THE SQUARE STATE · CHAPTER 4

Rock Around the Clock

BRISBANE STADIUM, 1956

On Tuesday 20 November 1956 the Courier-Mail carried an advertisement for a Rock 'n' Roll Festival at Brisbane Stadium the next night, eight o'clock, and it answered a question somebody in town had been asking. Despite rumours, it said, the show was definitely on.[1] The bill was Brisbane's own. Ron Gowans and his Rockets, Bobby Page, Barry Erickson, who was 'Mr. Rock 'n' Roll', Ron Mathers, Basil Green on piano, Tommy O'Connor on drums, and Lovely Fran Griffith, 'Queen of the Rock 'n' Roll'. At the top, flown up from Melbourne for a farewell performance, was Frankie Thornton, billed as America's foremost exponent of the music. General admission was five shillings. Ringside was seven and six.[23]

Valerie K. was eighteen and worked in a newsagency, and her boss took her. They sat high up at the back, on the wooden planks.[4] Raymond Evans puts the crowd that night at three thousand.[5]

The Stadium stood on the corner of Albert and Charlotte Streets, and it was built for boxing. A ring sat in the middle and timber bleachers climbed away from it on every side. A high wire fence topped with barbed wire ran between the cheap seats and the dear ones, put there so fight crowds could not throw bottles into the ring.[6] The aisles between the bleachers were for getting to your seat. All night police walked them, stopping anybody who tried to dance.[7]

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The year had been working up to that fence.

In March more than five thousand people went out to Eagle Farm in the wet to meet the American singer Johnnie Ray. They broke the terminal windows and climbed onto its curved igloo roofs to see him, and when they broke the barriers and pushed for the tarmac, police cordons struck out with canes and drove them back with their shoulders.[8] Ray's two shows at the Stadium that week cost fifteen shillings general, nineteen on the terrace and thirty-nine ringside.[9] The paper asked a medical columnist, a church youth director, a psychologist and one teenager what the airport meant. The adults talked about hysteria, discipline and a country with no national idea. The teenager was Robyn Brown, seventeen, a typist studying at night for her Senior, who had brought her school copy of Macbeth and got Ray to sign it. She did not think it was a mystery. 'Teenagers like to be taken notice of. Johnnie does that. He flatters them.'[1011]

The film came before the music. Late in 1955 Keith Cronau, a young teenager, sat in the Metro in Albert Street at a Sneak Hollywood Preview, which meant nobody had been told what film they were about to see. It was Blackboard Jungle. When Rock Around the Clock came over the opening titles the cinema roared and couples jumped out of their seats to jive in the aisles. One boy kept going

back, a dozen times and more, for the song over the credits, until a grown man in the row behind cuffed him for bopping and told him to sit still.[12]

By September the papers were running the cinema riots of England. The Argus in Melbourne gave a page-two banner to rock and roll rioters in Essex.[13] On 12 October the Courier-Mail announced that the music would come to Brisbane officially the next Monday, when the drummer Tommy O'Connor, Brisbane's Mr. Bop, opened with his Rock-its at St Francis Hall in Elizabeth Street.[14] Rock Around the Clock, the film, opened at the Tivoli on 18 October and was still running in its third week in November. Police patrolled the aisles there too, and saw nothing they called serious.[1516]

The Stadium had already held one festival, on Wednesday 7 November, six big bands and ten vocalists, five shillings general and seven and six ringside. It passed without trouble, and so nobody wrote it up.[1718]

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Near the end of the second festival, couples stood up in the bleachers to jive, and the police went for them in the aisles.[19] Most sat down. Desmond Duke, a labourer of twenty-one, stayed up. When a constable told him the manager had ordered the dancing stopped, he answered for everybody around him, as the court later heard it. 'You cops won't stop us or the manager either. This is our night.'[20]

