

The Incredible Adventures of The Bum Steers, by Arne Hanna 16th July 2023

I'll be forever grateful to the Primitive Calculator household for instilling within me an appreciation of Country music via the extensive collection of Country music recordings in their possession. And so, Stuart Grant, David Light, and myself decided, sometime in 1982 I think, to form a band of our own to try and actually play the music of Hank Williams, Ray Price, George Jones, Johnny Paycheck etc.

With great enthusiasm we set about learning the material; Stuart on acoustic steel string guitar and vocals, Dave on electric bass, and myself on drums and vocals. We quickly found out that playing Country music is not as easy as it might first appear and upon listening to the cassette recordings of our first rehearsals, we knew that we needed some help. That help came in the form of Bob Pollack, a somewhat older and more experienced musician, specifically adept vis a vis the pedal steel guitar. Bob was the real deal. He knew the tunes, could actually play them, and also looked the part: he had the George Jones sideburns and wore cowboy shirts and boots as a matter of routine.

After weeks of intensive rehearsal, we were ready to perform and our first few outings were well received. It should be understood that this was quite remarkable considering the cultural context that provided the backdrop to our activities. Melbourne was not a place where one could reasonably expect a positive reception to the performance of Country music given the predominance of New Wave and post Punk music in the early 1980s and the initially positive response to this first version of The Bum Steers was quite a surprise.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, our main drawcard, i.e. Bob, turned out to be a hopeless alcoholic and we had to fire him after an incident at a private party where we were booked to perform, involving the excessive consumption of numerous bottles of whisky and his unorthodox repurposing of his own fecal matter.

And so we were back to being a three piece, faced with very little prospect, given that our playing was, shall we say: sub-optimal, of getting another gig. "Fuck it", said Stuart. "We've learned all this material and we're not just going to call it quits." "Why don't we play it loud? I'll turn up and play through a distortion pedal, and instead of trying to sing like George Jones, I'll scream the vocal lines." And so, dear reader, The Bum Steers invented Grunge Country.

After a few weeks pursuing our new direction, we became aware that our experiments were beginning to bear fruit. Our versions of evergreen Country favourites, played with the drums slamming hard, and with both the guitar and bass intoning the chords, now hardly recognisable under a blistering layer of barely controlled feedback and distortion, sounded to our ears as sweet as honey. We were ready to make our new sound public. I don't have a clear memory of the first few gigs we did as this new version of The Bum

Steers, but I suspect our new approach was met with profound indifference. I do, however, remember one very special performance, the details of which I shall now recount to the best of my recollection.

To our delight, we were offered a spot at Banks Rowing Club on the banks of the Yarra River as part of a corporate event. The year was 1983 and we were booked to appear on the evening of August 6, this being an annual event organised by the employees of Crawford Productions. Crawford Productions was founded in Melbourne in 1945 as a radio production company and when broadcast television was introduced in Australia in 1956, it successfully transitioned to the new medium. Crawfords made TV sitcoms and dramas as well as documentaries, which gave them a reputation for quality as opposed to the rival Reg Grundy Organisation who handled the arse end of the market: Quiz shows and other forms of cheap to produce TV.

And so dear reader, the Bum Steers, somewhat bemused that anyone would want such a band as ours to entertain them at a party, nevertheless set off on one August evening to do exactly that. Upon our arrival, our ears were greeted by the sound of the first band, a Bush band, playing rollicking versions of traditional Australian folk ballads such as Waltzing Matilda, The Wild Colonial Boy, and Click Go the Shears etc. The band's main driving force was the Lagerphone: a four foot long piece of wooden dowel to which beer bottle caps have been nailed, and their energetic sound had everyone up and dancing. All good things must come to an end however, and so it came time for this jaunty ensemble to pack up and move on, perhaps to another venue to entertain the hapless employees at the Reg Grundy Organisation's party.

As we were setting up to play, the Crawford Productions employees who had been cavorting vigorously to the enchantingly rustic rhythms of the previous band were taking a breather sitting at the trestle tables talking amongst each other in an animated fashion and partaking of the large quantity of food that lay thereon. A certain anticipation that accompanies the prospect of the unknown could be discerned among this group of people whose number was possibly in the vicinity of a hundred and we were as keen as they to proceed with the evening's entertainment.

I think we were half way through our third song, which from memory was The Green Grass of Home, our rendition of which was prefaced by four minutes of feedback, when it became apparent that every single person that was not a member of The Bum Steers had, while remaining steadfastly glued to their seats, grasped whatever cutlery they could and were now pounding away on the table surface with great force, chanting 'Go Home! Go Home!' We considered it prudent to do as we were told, and we stopped playing. A gentleman whose name I suspect was Grant Bell, approached us, and in a most friendly and conciliatory manner said "Look, there's obviously been some kind of mistake here. Please stay and you're welcome to eat and drink as much as you want but please, don't play anymore." We did hang around, and I remember having a most interesting

conversation with the wardrobe lady. Thankfully, the employees of Crawford Productions turned out to be a very forgiving bunch and the kind of people that anyone would be happy to celebrate an event with. Later we found out that the person that had booked us for the event had seen us perform in our previous incarnation as a sweet but mostly inept Country band and was unaware of the transformation that we had undergone, a transformation that would ultimately result in The Bum Steers becoming legends of Country music.