WHAT A LIFE!

ROCK PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY MOTT

17 OCTOBER 2015- 7 FEBRUARY 2016
What a Life!
Rock Photography by Tony Mott

His major exhibition showcases rock’n’roll life — on stage and behind the scenes — captured by Australia’s premier rock photographer Tony Mott over a 30-year career.

Tony Mott got his first break photographing Chrissy Amphlett of Sydney band Divinyls in the early 1980s, and the affable British-born chef quickly established himself as the rock photographer of choice.

Tony’s photographs have appeared in Rolling Stone, Q, Drum Media, RAM, Juice, and other music magazines and street journals, and his shots have illustrated more than 500 singles, EPs and albums.

His portfolio features the biggest names in music, including the Rolling Stones, Björk, Elton John, Nirvana and local acts INXS, Cold Chisel, Midnight Oil, as well as the independent band scene in Sydney.

The exhibition tracks enormous changes in the music industry in Australia: the declining live scene, the drop in music magazine production and the impact of digital technology on the art of rock photography.

The Library has a long tradition of exciting and timely photographic exhibitions, often featuring internationally renowned Australian photographers, many of whom are represented in our collection. We are very proud of our photographic collection, which includes around 1.5 million images and is one of the most significant in Australia.

What a Life! presents the work of an extraordinary photographer who is recognised worldwide. We are indebted to Tony Mott for access to his photographic archive, which curator Louise Tegart has combined with related ephemera from the Library’s collection.

Alex Byrne
NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive
Good Charlotte
2010

Twins Joel and Benji Madden probably didn’t expect to marry stars when they started the band, but they ended up with Nicole Richie and Cameron Diaz. — TM
Rock’n’roll life
The incredible career of Tony Mott

Tony Mott has captured all aspects of rock’n’roll through his camera lens. Having stumbled into his career, he honed his skills at gigs in Sydney, eventually becoming a fixture of the 1980s and 90s music scene.

Born Anthony Moulds in Sheffield, Northern England, in 1956, Tony made his mark at a young age. He spent ten years working in hotels in the UK and Australia, before moving to Sydney in 1981. He has often developed a camaraderie with the artists, documenting their expressions over many years. About 10% of his income has come from record companies and the rest from band commissions.

Shooting stars
Tony’s portrait portfolio from over 3000 sessions features some of the world’s greatest musicians. His ability to establish a rapport — capturing candid shots of often very private stars — shines through in his remarkable photographs.

Live action
When it comes to capturing the intensity of live performance, nothing comes close to the lens of Tony Mott. Recorded music alone can’t convey the dynamism of a live show. It needs images. Live music photography, natural composition and available light dictates the shoot, but there can be lots of faked shots because the artist is constantly moving. Tony aims to show the excitement shared between the band and the audience. As a music fan he hears the music, sees the audience’s reaction and tries to convey the experience.

In the early 1980s, Tony would finish work as a chef at the Euston Hotel in Kings Cross and head out to watch bands. On Monday nights as a regular gig at the nearby Piccadilly Hotel and 28-year-old Tony started to take photos of the band in action. He says it took lead singer Chrissy Amphlett some time to develop into the incredible force of nature she became.

The first time I saw Chrissy Amphlett on stage — not a big noise that closely but surely she became the screaming banshee, wild child act she became famous for. I thought, god that must be bloody difficult to photograph, to capture that.

Divinity manager Vince Lovegrove asked to see Tony’s shots and decided to use one on a poster promoting the band’s upcoming shows. The image was widely used, and he had his break as a rock photographer.

Tony has photographed many musicians before they became famous and gained practice in posing for the camera. His portraits have become the best known images of musicians such as Björk, creating a visual identity that resonates with fans. He has often developed a camaraderie with the artists, documenting their expressions over many years. About 10% of his income has come from record companies and the rest from band commissions.

