

NOISE IN MY HEAD

VOICES FROM THE UGLY AUSTRALIAN UNDERGROUND

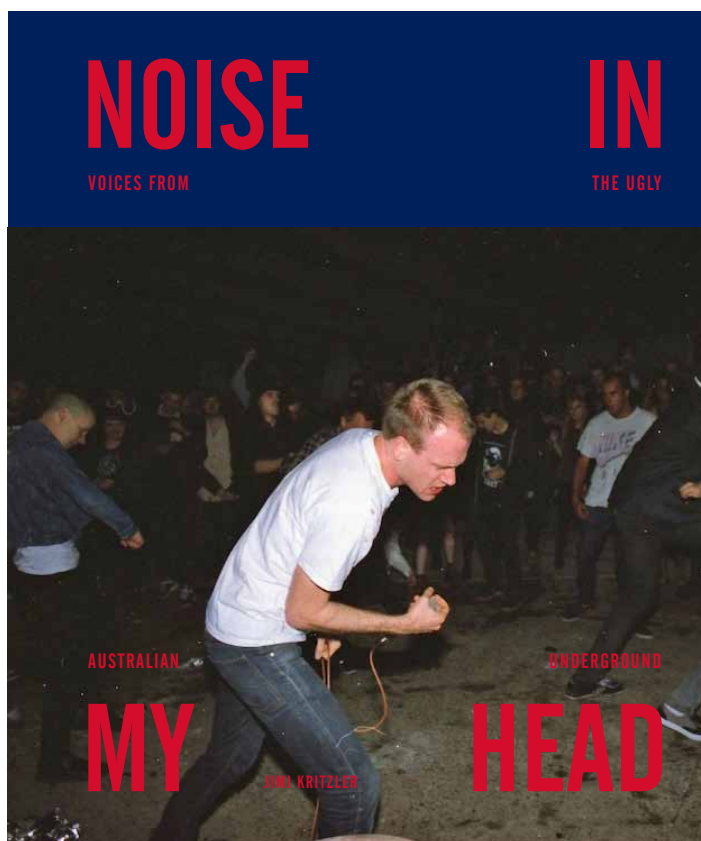
BY JIMI KRITZLER

The Ugly Australian Underground documents the music, songwriting, aesthetics and struggles of fifty of Australia's most innovative and significant bands and artists currently at the creative peak of their careers.

The book provides a rare insight into the critically heralded cult music scene in Australia. The author, Jimi Kritzler, is both a journalist and a musician, and is personally connected to the musicians he interviews through his involvement in this music subculture. The interviews are extremely personal and reveal much more than any interview granted to street press or blogs. They deal with not only the music and songwriting processes of each band, but in some circumstances their struggles with drugs, involvement in crime and the death of band members.

The book is complimented by previously unpublished photographs of all bands interviewed.

The Australian underground scene in the last five years has been heralded not only in Australia but also in Europe, and particularly in America. Known as the 'Australian Invasion', many of the bands interviewed in this book have received a great deal of hype and press in America, with many of the bands signing to American record labels. Bands featured in the book, such as The Drones, Eddy Current Suppression Ring, Royal Headache, Uv Race, Circle Pit, HTRK, Lost Animal, Oren Ambarchi, Total Control, Witch Hats, Deaf Wish, Blank Realm, New War, Holy Balm, Fabulous Diamonds, The Garbage and The Flowers, Straight Arrows, xNoBBQx, Naked on the Vague, Kitchen's Floor and My Disco are all on American record labels, and have toured America at least once. Eddy Current Suppression Ring even lent their song 'Memory Lane' to an American telecommunications company advertisement, which was played repeatedly during the Super Bowl. While that may indicate the influence of the band in America at the more mainstream end of the spectrum, at the other end, Eddy Current Suppression Ring are a culturally significant and revered underground band, who play to thousands of people at any given show.



The bands in this book have dedicated fan bases in both Australia and America that recognise that this crop of bands are the most creatively important in the Australian music scene today. These are the bands that will be remembered in twenty years for having created seminal records. Already, The Drones and Eddy Current Suppression Ring have been named in the *The 100 Best Australian Albums*.

The Author:

Jimi Kritzler graduated from The University of Queensland with a Bachelor of Journalism Degree and an Honours Degree in Journalism from Queensland University of Technology. In the past he was a feature writer, reviewer and contributor to *Vice Magazine*, *The Courier-Mail Newspaper* (News Ltd, QLD), *Time Off Magazine* and New York's *SUP Magazine*. He currently is Head of Record Labels at Fuse Group. He plays in White Hex with Tara Green and lives in Brunswick, Melbourne.