Police dragged Duke towards an exit. One of the constables holding him told the others to let him go, because more couples were getting up to dance and the crowd was getting out of hand.[21] Somebody pulled electrical conduit off the walls. Part of the bleachers caught fire, and the police said later that a gang had lit it on purpose. Valerie remembered people scattering from a fire close to where she sat.[2223]

The police cleared the Stadium at about half past ten. Several hundred of the crowd did not go home. They kept dancing in the road and moved up Albert Street towards Queen Street, and all the traffic between the Stadium and the corner stopped. Police lost their caps and had their uniforms torn. A youth smashed a bottle on a police car. A policeman was hit on the head with a stone.[24] The arrests ran from 10.37 until midnight.[25] Police swung handcuffs at heads.[26] Valerie's boss got her out of the middle of it, and she did not want to go. 'I remember I was excited and frightened and exhilarated by the music and didn't want to leave!'[27]

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The Melbourne Olympics opened that Thursday afternoon, and the Courier-Mail put the Stadium beside them on page one. 'Police arrested eight teenagers when Brisbane's first rock 'n' roll riot stopped traffic in Albert Street, City, last night.'[28] The afternoon Telegraph had the prosecutor in its headline, 'Police Will Not Let Youths Run City'.[29] The Central Queensland Herald, filing from Brisbane for Rockhampton, counted ten arrests.[30] The Courier-Mail's figure was the one the court used. Out of three thousand, eight were charged.

The eight went before Mr Taylor in the Police Court that Thursday, and the Courier-Mail printed every name, with an age and a trade. William John McLune, twenty, woodworker. Charles Henry Jones, eighteen, coal miner, of Ipswich. Desmond Duke, twenty-one, labourer. Michael Charles Warren, seventeen, clerk, of Salisbury. Daniel Michael O'Connor, twenty-one, meat worker, of

Cannon Hill. Noel Evan James, seventeen, clerk. Mary McMillan Clarke, seventeen, calculator operator, of Clayfield. Monica Smith, otherwise Frances Martin, nineteen, cake packer.[31] Page one had called them all teenagers. Three of them were twenty or twenty-one, and every one of them had a job to be at on Friday morning.

Detective Sub-Inspector Mahony prosecuted. He told the court the police had been caught unprepared on the Wednesday and would be ready if it happened again, and that a gang of hoodlums had set the bleachers alight on purpose and pulled the wiring off the walls.[32] McLune pleaded guilty to assaulting a detective sergeant, obscene language and resisting a constable. The prosecutor said he had thrown himself down on the footpath when they arrested him. McLune said he knew nothing about the law and could not afford a lawyer, but the prosecutor was not telling the truth. He had been talking to one of the other men arrested in the street when a constable pushed him and hit him on the head with handcuffs, and he had been looking for his wife when another constable arrested him for language. He was fined thirteen pounds or a month in jail, with fourteen days to pay.[3334]

Jones had jumped on the back of a detective who was arresting somebody else. He was fined ten pounds and given a month to find it.[35] Duke pleaded not guilty to five charges, two of assault, one of resisting, and one for destroying two police caps worth one pound nineteen and threepence. Mr Taylor asked him whether he wanted bail. Duke shook his head and walked down to the Watchhouse cells.[36] Warren pleaded not guilty and went out on forty pounds bail on his own bond. O'Connor and James did not come and lost a pound of bail each. Mary Clarke lost a pound and Monica Smith two.[37] Several of the eight told Evans, decades later, that they had been beaten in the watchhouse.[38]

Not everybody in the Stadium saw a riot. Des Wallace, who was there, thought the word was wrong. He remembered nearly as many police cars as people, and twenty or thirty in the trouble at most, half of them police. Allan Campbell went with his father, kept his programme for more than forty years and remembered no disturbance at all.[39]

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By Friday the Courier-Mail had changed its tone. Its editorial was headed Showing Off. Most of the rock and rollers had been teenagers, it said, and they had behaved like silly children. 'The police took a serious view of their conduct, perhaps too serious.' A sharp lecture, the paper thought, would have sent most of them home ashamed.[40]