Tony trained as a French chef and Moving from live photography to portraiture and session work was a difficult to photograph, to capture that. portraiture and session work was a learning curve. The fast-paced when it comes to capturing the intensity of live performance, nothing comes close to the lens of Tony Mott. Recorded music alone can’t convey the dynamism of a live show. It needs images. Live music photography, natural composition and available light dictates the shoot, but there can be lots of faked shots because the artist is constantly moving. Tony aims to show the excitement shared between the band and the audience. As a music fan he hears the music, sees the audience’s reaction and tries to convey the experience.

When he first started out there were no physical barriers between the crowd and the band.

Henry Rollins 1991
Despite the image, Henry is a lovely guy. He’s the most intense performer you are ever likely to see. It’s best not to approach him a good 15 minutes before show time — he will be pumping up the intensity. — TM

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Henry Rollins 1991
Out of New York’s CBGBs scene. Shot at Luna Park. I thought they’d make a great funfair side attraction, so it was the perfect location. — TM

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He could find a vantage point at the front of the stage to capture the spectacle. Later, he gained access to backstage areas where he could experiment with interesting angles, or set up shots with instruments and stage gear. Performance photos were often dominated by the lead singer; backstage, he could compose shots with the full band.

Tony has photographed the multitude of international acts that have visited Australia, from intimate gigs to stadium shows. He has covered the Sydney music scene of the 1980s and 90s, when the city was full of live venues and had a flourishing record industry. As the official photographer with the Big Day Out festival, he went on the road every year, taking close-up shots as well as candid portraits.

With all this experience, and a bit of luck, he can anticipate a moment before it occurs, revealing the performers’ charisma and energy.

Please yourself first

Tony was dragged kicking and screaming into the digital age, only switching to a digital camera in 2008. He didn’t believe digital could achieve the look of film or the grain he wanted for live shots.

When Nikon presented him with a D3 camera, he discovered it was made for live photography. Trying it out at a Judas Priest concert, he shot dozens of good images — with film he might get four great photos and 10 that were usable.

While digital may be cheaper and easier, the thrill of developing film and seeing an image emerge is lost. He goes to a lot of trouble to make digital images look like film, through techniques such as adjusting the white balance. And he still shoots on film when he can.

Rock photographs have become harder to sell now that everyone at a concert has a digital camera or mobile phone. The scene has become more competitive, and skill levels have gone down.

When Tony shot the Red Hot Chili Peppers in 2000 he sold 28 images around the world; when he shot them in 2013 he sold three. He sells images to blogs, but the payment is well below what he used to receive. These days he makes most of his living from film stills. When he worked on his first film, Suburban Mayhem, he had to adjust from the high-adrenaline of live photography to lots of waiting around on set.

A passion for music and photography and good relationships with musicians led to Tony Mott’s success as a rock photographer for over 30 years. He has never lost the excitement of capturing the moment, never stopped learning and lives by the rule Please yourself first. 

Louise Tegart
Exhibition curator
Manager, Exhibitions

Keith Flint, Prodigy 1997
A singer who lends himself to the camera, and a great band to photograph live because they blast forth a palpable visual drama. Prodigy crossed over from the Big Day Out Boiler Room to the rocking main stage.

Tex Perkins
1991
I first started photographing Tex in the late 80s. At that point I didn’t believe live photography was important. So I photographed Tex in the dark room... – TM
Lenny Kravitz 1994
I always thought he was a bit of a Hendrix wannabe. — TM

Michael Jackson 1996
There’s no doubt the King of Pop was in a class of his own for both recording and performance. — TM

Iggy Pop and the Stooges 2006
Iggy Pop and the Stooges came to Australia in 2006 for the Big Day Out. At 59 Iggy outperformed bands that were half his age — both in delivery and energy. He really wants to be your dog. — TM

Johnny Rotten (Lydon), Public Image Limited 1994
Saint Sex Pistol — taken at the Hordern Pavilion in Sydney before stage barriers were introduced, so I had a mass of punks on top of me while shooting. Too much fun, he bought this photo for his biography. — TM