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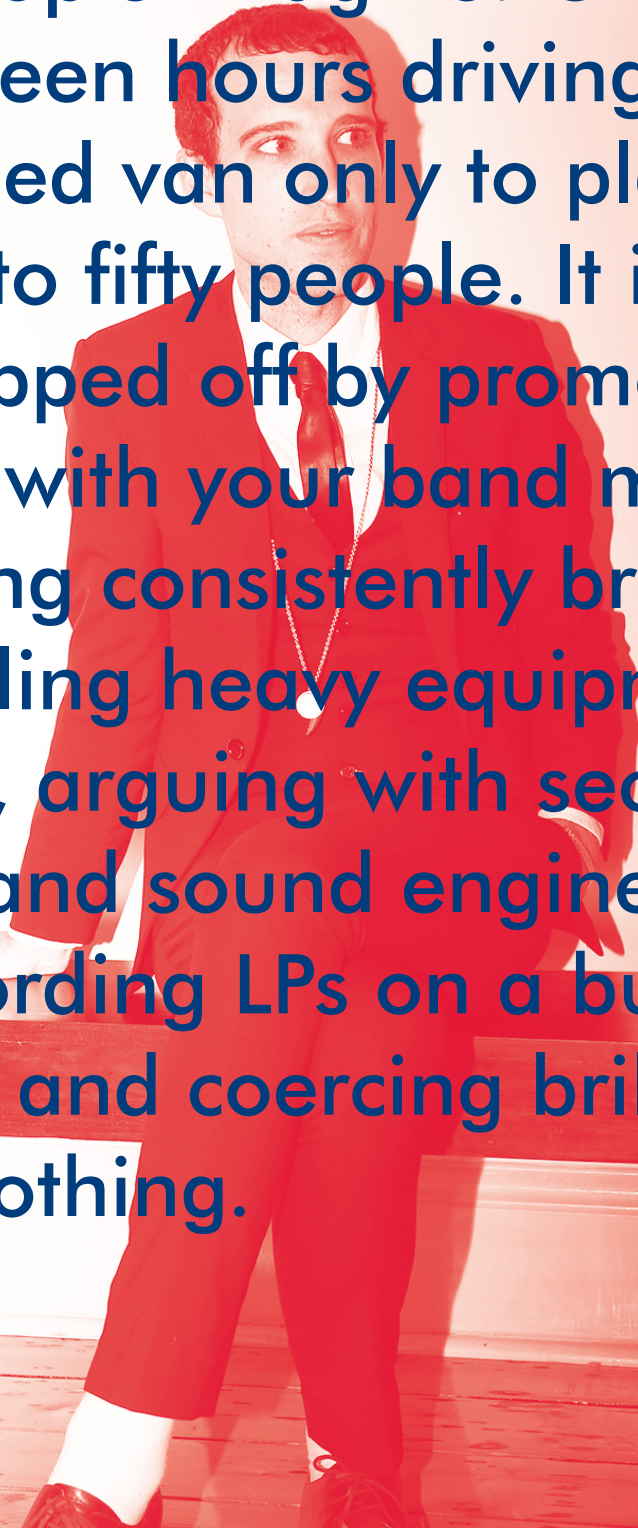
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For all queries, please contact:
info@melbournebooks.com.au

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Being in a band isn't simply the gloriously hedonistic existence most people imagine. Often it is thirteen hours driving in a cramped van only to play a show to fifty people. It is being ripped off by promoters, fighting with your band mates and being consistently broke. It is hauling heavy equipment upstairs, arguing with security guards and sound engineers. It is recording LPs on a budget of \$300 and coercing brilliance out of nothing.



And what hedonism there is isn't that glorious – ask around about elder statesmen like Ian Rilen, Tim Hemensley or some of the people in this book. The hedonism has turned people into chronic alcoholics, junkies, liars and thieves – some diseased and broken beyond repair. Tex Perkins' infamous quote, 'Drugs, fucked up every band I've ever been in actually. Every single one! Still fucking them up!' has apparently fallen on deaf ears. It is plausible, however, that in some cases without these vices and the complications they add to daily life, the music created wouldn't sound half as troubled, reckless, potent or innovative and some of the people in question might even say it was worth it. It isn't glorifying the skeletons of the past or the destructive instincts which come with the territory; it is simply admitting that the negatives come nowhere near to touching the positive aspects – making an LP, leaving the town that makes you crawl up the walls and scratch at your skin, to go on tour to cities and countries you never expected and playing shows that leave you quietly amazed that you could actually pull such a feat off.

