

# Viva Vauxhalls & Other Stories... 78-83

by Russell Brown

Much of the art of getting anywhere when you're a teenager lies in cushioning the whole truth from your parents. Not actually *lie*, but

describe the place you wanna go in terms which emphasise its more savoury characteristics ... well, sometimes you *did* have to lie ...

But Mollet Street (or 'Club Da Rox' as no-one actually called it) was tricky. It was a sleazy room up an alley off Colombo St which featured punk rock bands, mostly, but it only opened on Sunday nights. Didn't exactly tally up with School Cert. And by the time that particular little scholastic horserace was over, the place had closed down. That was in late 1978.

A fast R&B band called Vapour and the Trails had turned their practise room into a venue in late 1977, charged \$1 on the door and all of a sudden found themselves with a scene on their hands, lots of local bands popping up and even touring bands like the Enemy and the Scavengers. It only had to close down because the weekly leaping about was a serious threat to the structure of the old building. So I never got to

see Johnny Abort and the Doomed (a longhaired punk band featuring Dick Driver on vocals) or the Vandals (an extremely fluid lineup based around noo wave guru Tony Peake, he of the Uni Bookshop and ever-changing hair colour).

But I did see Johnny Vexox and the Vauxhalls, mainly because a couple of them used to jump over the back fence and come to the odd class at my school. They even played a school assembly. By the time of the next major venue, the Strand, they'd shed Johnny and were a three-piece who looked like amphetamine sheepdogs and played unrecognisably fast versions of 'Mannish Boy' and 'Louie Louie' as well as their own (even faster) classics like 'Griffin's Gingersnits' and 'Bob Brown For Sound'. The Vauxhalls were the

VAUXHALLS BON MARCHE  
vapour and the trails  
SPLASH ALLEY VIBES  
STANLEY WRENCH  
& more  
SUNDAY  
22 July  
1.30 start  
Sydenham fire station  
colombo  
they'll go rar.

xmas  
RAGE  
VAUXHALLS  
androids  
stanley wrench

quintessential local faves who no one else really understood. They played everywhere.

The Strand had its first few nights at the unlikely venue of the Redcliffs Community Centre, well out of town. The gigs were underwritten by 3ZM, who obviously didn't really know what they were getting into. The station earnestly ran a "new wave disco" between bands and even a "dance like Plastic Bertrand" contest (I admit, a friend of mine won it — he got an Eddie and the Hot Rods album.) And when a moustachoed type rushed on stage to push away an enthusiastic fan who was bashing the strings on Vauxhall Scott Brooks' bass (which didn't make much difference to the already unbelievably distorted sound) he just got an angry glare from Scott and scuttled back off the stage, bewildered.

The Strand fell from favour when it moved into the city into a room the size of a large shoebox, but its farewell gig signalled the start of another healthy period. It was an all-day at the old Sydenham Fire Station — Bon Marche played and were mercilessly heckled; Dick Driver's Splash Alley got away by playing a great version of 'Pretty

Vacant' (that kinda cheap trick still worked at that point). The venue was thereafter known as Wayne Manor.

Now *there* was a venue. Bylaws didn't come into it — every Friday night two or three bands would play and the audience would troop up with as much alcohol as they could be bothered carrying. At one end was the stage, under a single hanging light, and at the other were some armchairs and a big fireplace. By the end of the night comatose figures would be draped over chairs and on the floor at the fireplace end. And there was never any violence — until, after some months, some heavies at the Sydenham Rugby Club worked out there was venue right next door and took to beating up punks. Things crashed rapidly.

All this time, 'New Wave Raves' ran fortnightly, firstly in the Horticultural Hall and then around the suburbs. Despite the dorky name and the unlikely venues, these could often be outrageously good. Then again, that could depend on who was playing — I have horrible memories of Flight X-7 turning up at one. Wayne Manor's successor as sleazy-casual venue was the England St Hall, an unbelievably run-down place owned by the Oddfellows' Society (plaster fell off the walls if you slammed the toilet door). I don't know how everyone knew every time there was a dance there, one theory was that it was advertised in the Personals, but everyone just *knew*. As 1979 developed into 1980 and beyond, the crowds got heavier, the police visited more and the dances got less frequent, until, eventually, (at a dance run by 'Erebus Promotions') the bouncer was beaten up and the takings stolen. The violence we'd only read about in Auckland had come to our place ...

All this time, the pubs were running, of course. The Hillsborough was a big, modern booze barn at the foot of the Port Hills that saw everyone from Big International Bands (well, Australian ones ...) to first-timers until it finally lost the battle to stay afloat and drowned in a sea of noise restrictions. The British was an awesomely sleazy little

pub in Lyttelton that saw a variety of bands but truly belonged to the Androids.

But The Venue was the Gladstone. A series of bookers looked after it, but it was at its height in 1981, when well-attended early week specials nurtured bands to weekend status, amidst the genuine youthful vitality of the Auckland tourists, particularly the Screaming Blamatics. Maybe the place's greatest triumph was the delightful head-to-head battle for the punters when the Androids packed it out whilst the Swingers got 1100 into the Hillsborough across town. You couldn't move. That was the weekend when the 'Droidss set the bar take record, one which hasn't been bettered (the door take has, quite a few times).

The graffiti in the toilets was a constant joy, no matter how often the walls were repainted. I saw Toy Love for the first time there too. I won't forget *that*.

But the diminutive manager, former boxer Ray Newman, moved and the new management got skitterish about some violence outside the pub (which virtually never came from the actual gig-goers) and under-agers, and the dull country-rockers the Cowboys were brought in as residents in late 1982. The place has never been the same since the place was done up like a bordello to their specifications. The residency didn't work out and the current one in there probably won't either.

So that takes us up until about the time I left the South Island. Visits tend to indicate that the essential characteristics of the ChCh scene remain — University gigs are still good if you are a student or can sneak in (we did a lotta that), a bizarre variety of bands are friendly and supportive of each other, Bill Direen has moved to Wellington but a genuine weirdo over/underground subsists courtesy of the Axmin and friends, a lot of bands are hugely popular within the city limits and virtually unknown elsewhere, there are still personality promoters of similar age to the punters ... and the record label's a bit bigger now.

Russell Brown

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