Johnny Cash 1991
The ‘Man in Black’, widely considered one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century. — TM
Possibly the easiest band in the world to photograph. — TM
Read about it — A recollection of the Australian music industry

You rarely know when the moment has passed until it really has. We couldn’t have known as we flew over the blue Pacific for a weekend at Hamilton Island that this would be, as it were, the last drinks. As the plane made its descent, we members of the press planned a decadent weekend on the tab of the brothers Warner. But the days of serious eating were numbered. The occasion was the launch of Jenny Morris’ ‘Moonpyllp’ LP in October 1979. Warner Music and Jenny’s management flew a murderer of rock journalists (if that is the correct collective noun) to Sydney and watch Jenny play a gig. This is how it was always supposed to be, la dolce vita.

A number of stars had aligned in the 1980s. A group of managers had restructured the music industry, taking advantage of the large suburban hotels that were willing to book live music. These managers and, to a certain extent, the record labels began to aggressively pursue international releases for their artists. In the 1980s, INXS, Midnight Oil, Men At Work, Divinyls, Crowded House and the Church all had significant success outside Australia creating alternative media, driving up circulation of music magazines in Sydney. Not only was it plugged in the local scene and broadcasting on radio station 2JJ, going into the local scene and broadcasting the 1980s. A group of managers who documented the glory days.

Music journalism has different facets. There are fanzines created by and for fans. Then comes the free street press. Then the specialist music papers. In Australia that was RAM (Rolling Stone Magazine). And rolling Stone was the self-styled magazine of alternative music culture. The alternative culture created alternative media, including what was known as the ‘underground press’. These fanzines and community papers thrived because, as Bob Dylan famously pointed out, something was happening and the established media didn’t know what it was or how to report it.

For its publisher Jann Wenner, Rolling Stone was more than just a music paper. It saw itself in the tradition of American liberal media such as Esquire, the New Yorker and the left-wing Daily Programe (where Yip Yips he borrowed for the iconic Rolling Stone style).

Another tradition was the music rag — England had NME (New Musical Express) and Melody Maker, which single-mindedly pursued music and cared nothing for the rest of society. Go-Set, established by David Elick and Phillip Fraser in late 1960s Melbourne, was in this vein.

Frazer was the first Australian licensee of Rolling Stone. The first Australian edition, in 1970, was US number 150, with cover features on the Grateful Dead and A Clockwork Orange.

For me, the arrival of Rolling Stone was life-changing. Each alternate Sunday night, I’d go out at midnight and drive my mother’s Beetle to the counter culture. The alternative Media didn’t know what it was called, but there was a newsagent at a city train station where they sometimes unpacked the Monday deliveries early. I was to the eight-hour edge.

But despite my enthusiasm, circulation of music magazines was low. Rolling Stone was doing less than 5000 copies. Fraser eventually sold the Australian licence to Silvertongues, a consortium of leading Australian journalists headed by Fairfax reporter Paul Gardiner. Investors interested in the magazine because of its reputation for the highest quality new journalism. It was the magazine that published Hunter S Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Joe Klein, Timothy Crouse and Truman Capote. Certainly, they did some great new journalism. Gradually music took over. In 1976, Gardiner put Skyhooks on the first Australian-originated cover. Skyhooks was also the first cover of RAM magazine in March 1975. Founded and edited by former ad man Anthony O’Grady, RAM was styled along the lines of NME and Melody Maker. Ed Vennemo’s Juke in Melbourne mirrored RAM in Sydney but that paper never seemed to matter much outside Victoria.

And, in any case, music was about to move to Sydney.

An appetite for Australian music

In the mid 70s Australian music was just starting to come into its own. In 1975, radio station 2JJ went to air in Sydney. Not only was it plugged into the local scene and broadcasting into New Zealand.

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Angry Anderson, Rose Tattoo

A band that commands respect from many overseas bands — they really should have been more successful overseas than they were.