Ultimately, however, the people and bands covered in this book are so diverse in sound, background, outlook, popularity and lifestyle that to generalise about their experience is never going to suffice. That said, all the people who were interviewed in this book would have probably encountered or endured one of the aforementioned experiences.

One generalisation I can make, though, is that every single band in this book has written a song or an album, or played a show that has left this (at times not so humble) writer completely in awe.

When I initially dropped the record needle onto Circle Pit's 'Honey', the lethargic balladry showed a new confidence. Gone were the rock-and-roll histrionics and the pervading influences of Jagger, Richards, Hagerty and Herrema. It was as if the Sydney duo had finally eclipsed their spectrum of influence and outshone the icons they had once held so close. And in doing so they created a song so delicately personal, albeit despondent, that in my mind it summed up the drug-addled misfortune that had characterised their prior few years. 'Honey' and its counterpart 'Slave' are works of desperate song craft that reek of romanticism and struggle and accordingly, or so legend would have it, both songs were written by the two members about each other. If justice prevails these downtrodden tunes will outlive both Jack Mannix and Angela Garrick (aka Angela Bermuda).

Likewise HTRK's narcotic, quixotic opus, *Marry Me Tonight* from 2006 and *Work (work, work)* from 2011, stand as landmark records in the modern ugly, Australian underground. The band's cold, industrial excursions centre upon a thoroughly hedonistic delivery that's carnivorous in its aural hostility and reverie-inducing in its repetition. Furthermore, the sedated vocals of Jonnine Standish, whose lyrical bent delves into the realms of the androgynous and sexually beguiling, underpin HTRK's clinical electronic excursions and set them in a league of their own. Part of the interview conducted in this book with guitarist and programmer Nigel Yang was the final HTRK interview granted before bassist Sean Stewart took his own life in March 2010.

On a completely different musical bent, it is nigh impossible to cast out of mind the damaged Velvet's splattered guitar deconstructions of The Garbage and The Flowers who, over the course of twenty years have proved a cult unto themselves, creating a cacophony of guitar abstractions that deconstruct rock-and-roll to its most primitive conclusion.

The instantaneous dirge pop antagonism of Witch Hats' 'Ma Birthday' or 'Jock the Untold', are staggering works, which crawled out of the swamp, covered in pop intuition, encumbered only by the dirt, murk and spite which saturates nearly all of Witch Hats' demented attempts at constructing pop sheen. It is 'Jock the Untold', though, that leaves one gagging at the preposterous Australian suburbanisms which comprise the lyrics of the song. Witch Hats vocalist Kris Buscombe's unique ranting spews forth with a delicate intelligence amidst the humour that ultimately transforms this song into a masterpiece of Australian suburban iconography.

In researching and writing this book, perhaps my most firmly-planted memory is from 2009, when I agreed to book a show for a recently formed band from Sydney. I had never heard their music, I thought their name was particularly unremarkable and, as it was a favour to a friend, I had absolutely no expectations. I booked the show, did a poster, organised some interviews, spread the word and promptly forgot about the show until a few weeks before, when the band's demo 'Girls' arrived. Upon hearing Royal Headache's one minute and thirty-nine second blast of soulful garage crank, I was convinced that it was, as far as I was concerned, the single of 2009. It was on the surface a lyrical tale of failed romanticism at its most brilliantly charming, albeit purposely naïve and stoically sincere; a sentence which in my mind encapsulates Royal Headache's outsider crooner, Shogun, who is not the idiot savant some misguided and condescending music journalists perpetuate him to be. Over the several weeks following, word slowly spread and for those hundred people who crowded into Brisbane's Step Inn Front Bar, well, they bore witness to one of the most startling, relevant, electrifying and memorable shows I had seen in years. Royal Headache played with a conviction and intensity that stemmed simply from the fact they had a remarkably strong catalogue of songs – from 'Girls' to 'Eloise' to the memorable soul-inflected garage elation of 'Honey Joy'. Royal Headache reminded me that a renaissance was occurring in the Australian underground and that they, alongside other Sydney degenerates like the hateful swamp trio Whores, the industrial clang of Naked On The Vague, The Glimmer Twin Stones-styled song craft of Circle Pit and the freewheeling acid-drenched psych rock of Dead Farmers were at the forefront of Sydney's contribution to this resurgence.

