

The Auckland Star's coverage of ZZ Top in Auckland has been interpreted by media observers as a trial run for the type of journalism we can expect from the Star's proposed morning off-shoot, the Sun. Certainly it is rare in New Zealand, outside the reactionary tabloids *Sunday News* and *Truth*, to see such a transparent attempt to raise a paper's circulation through old-fashioned shock horror tactics.

● **Friday** — The first salvo of the ZZ Top affair is shot when the *Star* headlines their coverage of the band's press conference "ZZ Top denies links with KKK." The story goes on to report police expectations that up to 1400 gang members will be attending the concert, although later paragraphs quote the policeman organising security saying such reports are "wildly exaggerated" — and police intelligence saying they couldn't estimate the number of gang members attending.

But the mud has already begun to stick. No source is given for the KKK allegation; the "ZZ Top denies ..." headline is an ancient tactic that gives the impression the subject has something to hide.

● **Sunday** — the morning after the concert, the *Sunday Star's* headline reads "CONCERT SEIGE — Police arrest hundreds in ZZ Top crush." Those who attended wonder what they missed. The "seige" turns out to be the smooth removal of 150 Black Power members from the ground when a confrontation with the Mongrel Mob seemed likely. The "hundreds of arrests" (actually 239) were unrelated to the incident. Most were people taken away before the concert began for being drunk and disorderly — outside the gates — and Auckland's assistant police commissioner was later quoted as saying it was "about what we expected."

Pictorial coverage of the concert shows three gang members, one policeman, two band members — and three lads from Palmerston North whose car blew up. By comparison, the *Sunday News* pictures showed four policemen, three am-

No News is Bad News Aunty Star Vrs ZZ Top

Who wants yesterday's papers? Nobody in the world.
— the Rolling Stones, 1967

History never repeats?

Twenty years after the Rolling Stones were subject to a smear campaign by the sensationalist *News of the World*, ZZ Top received extraordinary coverage from the *Auckland Star*.

And in a curious turn of newspaper politics, the conservative *Herald* has provided the objective, balanced account of events — just as in 1967, the *Times* came out in support of the Rolling Stones.

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CONCERT SIEGE

Police arrest hundreds in ZZ Top crush



A 6 Auckland Star, Monday, March 16, 1987

Starview

Let's fix ugly concert anarchy

balance men, three drunks, six gang members — and no band. Neither paper reviews the concert.

● **Monday** — By now, the *Star* has become a joke. The lead story, headlined "Texans put promoter in line for ban" in inch-high type, is a

provocative piece about noise levels and council restrictions. The inflammatory editorial "Let's fix ugly concert anarchy" asks hypothetically, "There were reputedly 65,000 people jammed into the Springs, the majority well-behaved. How many would have been seriously in-

jured in the rush to get out had the situation not been so well behaved?" It calls upon local authorities to find a "proper solution" to "Auckland's rock concert problem" — "before there is an incident like the Belgian soccer riot."

Wouldn't that be news? It would certainly make more exciting photos than the one of half a dozen men urinating outside because the toilets were too full. Further on in the paper, a review — not written by the *Star's* music critic — continues the theme. "Perhaps the authorities will have something to say about [the volume] later," it says, claiming the stoned and drunk crowd didn't warm to the bands, or even take much notice. That wasn't the judgement of any respected rock critic; perhaps the reviewer stayed out of the ground with the inebriated, looking for a riot.

● **Tuesday** — in rides the *Herald*, with an objective account "Hitting a Positive Note on ZZ Top" that put things in perspective, quoting police assistant commissioner Brian Davies ("It was about what we expected. I would not say it was good or bad compared with other concerts. But I would not get too negative about pop concerts.") and city councillor Phil Warren, who points out 60,000 people enjoyed the concert and there were a maximum of six shows a year. Mayor Cath Tizard suggests that some acts not be allowed at Western Springs because of the type of crowd they attract.

● **Wednesday** — the *Star* struggles to keep the controversy alive. Their lead story, "Rock in plan to run off athletes" (the headline was larger than the story) presumably intends to ignite right-wing reaction to the evil rock threat. It quotes ARA chairman Colin Kay saying Mt Smart Stadium would welcome more rock concerts as it isn't getting enough use; on concert nights however, Mt Smart tenants the Auckland Athletic Centre would have to go elsewhere.

The ZZ Top affair isn't dead yet, though. Watch for the headlines after the council's parks committee discusses the concert on April 9... and there's still ZZ Top's defamation

suit against the *Star* to be heard.