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Craig Bloxom and Mike Weiley, Spy vs Spy

Named after a comic strip in Mad magazine, these guys had a few different incarnations and names: Spy vs Spy, v.Spy v. Spy, and the Spies. They wrote songs about political issues such as homelessness, destruction of heritage buildings and drugs.

Craig Bloxom and Mike Weiley, Spy vs Spy in 1987

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Sydney bands, but Double J had a 'what's on' gig guide every day.

The music papers survived on the smell of ink and an oily rag. Despite low circulation, the magazines gave a narrative to the Australian scene: they taught a flock of music journalists the standard modes of rock'n'roll and the ancillary businesses that sprung up with it. They were as likely to be found in fashion magazines like Stiletto and Foller Me as RAM. Looking back through my papers, I found copies of Egg, a pocket-sized street rag, and the Sydney Shout, which briefly ran a column of mine. In a notebook I found a ledger for August 1981, when I made $525.82 from RAM and the Sydney Shout. The money wasn't great, but one got by on canapes and free beer at record launches at least a couple of times a week. Lotuses were everywhere.

The relationship between bands, the industry and the media was completely intertwined. There was a group of people who lived between Kings Cross and venues in Surry Hills like the City Pub and venues in Surry Hills like the Fadism, the Trade Union Club on Forsyth Street and the Southern Cross Hotel on Elizabeth Street.

In the early 1980s, Christine Weble and Jonathan Morris started Bitele magazine in a warehouse on Liverpool Street. Groups like Do The Hi, I'm Talking, Mechanics, Fleming Hands, INXS, Models and the Rock Toombas had moved away from brute rock, to smoother sounds and dirty jeans. They were as likely to be found in fashion magazines like Stiletto and Foller Me as RAM. Looking back through my papers, I found copies of Egg, a pocket-sized street rag, and the Sydney Shout, which briefly ran a column of mine. In a notebook I found a ledger for August 1981, when I made $525.82 from RAM and the Sydney Shout. The money wasn't great, but one got by on canapes and free beer at record launches at least a couple of times a week. Lotuses were everywhere.

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Most of them were musicians; some were writers like Mark Mordus and Clinton Walker. There were snappers like Tony Mott, Frances Malloy, Kate O’Brien, Wendy McDougall and Ian Greene.

Tony Mott

Tony and Frances were the most involved in the scene and the best hustlers. Tony’s trademark was the wide-angle lens and Frances’s was to tilt the frame at 30 degrees. The first shot I ever bought from Mott was a back-upstage image of Rose Tattoo. Not a great shot of ugly people, but there was a need for pap shots in Rolling Stone’s Random Shots. So I dropped the first frame she made from Mark Foys. His great asset was his personality. That got him access no one else had. Tony was also easy to deal with. His prices were reasonable; he was entertaining and absolutely reliable.

Tony was not a passive snapper, though. If there was a band he liked, he would proselytise on their behalf. I recall being badgered into a story on the Honeys when I had a gut feeling they were not destined for greatness.

The shifting scene

So the reason I was on the plane was that in 1985 the Gardiners gave me a job as music editor of Rolling Stone. INS was about to drop Listen Like Thieves, their big play on the US market. Their management was pressuring me to deliver a Rolling Stone cover. Eventually a portrait of Michael Hutchence was agreed to. It was my first edition and it sold really well. That broke the drought. In the next year the Hoodoo Gurus and Midnight Oil started on Rolling Stone. Looking back on those issues, the review pages were wild and discursive. Bands that had sprung from nowhere got 800 words about their record or about the state of the art. Groups like the Triffids, who sold no LPs at all, could get a long essay which contributed to the legend.

By the mid 80s most of the street press had evaporated under the heat of Margaret and Jenny Colt’s Drum Media. O’Grady had bought from RAM, which went independent but didn’t survive. Stillets went under and Jonathan Morris created a dance version of Drum called 2D World. In 1987 Paul and Jane wanted out of Rolling Stone. An old schoolfriend, Phillip Farrow, suggested we get the licence. A company was formed with Philip and his girlfriend Lesa-Belle Furrhagen and we landed the Australian licence.

