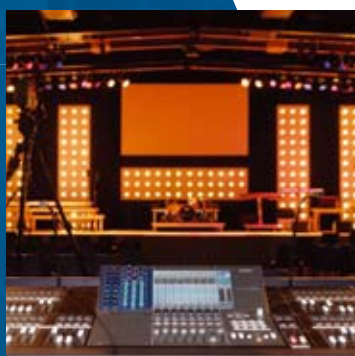
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and got my personal band of the night award.

Eventually after Molly's Humdrum segment complete with the desk, after good banter and bad, after a witty but sensitive tribute to the singers who have left us by a videotaped Red Symons, the headline act cranked up and left me flat. I was a card carrying Sherbet fan, and have always been impressed by Daryl Braithwaite's vocal delivery and style.

It wasn't that guitarist Harvey James spent the whole of the first song with his back to audience, trying to coax sound out his amp. Probably it wasn't even that the second song of the short set was a forgettable flipside that was included only because there was an entire film clip from the early days that the band could play to in sync.

It was all there, really good lighting by Hugh Taranto, supplied by Chameleon with a crew of five. A Vertec PA from Jands, mixed really well by Greg Rosman. Big screen video with tight camera work from Black Sheep (see side story). A great set designed by Otello Stolfo and built by ESS.

But at the end, the very late end, the headline band fell flat. They were then relegated to being just part of a show with almost 80 performers, most of who came on stage for the obligatory and cheesy all star band closing segment, that mainly seemed to comprise a lot of skylarking and the stage managed ejection of Wilbur Wilde.

A great night. Lots of fun.

It's conceivable that there could even be a Countdown II with Men at Work plus Hunters and Collectors headlining. There are enough other acts still creaking around, like Radiators, Mentals, and perish the thought, Jimmy and The Boys. CX

## COUNTDOWN TOURING VIDEO

Blacksheep Productions supplied the complete video production solution for the show which included cameras, replay, projection, and a giant LED video screen with Blacksheep Project Manager Angelo Russo overseeing it all.

It was clear to producers from the beginning that video would play an important part in the overall design of the show. Show Director Paul Drane worked as Director/Producer on the original Countdown in the 1970s (incidentally, he also created pioneering music film clips, including AC/DC's infamous Long Way to the Top), and as such he placed strong emphasis on the visual element. When planning the event, Paul went to the ABC's archive to source a range of video clips. These were then compiled into a number of "breakers" and supporting clips which, when combined with a number of generic graphic backgrounds to be played behind songs, totalled over 100 video cues. These clips were played off Blacksheep's hard drive system. Paul also specified 4



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cameras to cover the show live-to-screen.

A main feature of the set was the large LED screen – Blacksheep supplied a 9.24m x 5.67m (11 x 9 panels) Monstvision LED screen. There were a number of benefits in using this screen – rigging was quick as the panels traveled pre-rigged and pre-cabled in pairs; power supplies are separate to the screen itself, keeping weight down (the whole screen including cabling and rigging weighed in at only 3800kg); and programming was done wirelessly from front-of-house allowing for on-the-fly tuning throughout the show. The screen was fed an SDI signal via fibre optic, with a copper backup. Screen techs Joe Borden and Chris Deschamps kept the screen looking good during the tour.

Either side of the LED were two Barco R10s projecting onto 24' x 13.5' front projection screens. The Barcos were also fed SDI.

The whole system was driven by one of Blacksheep's portable Outside Broadcast units. 4 Sony

D50 cameras were placed around the venue – one camera sat in the middle of the audience on a jib (to allow for moves over the audience when they stood up to dance along); one camera was placed in the pit in front of the stage; and two were on-stage with wide lenses. Camera operators Mick Eady, Brandon Batten, Mark "BJ" Walkden, and Tony Marinceski put in the hard yards every show to get through 4 hours of hand held camera work (therapeutic massage fees were not included in Blacksheep's original quote).

These cameras fed SDI signals into two Sony DFS switchers – one for the main LED screen, and one for the projection screens. Other inputs included hard drive replay (which was controlled by TD David Beattie), a Betacam SP player, and other effects generated within the system.

Paul Drane (and wife Margaret, who worked as Director's Assistant) collaborated with Director Ben Alcott to get the best images to screen. The system configuration

allowed for any source to be displayed on any screen, and often all four cameras were on-screen at the same time so good communication was vital.



## THE COUNTDOWN SPECTACULAR

Producer – Michael Gudinski  
Co-Producer – Ian Smith  
Concept Liaison, Host & Hat – Ian Meldrum  
Director – Paul Drane  
Writer – Margaret Drane  
Set Designer – Otello Stolfo  
Lighting Designer – Hugh Taranto  
Technical Director – Eric Robinson  
Production Manager – Peter McFee

### The Countdown Spectacular House Band:

Peter Luscombe – Musical Director & drums  
Bruce Haymes – keyboard  
Lilith Lane – piano  
Bill McDonald – bass  
Ashley Naylor – guitar  
David Newdick – trumpet  
Mal Pinkerton – guitar  
Paul Williamson – saxophone  
Eliza Wolfgramm – backing vocals  
Talei Wolfgramm – backing vocals