Meanwhile, 1000 kilometres south, in Melbourne, there was a gang of juveniles imported from rural Australia called The Uv Race. They initially plied a garage stomp approach until, after two albums, the songs began latching onto avant-garde weirdness and outsider psych-pop. From the Neanderthal garage thud of 'Lego Man' to the misguided romanticism of 'Girl in My Head' and the comic drug rant of 'Acid Trip', The Uv Race is an anomaly. They are a band unmoved by trends, motivated by friendship and creating album upon album of some of the weirdest psych-splattered outsider punk music Australia has yet produced. When The Uv Race's drummer DX told me they were filming a feature-length film on the band – not a documentary but rather an actual film and that they were recording their next record in India – it seemed as though the six of them simply came up with the most ambitious, albeit preposterous, idea and then simply went for it.

On a different trajectory of ambition and sonic innovation, Melbourne has also given birth to the minimalist experimentation of Oren Ambarchi, the unrelenting pub murk of Deaf Wish and the pulsating mutant techno din of Forces, among many others featured in *The Ugly Australian Underground*.

The bands documented in this book are but a mere selection. Admittedly, the original list of bands I intended to cover was so long that I knew certain compromises would be made in order to present a book that featured detailed, yet not overly elongated interviews, with the subjects that talked personally in their own words about the music, ideas, lifestyles, mythologies and stories which have characterised all the bands featured in *The Ugly Australian Underground*.

In a perfect world, *The Ugly Australian Underground* would also have featured interviews with:

The Native Cats, Marco Fusinato, Lace Curtain, The Necks, Degreaser, ZOND, Bedroom Suck Records, Darren Sylvester, Exhaustion, Striborg, Peak Twins, Bitch Prefect, Kes Band, Angel Eyes, Vaginors, Mum Smokes, Robin Fox, Fatti Frances, Castings, Cured Pink, Beaches, Boomgates, Extortion, Bits of Shit, Lower Plenty, Taco Leg, Sky Needle, Anthony Pateras, Rod Cooper, Martyr Privates, Collapsed Toilet Vietnam, Superstar, the Music Your Mind Will Love You collective of bands like Terracid and 6majik9, The Deadnotes, and many others.

Time and space constraints rendered this impossible. In some cases and for various reasons, the bands or artists declined to be interviewed. For one, Tim Evans, the creatively deranged mind behind iconic Australian bands Sea Scouts, Mouth, Bird Blobs and now Degreaser, which operates out of New York, would simply prefer to write music than talk about it. Similarly, Tasmania's black metal icon Sin Nanna (aka Striborg) is an artist so reclusive in regard to publicity that an interview, despite my efforts, never eventuated. Regardless, the bands covered are but a mere (and purely subjective) selection of the music emanating from the Australian underground. Dig deeper into the recesses and you will find a vast array of bands that warrant just as much attention. This book's primary ambition is to serve as a snapshot. It is a document of a very specific time in each of the bands' existences. In the current media landscape and technology-saturated age, the purpose of this book is to detail, analyse and explore the music, motives, ambitions and lifestyles of the people in the bands interviewed. The book serves as a time capsule, which captures the respective bands in their own words and sheds insight into the minds behind each of the bands at this specific moment in time.

In researching and writing this book, I came to realise that some things haven't changed all that much in terms of Australian music over the past few decades. The most crucial thing is that bands are still carnivorous in their attempts to construct damaged, innovative and unique sounds. And while the ever-pervading influence of The Birthday Party, Venom P Stinger, The Go-Betweens, The Triffids and The Saints remains an overarching influence on some, there are bands that have forged their own unique vision and sound in a post-1980s climate. It is for this reason that I have written this book – in a bid to document the ugly anus of the Australian underground so there exists a record of the bands at their creative peak, rather than having them reside in obscurity for the next decade or so until the next generation stumbles upon the deleted 7-inches, tapes, LPs and video bootlegs which will define this era of bands.

While the bands in this book differ largely in genre and approach, there is an undercurrent of vehemence and a willingness to explore the more challenging, innovative, uglier and more inherently damaged aspects of music that intrinsically links them all. Welcome to *The Ugly Australian Underground*.

Jimi Kritzler