We had trigger all idea what we were doing. David Messer, who had landed out the University of Sydney student newspaper Nant Soit, agreed to be art director. The magazine arrived on big pieces of film that were processed in a strange machine that rarely worked. These international pages were supplemented with local ones that were typeset and stuck down with glue before being processed. David did all this with some help.

The first issue was an embarrassment. The second issue featured Mental As Anything on the cover. Anything on the cover and we were off. Some months into the enterprise, John O’Donnell joined as associate editor. Not only could he write, but he would drive to Newcastle with Sky vs Sky in the van.

O’Donnell epitomised the best things in Go rock. Coming from Fairfield in western Sydney, he totally got the Skidmarks but equally got the Go-Betweens and he understood that Cold Chisel was the bridge between those two worlds.

There was a strong commitment to local content, not only music. We improved the art and production, and sales steadily increased. Everything became corporate in the late 80s. Australian bands had real success internationally, but a combination of drug-driving laws, insurance and an ebbing in the talent pool dried up a lot of Sydney music. Things didn’t go well on a personal level and in 1992 Lesa-Belle, O’Donnell and I formed a rival publishing house and launched the magazine Juice.

The music was shifting. It was all Generation X and grunge. The qualities of rock’s classic era were qualities of rock’s classic era were under threat and no one knew how it would turn out. Pop culture magazines were changing around the world. Irreverence was the order of the day in the Gen X years. The idea of a 20,000-word definitive Rolling Stone interview was as popular as polka music. We’d just write way more hop than Rolling Stone and we’d do some amazing issues but, like Derryn and the other magazines we admired, it wasn’t going to work.

In England, Smash Hits’ publisher EMAP launched Q, a glossy magazine dedicated to music and nothing else. Unlike Rolling Stone, which put music at the centre while being engaged with broad cultural issues, the EMAP magazines said “fuck that, we came to dance. Don’t tell us your problems.” EMAP was big on branding and formatting. Long discursive reviews were out. It was a paragraph or two tightly and alphabetically fitted into the grid. The cover lines proclaimed ‘135 CDs Reviewed in this issue’. The numbers were true, but if they reviewed that many CDs they didn’t always have anything interesting to say about them.

End of the glory days

In the early 90s The Big Day Out launched and festivals took off. Heaps of bands for a few dollars. You could go with your pals and see some things you liked, have a snack or a drink, then see some bands for the first time. Individual artists didn’t matter so much, it was the beginning of music as a volume business. That’s not to say there was no good music anymore, but most artists no longer had a career arc. The Eagles had a $50,000-a-year gig, but they could sell 20 million records. Alona Remisauce sold 20 million of her second album and nothing thereafter, the voice of her generation for a minute. I think it was the music Beck who pointed out that in 1990 you could not have predicted the records that would be made in 1970, and in 1970 you could not have predicted punk and disco and the records that would make an impact in 205 could as easily have been made in 2050.
At the Big Day Out in Melbourne in front of an enthusiastic crowd, The Living End’s singer and lead guitarist Chris Cheney was still recovering from a near fatal road accident. He went on to lead the band back to the top. — TM

Everything is available. Then, at the turn of the century, came the internet. As my friend and art director Bruce Daly says, “Today, the internet is not our friend.” Now everyone is a photographer. They can find their own walls and wide-angle lenses. Perhaps there’s a Tony Mott app. Music is everywhere. Everyone is a critic and everyone is a musician, so the world has become flooded with amateurism.

The critical faculty has disappeared under the tyranny of formats and star ratings. So now they don’t even start considering what the artist is on about lyrically or where the music is coming from.

The clumsy reproduction and the formatting of pictures and text are defined by machines and not art directors. The magic of opening a great spread is gone. The editorial voice has become smaller. “Content” is cut and pasted and republished so it’s hard to know the personality of the author.