Hugh Lynn, promoter of the ZZ Top concert, shakes his head. "The concert almost received more coverage than the Bay of Plenty earthquake," he says. "Any truth in the KKK rumour would have come out ages ago in the investigative journalism overseas. It made us look naive."

The band themselves were not actually asked about the KKK. According to Lynn, two *Star* general reporters who hadn't been invited to the press conference — the music writer had — arrived wanting to attend. They approached the band publicist, "who became aware of their intention and decided not to let them in. I would hate to believe that confrontation was the reason it all happened, but we'll find out the reason because of the impending court action."

Lynn isn't that worried about the press treatment after the concert, but the speculation about gangs beforehand. "It was totally irresponsible running that story, like putting kerosene on an open fire. The *Star* turned it into a frightening situation with that gang story. They put fear into people's hearts. There aren't 1400 Black Power and Mongrel Mob members in New Zealand; recently the *Star* itemised the membership of each gang. I knew that some gang members were coming, and had spoken to the leaders of various gangs."

There was no hint of "a rumble" coming up, says Lynn. Besides, the gangs wouldn't want to confront each other in front of thousands of people — bad PR, and it would spoil their evening too. "I was proud of the way the Black Power's leaders contained the situation. They could have backed up, but there were no arrests." The ejected gangmembers received refunds.

According to Lynn, a workers' free concert held at inner Auckland's Victoria Park brought 60 arrests out of 3000 people. "Put that into a percentage — it becomes clear that 260 odd arrests is not a lot out of 65,000 people. Most of those arrests were out of the ground. The police have a new policy of remov-

ing drunk or aggro people prior to the concert, and it's working well."

Inside, things ran very smoothly. "Rock and roll isn't just a kids' thing anymore," says Lynn. "The crowd ranges from 45 down. But when 65,000 people are together, it seems there's a mathematical equation that there's a certain amount of arrests, confrontation, and peeing on the lawn."

"It's more acceptable when it's done at a cricket or football thing. You can't tell me those crowds are less rowdy, with less rubbish. Maybe it's difficult for the authorities to accept that rock and roll is bigger than football."

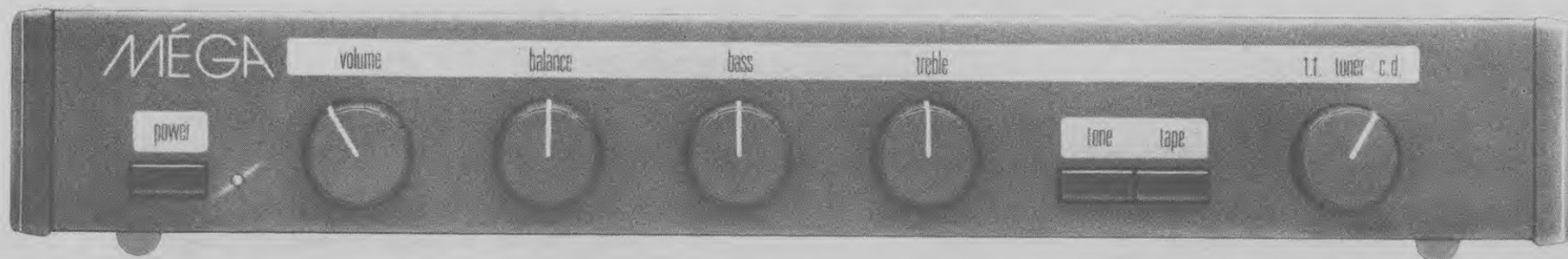
"You have to get back to the fact we're living in a democracy. Aren't the wishes of 65,000 stronger than the inconvenience to a couple of hundred? Living in a big city, we're all faced with inconvenience. I live in Mount Eden — every weekend there are cars parked across my driveway."

There are areas in which concert organisation could be improved, he says, such as patrons parking elsewhere with a bus shuttle service to the ground. "There have been major changes since the Aotea Square riots. Prior to that, rock promoters weren't very successful at communicating with the authorities. The attitude's different now. The Prime Minister declared we had to get together." Lynn has nothing but praise for the two people whose job it is to deal with promoters — Inspector Tim Masters ("a straight shooter, a music buff. It's enjoyable dealing with him.") and Barry Bonner, parks manager for the Auckland City Council. "They have made a major contribution to better communication."

The trouble is that after these concerts the media tends to look at the negative side, not the positive. But look at the evidence, we haven't done much wrong. You've got to equate 65,000 people enjoying themselves, and the only thing wrong was the band occasionally going 5 dB over the acceptable limit. There were no deaths, thank goodness, no cars rolled. How bad is it to pee on the grass?"

Chris Bourke

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