Sex Drugs Rock and Roll: Stories of a Roadie

How I survived hedonism, explosives and road crashes

A story of life on the road in the 1970’s and 1980’s - by Julius Grafton
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julius Grafton today heads Julius Events College, Australia’s only tertiary education institution specifically founded to provide technical and management training for the entertainment industry. He also publishes CX Magazine, the trade journal for the entertainment technology industry in Australia (www.juliusmedia.com). ENTECH trade show, the peak industry event (www.etf.com.au) was founded and run by Julius for ten years until it was sold to finance the college. Julius has almost 40 years experience working in the industry, he ran away to work with rock bands in the 1970’s. He is passionate about the industry, and devotes one day a week as guest lecturer in schools across Australia. Julius is still a practicing live sound engineer, event organizer and lighting designer.

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Cover picture: AC/DC pictured at the Hordern Pavilion in 1976 by Bob King

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INTRODUCTION

When former Chisel roadie Gerry Georgettis took his life in dramatic style early last year, media from around the world picked up the story. How could a seemingly placid, stable theatre manager go suddenly crazy and burn down a car dealership in Miami; then hang himself in a cramped airplane toilet?

What darkness exists in a human heart, some of the more intuitive media asked?

Gerry’s brother Joe summed up at the funeral – “He liked beauty, and he liked the beast”.

How does the music industry affect those who serve? Tour veteran Michael Lippold put it this way: “A call from my older brother has helped put things into perspective; he pointed out that we ‘roadies’ are different to the norm, somewhat like the Vietnam vets, damaged by their experiences, some physical, some mental, some both. The vets have done something about it and it is time that we did the same for our ‘brothers’.”

So what was it like, through the halcyon days of the Australian music industry, when guys like Michael and Gerry rose up? Gerry went on to tour manage Bon Jovi, and work with the elite. Michael worked for Midnight Oil around the world. I did the highways the back alleys and saw Australia driving the truck.

CAMPBELLTOWN, 1975

The Flxible Clipper coach roared up to the civic centre leaving a trail of black diesel smoke. Built in the late 1950’s, these American long distance coaches were used by Ansett around Australia, and AC/DC had purchased a well traveled version for use as a tour bus and truck. The bands gear was in the back, and a roller door was installed at the side, in front of the rear engine compartment.

The Flxible part of the Clipper name was not a typo, there was a trademark issue that resulted in the strange name. The coach itself was a thing of awe, with a swept rear end below a big air intake scoop. In AC/DC use, the bus carried backline and a smallish PA system.

The bands crew was accustomed to working fast, since the band was on board. Bon Scott would leer out the windows at girls, waving a bottle of Red Label, with a fag hanging out of his mouth. It was handy at the end of a gig to retire to the bus while the crew loaded it.

Back then, no one thought about consequences, and I think there were few. The parade of gorgeous young (and some were too young) women were essentially competing to get laid. We assisted them in their endeavors.

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Sex, dope, rock n’ roll = teenage heaven. That’s what was on the cover of the Daddy Cool album, and those were primary drivers in our lives. The free love, drop out movement from California hit Australia in 1971, and we were all of that era. People would get naked, and get stoned, without much provocation. The movie ‘Almost Famous’ does a good job of capturing the mood.

Our lives were flipped upside down, the world was straight and conservative, TV was black and white, and it wasn’t that long ago people wore hair cream and danced under fluoro lights to cheesy pop groups wearing badges that said ‘I like Swipe”. We had long hair. We were anti establishment. We were in the rock industry. We got arrested.

**DRUGS**

Literally everyone smoked dope, pot, ganja, weed, cannabis, bongs, joints and spliffs. Sometimes all at once. LSD and Acid were cornerstones of the 1970’s, Heroin was not on the scene, nor was Cocaine. Alcohol was part of the mix, but most gigs were in halls that were not licensed.

There were some discothèque venues that programmed bands, and towards the end of the 1970’s the pubs started to open up in a big way as audiences grew up, out of the school halls.

The police were very interested in long haired hippy rock types, and would routinely pull us over and search us. There were no breathalyzers so we were more prone to drink driving. Sydney to Melbourne was a bottle of Southern Comfort away. We had just escaped the draft, which Whitlam abolished in the early 1970’s, where they would have a lotto style draw of birth dates and conscript the winners for a year in Vietnam. Returned soldiers were pilloried as murderers and didn’t go to rock gigs.