### Tour Management:

Yael Cohn – Assistant to Ian Meldrum  
Susie Steadman – Assistant Tour Manager

Bret Chin Quan – Assistant Tour Manager  
Adrian Carbone – Assistant Tour Manager

### Production:

Colin Skals – Assistant Production Manager  
Denise Turra – Production Assistant

### Stage:

Dugald McAndrew – Stage Manager  
Dave Mayer – Backline technician  
Matt English – Backline technician

### Wardrobe:

Julie Smith – Costume Design

### P.A:

Jands Production Services  
Greg Rosman – Audio Director  
Michael Burdett – System Engineer  
Tristan Johnson – Monitor Engineer  
Grant Barron – Monitor Engineer  
Joel Whyman – Monitor Rigger  
Matthew Ownsnett – Audio Technician  
Guy Gilchrist – Audio Tech

### Lighting:

Chameleon  
Graham Walker – Lighting Crew Chief  
Michael Simpson – Lighting

Technician  
John Streckfess – Lighting Technician  
Derick Weith – Lighting Technician  
Danny North – Lighting Technician

### ESS:

Set Builder

### Pyro Oz:

Peter McGill – Pyrotechnics

### Screens & Cameras:

Blacksheep  
Ben Alcott – Screens Switcher  
David Beattie – Screens TD  
Tony Marinceski – Camera  
Brandon Batten – Camera  
Mick Eady – Camera  
Mark Walkden – Camera  
Joe Bordon – LED Technician  
Chris Deschamps – Screens/VT

### Showtravel:

Tara Robinson – Travel Agent  
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# PRODUCTION NEWS

By GREENROOM GERTIE

## DOME OP OK AFTER CHAIR FALL

The Boy from Oz company were shocked when followspot operator Andrew Oakshot fell from his chair above the stage, pre-show in Adelaide. It appears that he was not connected to the fall arrest system at the time. Local safety inspectors are investigating. Although hospitalised Andrew is said to have been very fortunate, CX was told he is expected to make a full recovery.

## BLASTER BATES EXPIRES

According to The Stage (London), Blaster Bates has died at the age of 83. He was a demolition guy whose use of explosives ended up the topic of a one man show that toured the UK. His slogan was "I'll blast anything" and he had a habit of carrying around some spare dynamite in his pockets. Just in case. Blaster

died of natural causes. Blaster is not related to Master Bates.

## WIRELESS RAGE

Theatres in the UK are trying to have the law there changed to allow the use of mobile phone blockers within the venue. Some actors have adopted a policy of walking off stage if a mobile phone rings. More than 75% of audiences agree that a ban, or electronic spectrum blocking, or on the spot fines, should be introduced.

## REPENT, AND HE DID

Just how civilised the theatre industry can be ... Director Tim Highman was sacked by the Theatre Royal, Stratford East after the venue alleged thirty thousand pounds went missing. He made a full confession and apology, repaid the money, and told the industry that his actions were inexcusable. After obtaining counselling, he found a job in another company, whose management were fully aware of his mistake. Could that happen in Australia?

## 20 MINUTES TOO LONG?

Star Wars has been rewritten for the stage, in a show that runs for just 20 minutes. It was first played recently in London, by the people who (re) wrote the Complete Works of William Shakespeare in 90 Minutes. CX applauds this initiative, having never quite 'got' the six movies despite having seen them all.

## PIGEONS UPSTAGE FESTIVAL

The Quadrangle Festival at Texarkana, Texas featured more than bands. Some of the 40,000 punters at this year's event were startled to see suicide pigeons. It appears the birds had consumed poisoned corn at an adjoining farm. An ice cream vendor told Pollstar magazine that he saw a pigeon nose dive onto the concrete. "It just kind of hobbled over and around and sat there and twitched", he reported. This is now an extra line item for every festival safety officer.....

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## ONLY IN EUROPE

For a sociocultural event you can't go past the Zürich Love Parade. It lasts from lunch till midnight. More than 35 "Love Mobiles" parade through the streets running at about half a mile per hour. I'd just love one of those to come past my place. They are long-bed trucks equipped with powerful sound systems, foam firing cannons, DJ booths, and Go Go platforms- basically dance music factories on wheels. More than a million people attend this, umm, event.

The history of the Zurich Street Parade goes back to 1992, when a Swiss student conceived an event based on Love, Freedom, Tolerance and Generosity. Although nobody believed in this student's project, two thousand people gathered together dancing freely along the streets of Zurich for an entire day in front of the flabbergasted local authorities. The number of 'demonstrators' grew from year to year to such degree that nowadays the Street Parade is considered the cities largest peaceful street event.

Strangely, even though the weather this year was cold and wet, the audience had a good time.

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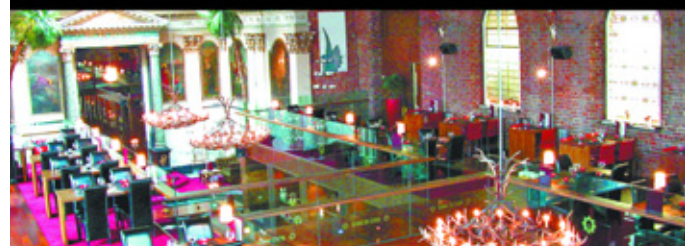
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