

Music

Let there be rock stars

BERNARD ZUEL asks why Australia hasn't produced one strutting god since Michael Hutchence.

The English do them regularly, the Americans do them comfortably but where are the Australian rock stars? The classic rock star, that semi-mythical figure born of bedroom fantasies, fed by music-magazine intensity and crowned in tabloid frenzy.

Bernard Fanning from Powderfinger, you say? Nup. Big-selling but self-effacing and deliberately ordinary. Chris Cheney from the Living End? Workmanlike is not exactly what women like. Shannon Noll? Two words: soul patch. John Butler? You can't be a rock star sitting down. Jimmy Barnes? Too blokey, too matey, too old. Gareth Liddiard from the Drones? Too unknown, too inner-Melbourne.

Michael Hutchence, who knew a thing or two about what it meant to be a rock star, looked at his audience knowingly. "They fantasise about much more than is really there, don't you think?" he once said to Belinda Carlisle of the Go-Go's.

Whatever truth lies in that comment is somewhat undercut by the fact that this was said to a beautiful, desired woman who was also, for a time, his lover. Carlisle recounts in a recent biography that Hutchence was not really complaining about the life.

He had, after all, chosen it and built a life around his need to be that creature of tantalising distance, desire and decadence.

As his band-mate Jon Farriss puts it: "Michael became close to friends who allowed him to be a rock star because that was where he was the most comfortable.

"He couldn't pretend not to be [a rock star], otherwise it would be dysfunctional and it was dysfunctional enough already."

A rock star is not just a lead singer or a big-selling artist or the prettiest one in the room; that is the practical side of music, the tangible, explicable side. And that's boring.

After five decades of mythologising, we know a rock star is the strutting peacock who doesn't ask for your attention but commands it.

The one with the streak of danger you know you'll never have in you but thrill to at a distance.

A rock star is the projection of blatant adolescent aspirations and only partially hidden adult expectations; and is recognised for it by a wider public who wouldn't buy an album or even know a song.

And, let's not pretend otherwise, a rock star reeks of sex: they have it, they're getting it, you're wanting it. Or at least to stand near it.

On those criteria, Chrissie Amphlett came close, Nick Cave would qualify if he hadn't scared so many people off before the hair started receding, Peter Garrett was never in the hunt and Tex Perkins and Tim Rogers didn't sell enough.

But Michael Hutchence, unquestionably, was a rock star. The most intriguing aspects of Hutchence today, as INXS prepare to release an album next month with a dozen guest

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Bernard Fanning

vocalists, are why is he one of the very few rock stars created in Australia; and why has there not been another since his death in 1997?

Maybe there's the beginning of an answer in Powderfinger, whose guitarist Darren Middleton says the band belatedly began putting on a "show" when they realised audiences "don't want to see themselves or the guy next door doing it, you want to be taken out of your own existence for an hour-and-a-half".

Bernard Fanning confesses he

avoided any classic rock-star behaviour on stage because "I've had that great Australian fear that my mates are going to give me shit".

There's the crux, says John O'Donnell, who signed Silverchair when they were monosyllabic "long-hairs", and who later ran the

Australian arm of EMI. "No one wants to be a rock star 'wanker', whereas that is celebrated in other countries," O'Donnell says.

"In their different ways, the US and UK promote brilliance and celebrate success but we have to be careful not to 'rise above our station' and turn into a wanker."

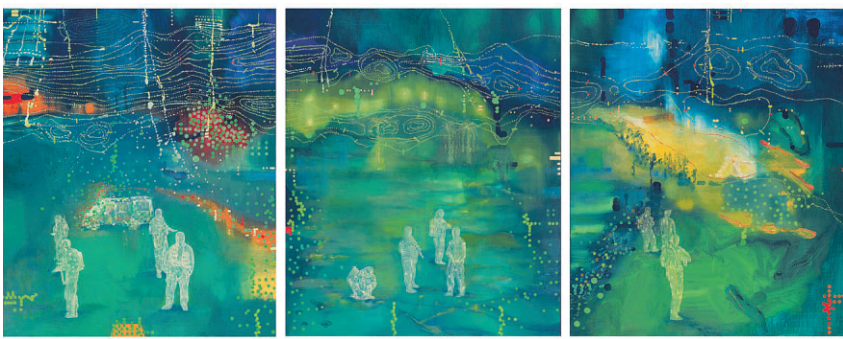
The editor of Australian *Rolling Stone*, Dan Lander, says Australians prefer their rock performers to be the

type "you would have a beer with at the pub and it would seem like a normal thing to do". "We don't admire the prancer and the preener, so, therefore, our musicians don't become that," says Lander, who applies the theory to international acts who do well here. "You look at the bands that we have embraced: Dave Grohl is not really a rock star, he's much more in the Aussie mould of what a musician is. We embrace the ones who fit that Aussie mould of the slightly humble performer than the more extravagant ones. Kings of Leon are another one, or Mumford & Sons."



Master ... Michael Hutchence.

Jon Cattapan - PERSPECTIVES - eX de Medici



Jon Cattapan, *Night patrols (around Maliana)* 2009, oil on Belgian linen (three panels) 120 x 300 cm (overall), AWM ART93993.001-003



eX de Medici, *Bullpup*, 2009, watercolour on paper, 114 x 181.5 cm, AWM OL00610.003

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