The letters came in for a week. Old Timer of Red Hill, writing as a taxpayer, wanted the birch rod brought back for delinquents and their parents' wages garnisheed. A parent in Mayne who signed as Perplexed had let a daughter go to the festival with a young student, and she had come home upset. Some of the crowd had needed restraint, the parent wrote, though not the bashing the police handed out. In its next breath the letter asked for rock and roll to be banned from radio, screen and the press.[41] Lyle R. Parker of Nudgee had been inside, and he said that plenty of decent boys and girls there were disgusted by the way the police handled it. 'Most of the young ones rebelled against the way some girls were treated by officials.'[42]

Michael Warren came back to court on 29 November with a barrister, O. J. North. He was charged with disorderly behaviour in Albert Street, with wilfully damaging Constable J. K. Mahony's

wristwatch, and with insulting words to Detective R. K. Edwards, which the paper printed as ‘get out you mug copper’. Only the disorderly charge was heard. North told the court the City Council had suspended the seventeen-year-old clerk until it was settled. He asked the constable whether the police had set out that night to clean up bodgies. Mahony said no. He denied hitting Warren in the solar plexus at the watchhouse and knocking him to the ground. By his appearance, the constable said, he would not have typed the youth as a bodgie at all.[43] The next day the magistrate discharged Warren.[44]

Duke’s case came on in December. He told the court he had been walking back to his seat from the toilet when the police took hold of him, and he denied being a bodgie as well.[45] He also told the court what he had said to them in the aisle.

‘Let me go. Stop. I’ve done nothing!’[46]

NOTES

1. Courier-Mail, 1956k

2. Courier-Mail, 1956k

3. Gaunt, 2025; Courier-Mail, 1956k

4. Valerie K., as cited in Evans, 1997b, p. 113

5. Evans, 1997b, p. 113; Courier-Mail, 1956l; Central Queensland Herald, 1956, p. 4

6. Evans, 1997b, p. 117

7. Valerie K., as cited in Evans, 1997b, p. 113

8. Courier-Mail, 1956g

9. Courier-Mail, 1956, March 5, as transcribed in Rock ’n’ roll in Brisbane town

10. Courier-Mail, 1956g

11. Courier-Mail, 1956h

12. Evans, 1997b, p. 107

13. The Argus, 1956, p. 2; Courier-Mail, 1956v

14. Courier-Mail, 1956t

15. Courier-Mail, 1956j

16. Courier-Mail, 1957h

17. Courier-Mail, 1956, November 1, as transcribed in Rock ’n’ roll in Brisbane town

18. Evans, 1997b, p. 113

19. Evans, 1997b, p. 113

20. Courier-Mail, 1956c, as cited in Walden, 2003, p. 116

21. Evans, 1997b, p. 113

22. Courier-Mail, 1956l; Evans, 1997b, p. 113

23. Valerie K., as cited in Evans, 1997b, p. 113

24. Courier-Mail, 1956l

25. Telegraph, 1956, November 22, p. 5

26. Evans, 1997b, p. 114

27. Valerie K., as cited in Evans, 1997b, p. 113

28. Courier-Mail, 1956l

29. Telegraph, 1956, November 22, p. 5

30. Central Queensland Herald, 1956, p. 4

31. Courier-Mail, 1956m

32. Courier-Mail, 1956m

33. Courier-Mail, 1956m

34. Telegraph, 1956, November 22, p. 5

35. Courier-Mail, 1956m

36. Courier-Mail, 1956m

37. Courier-Mail, 1956m

38. Evans, 1997b, p. 114

39. Walden, 2003, pp. 116 to 117

40. Courier-Mail, 1956m

41. Courier-Mail, 1956o

42. Courier-Mail, 1956r

43. Courier-Mail, 1956s

44. Courier-Mail, 1956b

45. Courier-Mail, 1956c, as cited in Walden, 2003, p. 116

46. Evans, 1997b, p. 113



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