Sex was happening everywhere. The worst thing that could happen was you got venereal disease and had to visit the Blue Light Clinic. The pill had liberated women and the media was full of free love and desire. Number 96 was a TV soap that featured women taking off their clothes in every episode. If you couldn’t get laid it was because you were too afraid to ask. Guys virtually did just that: see a girl at a gig, sidle up and suggest a walk outside. Code: have sex.

Girls didn’t think of themselves as groupies. They would try and do anything to get close to their idols. Crews were well placed as intermediaries. Pants down, transaction, introduction, motel room number. Next! Load out.

On the road we would pull into a town, circumnavigate the main street, and roll up to the hall. There was always a hall attendant to open up, and usually the place smelled of fresh floor polish. The timber floor was all pristine, and there was usually a plaque above the stage commemorating the fallen.

By the end of the night we would be in some fibro motel room with a ceiling fan and a breakfast hatch on the wall, keeping the rest of the place awake with booze and girls, yelling and smoking. Sometimes an enraged father would arrive with a couple
of uncles, looking for Diana, Darlene or Donna. Sometimes we would get run out of town by the Police.

Some of the bigger bands played extremely hot gigs packed with thousands of punters. There were no controls on venues, no noise laws that anyone bothered to enforce, and no reason to cool down a hot crowd who would drink more. Press reports had some rock stars needing oxygen side stage. We carried a tank alright, but it wasn’t oxygen, it was nitrous oxide. You could buy it anywhere they sold industrial gas, no questions asked. Sucking a face full of that stuff gave you a rush but it also knocked you out. I had a balloon full one night after a gig, and woke up after hitting the floor being tenderly ministered to by a girl – her care extended beyond a bandaid.

Memo: some girls respond well to blood.

PRIMITIVE

We were. But the conditions were too. Air conditioning was not available. Deodorant was Uncle Sam, or Brut 33. The truck was petrol engined with four on the floor. Power brakes were a luxury, power steering very optional. The truck cabin had a vinyl bench seat, no heater, no radio, and no air vents.

The phone was made of Bakelite and phone numbers had 6 digits. To call interstate or overseas you needed an operator. Air tickets were crazy expensive, exactly the same price on TAA or Ansett. Even the flights left at the same time, we had a two airlines system that was totally regulated. Two competing DC 9’s would take off from somewhere ridiculous, like Prosperpine, and land at the same time in Brisbane.

There were no faxes, we used a Telex machine that fed out typed telegram style messages – or we sent a Telegram, and a kid on a bike would deliver them. The last telegram I ever got was from a girl – “I hate your guts”, it read.

We wore Denim, and T shirts, and running shoes. Our long hair was greasy and the food was too. McDonalds had just opened at Yagoona in Sydney, KFC had been going a while. Fast food was actually made by a guy in a blue coat at a suburban takeaway and washed down with a milkshake.

At the gig there was no three phase power – we scrounged single circuits from around the place, running long leads. Soon we needed more, the Miniset 10 dimmer and the new Jands dimmer needed 3 phase, so we made single phase to 3 phase adaptors. But to get real power, you needed to tap into the switchboard at the gig. We did it live, with the master switch on, screwing bare wires into the back of the porcelain fuse holders.

There was no FM radio, only AM with the radio station names printed on the tuner dial. 2SM, 3XY … those radio stations had immense power, and the DJs would routinely turn up at gigs in their tight denim flairs and walk out with a stray woman. We wore platform shoes, men had perms. We all had too much hair, everywhere.
Bands would play for $80 (support) through to a couple of hundred bucks for a headline act. Crews were paid about $10 a night in the early 1970’s. The bridge toll in Sydney was 20c.

Legends were born, but some were killed off early.

DEATH

Safety was not a concept. There were a series of road accidents, the most horrible involved two Swanee crew members whose UD truck ran off the Hume highway and burned down to the wheel hubs.

Because we were ready and willing to drive overnight after a gig, usually fuelled by drugs and booze, we were more prone to dying. It helped if the band paid for the drugs and booze, somehow that seemed honorable. Death seemed less fatal then than it does now.

It was ridiculously easy to smash the car, truck or van. My Kombi came to an early end on the Bulli Pass when I ran into a truck. I remember the random thought at the moment of impact: ‘Gee, that truck is INSIDE the Kombi, on the passenger seat’. I could reach over and touch the side. Then the Kombi fell over. I walked away, not scratched, covered in glittering windscreen shards and soaked from the rain.

One night my Ford F350 2 ton truck ran off the road and brushed an overhanging tree branch as it careened out of control. I had been asleep behind the wheel, and the overhanging branch gave me enough of a wakeup to somehow bring the thing under control and not hit a tree.

I found out how a rental car will spin out of control. I did it once on the Pacific Highway and once on the New England Highway. Somehow there was a break in the oncoming traffic both times. I also found out that those speed advisory signs on corners actually mean something when I overshot a corner and again – there was a break in the oncoming traffic.

Fall off a tall ladder and not break anything? Get hit over the head with a steel bar and just bleed without brain damage? Maybe I was brain damaged.

In the late 1970’s Heroin entered the scene and there was a rash of death associated with the drug as people calibrated the dose. For all who died there were many left wrecked or just left behind.

A lot of brains were fried by drugs, plenty became alcoholics, and some people were just taken out back and bashed senseless by uncles or fathers or bouncers or gangs. A bashing was seen as something routine and I don’t really remember anyone afraid of being charged with assault. You were judged by how you handled yourself, how you handled your liquor or alcohol, and how many women you laid.

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Those of us who established roots left our beloved at home to become ‘rock and roll widows’, forced to be happy with the occasional phone call. Some of them burned the relationship candle at both ends; free love usually meant no responsibility. Women with women. Wives with mates. Mates with wives. Men with men. Animal sex – I kid you not.

Insidiously there were underage girls everywhere, and no one seemed to go to jail in those days. There was a totally alien and almost unreal attitude to morality which we have been forced to dramatically reprogram since.

There was no responsibility for anything.

An example: some genius at Hertz decided to corner the music industry and they hired us Falcon wagons and trucks at flat rate with no excess and a no fault replacement scheme. We put two new wagons into wrecker yards on one trip to Queensland, yelling at the Hertz chick when we were forced to await a replacement for two hours in Kempsey.

A Skyhooks crew parked a Fairlaine in the motel swimming pool at Coolangatta and complained to Hertz that it wouldn’t start because the electrical system was wet. They brought a new one over.

For a while we blew things up, until it got ugly and someone got killed.

I experimented with gunpowder. If you mixed in some magnesium powder it got brighter. But then I discovered the fireworks company would sell flash powder over the counter, so I was typically carrying a kilo of grey powder in my attaché case.

We had flash pots, we had strips of roof gutter filled with a trail of powder. If we didn’t have igniters, an old style flash bulb would do it. We had 12v power supplies and a firing board and too much fun. Sometimes the band got more than they bargained for. We didn’t care.

My moment of infamy happened at Paddington Town Hall on Sunday December 20th, 1975. Robert King hired me to do lights at his concert and it ended badly for everyone, especially Toivo Pilt from Sebastian Hardy. He was in hospital, and several audience members were treated at the scene. The hall still has a chunk of concrete missing from the balcony.

MONEY

The music industry grew at a staggering rate in the 1970’s and the first half of the 1980’s. Bands could and did sell hundreds of thousands of vinyl albums and singles, promoters and managers could and did skim plenty of money off the gullible. If you’re drunk and stoned it’s hard to count.

The audiences were bedazzled by colour TV in the mid 1970’s. Countdown came alone and the loud ballsy sound we produced was at a time even cinema sound was
basic. We had big bottom end and sizzling highs and our Par cans were bright. We were Technicolor in a monochromatic world.

There seemed to be no stopping the music business.

School and community halls gave way to beer barns and pubs that crammed in 1,500 by the end of the 1970’s, when The Angels and Cold Chisel toured, the door gross could be over $10,000 in cash.

The highways always had a band truck passing by. We used to spot the other crews, meet them at roadhouses, and stop when they broke down. By the early 1980s we were all driving Isuzu pantechs, then 8 tonners. Still with no air conditioning, still with vinyl seats. I remember the summer heat in Queensland, windows open, sweat dripping out of my shorts onto my thongs. Bare chested. Sweat. Swigging Fosters down the highway. Driving of course. Cassette tape of Little River Band playing. My girlfriend chucked a banana milkshake out the window, and it blew right back in. The back of the truck – hot, stale beer smell, sweat, puke, de-odor gas on sticky pub carpets. Gaff tape on everything, sharp staples from hastily hung backdrops. Innocently yelling ‘hang the blacks’ and getting into a fight with a table full of aboriginals in a beer garden.

Big and packed venues like the Playroom on the Gold Coast, Bombay Rock and the Bondi Lifesaver, small and packed venues like the Manzil Room or the Khardoma Café. Strange pubs in country towns, little bowling clubs whose secretary managers had been stitched up by a booking agency into believing that paying $8000 for a band on a Tuesday would save the place.

There was a lot of cash changing hands, I was always pushing the drug dealer out of the way to get paid by the tour manager. Some people fabricated some extra wild stories about why and how the money had disappeared. Lies and more lies, promises and unreality. Just show me the money.

It was the cash era, a time before electronic banking, before computers or internets, no emails, no gst, no mandatory reporting if you deposited 20 grand in marked bills at the bank. Mainly the cash was kept out of the bank and dished up in one and two dollar bills stuffed into the attaché case that was de rigour back then.

The rip-off’s were routine, the cheque always bounced, and promises were thick on the ground. “I promise I’ll respect you in the morning……”

There were bikers, fires, fists and guns. Hookers and dealers, groupies and managers, record company staff who really thought they wrote the songs, and booking agents who lied for a living. Dope diesel and degradation. Then there were the rock stars.

Because of the struggles and the violence and the egos there were some people who were complete utter bastards, who practiced the art of duplicity and who just did not care about others. A few still work in the industry and are well avoided by those who remember, most of the rest are dead.

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I smelled the turning point in 1982 and got off the road, a road that peaked with Whispering Jack shifting 24 platinum records several years later. Somehow we faded as our audience grew up and had kids.

Aids and random breath testing forced the fun out, Bolivian marching powder (cocaine) and speed made people crazy. I still have a mental list of some guys who made my life hell at some gigs, and I don’t seem to run into them anymore since they probably died or are unemployed. How would you feel – tired, exhausted, trying to do your gig, and a guy is yelling spittle into your face for no reason or trying to take a swing at you? Or telling you that you can’t do this or that, turning the PA down, just being ridiculous. Refusing to load out after the gig – the list goes on. I remember them all. Sometimes the best response was a microphone stand over the head. Take a nap, sunshine.

I had teeth broken, carry enough scars, and like most old roadies I have a back injury that flares up when it is cold. And I’m half deaf, with a liver that knows more than most.

We fought, we struggled against the authorities, we exceeded our limits, and we had a burning passion for the music. Ours was a generation with a big gap between us and the confused pre war generation who parented us. Those were not the good old days at all; they were bad times with flashes of brilliance.

Sometimes our curiosity pushes us to gawp at a road accident, or makes us do something thinking better stuff is around the corner. The good times, meeting strange and unusual people, the music – always the music.

I used to cringe when someone called me a roadie. Now I’m proud I was.

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Photo thanks: the following pictures are from the Museum archive assembled by Colin Baldwin, Julius Grafton and Yogi. Some came from Phil Duneski, Jands, and Bob King.

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AC/DC Stage Collapse, before the days of engineer reports and that fancy safety stuff

The standard chariot of the 1970’s, the Ford F350 truck. Fast in a straight line, no brakes, no cornering recommended. No heater, no radio….. bench seat excellent for nocturnal diversions.

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Rightly known as The Loadin From Hell, this is one of those gigs you never forget. Innisfail Town Hall.

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Loading the truck. Timeline somewhere at 2am.

This is how it was done. Unlimited audience, heaps of Par Cans, no moving lights, no computers. Just Misex, playing ‘Computer Games’
Just build a scaffold, throw a band on there, add a little PA system. What crowd control?

(Left) How slow can you go? This old Acco maxed out at 80 kph. Imagine driving around Australia in that, and sleeping in a caravan every night.

(Right) Just like the circus. Hit town, spruik the gig, negotiate with the locals.

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