I miss the days when I had to sneak out in the middle of the night and drive across a sleeping city to get something I valued. But right now there are more Australians doing interesting things around the world than ever before. Maybe authorship isn’t everything.

The internet has not been kind to the record business. There is illegal downloading, and it’s possible for bands to produce their own work and have immediate distribution. We’ve lost the expertise that crafted the Beatles, Pink Floyd and Aretha Franklin.

Today’s proposition is that everyone can express themselves. That’s true. But I’d rather they didn’t. Without the photographers and the writers to turn musicians into gods, we’re surrounded by ordinary men and women.

But this isn’t the end of culture. As my friend Stephen Cummings once sang, “It’s just some magic, there’s still some fun/ If you don’t pay too much attention.”

The trips to Hamilton Island and the lavish launches dried up in the 90s. The money went away. And if everyone is a critic, how will you fit them all on the plane?

Toby Creswell is one of Australia’s most prolific music and popular culture writers and producers. He was the founding editor of Juice magazine and former editor of Rolling Stone Australia. His books include Too Much Ain’t Enough: The Life of Jimmy Barnes, 100 Songs, Love Is in the Air and 100 Greatest Australian Albums (with John O’Donnell and Craig Mathieson). Toby has produced and written a range of films, TV series and documentaries, and won a swag of industry awards.

Cold Chisel 2001
For me, Cold Chisel is Australia’s greatest band ever. After a huge tiff at one of their last gigs the band said they were done. I was lucky enough to get backstage to get these shots of them before they played their final song. — TM

Kasey Chambers 2015
In July 2015 I did a shoot with Kasey Chambers at the State Library. We teamed up with Rolling Stone to show the whole process from shoot to cover. Often, as a photographer, you pick your best shot and then the editor or band management choose it. The next thing you know, the magazine or CD cover comes out and they’ve chosen something different. It’s not always as bad as it sounds — you can be pleasantly surprised. — TM
EVENTS

What a Life! with Tony Mott
THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER, 6 PM
Metcalfe Auditorium
Macquarie St building
$10, bookings essential
Tony Mott has been photographing rock'n'roll life — on stage and behind the scenes — for the past 30 years. He has captured official tours and photo shoots, and witnessed wild after parties and rock's excess! Join Tony as he talks about some of his favourite photos and career highlights.

SATURDAY 28 NOVEMBER, 2 PM
Metcalfe Auditorium
Macquarie St building
$10, bookings essential
Tony Mott has been photographing rock'n'roll life — on stage and behind the scenes — for the past 30 years. He has captured official tours and photo shoots, and witnessed wild after parties and rock's excess! Join Tony at this special event as he talks about some of his favourite photos and career highlights.

Dead or Alive?
SATURDAY 31 OCTOBER, 2 PM – 3 PM
Metcalfe Auditorium
Macquarie St building
Free, bookings essential
It's popularly believed that Sydney and Melbourne's live music scenes have been dying out since the late 1990s. Musician and researcher Sarah Taylor decided to find the truth by mapping information from local gig guides over a 23-year period from 1983 and comparing it with census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Join Sarah for this illustrated talk as she reveals her surprising findings.

Solid Gold
SATURDAY 5 DECEMBER, 2 PM – 3 PM
Metcalfe Auditorium
Macquarie St building
Free, bookings essential
Author Jeff Apter and photographer Phillip Morris reflect on the 1960s and 70s 'golden era' of Australian rock. They discuss their experiences and most recent publications, Tragedy: The Sad Ballad of the Gibb Brothers and It's a Long Way: From ACCA-DACCA to Zappa.

bookings@sl.nsw.gov.au
Telephone: (02) 9273 1770

Marilyn Manson
1997
Introducing himself as Brian, and presenting a box of contact lenses in different colours, he couldn't have been a nicer guy. He doesn't look like any other Brian I've known. TM

AC/DC
2013
You can't help but smile when a 57 year-old man walks on stage in a school uniform and proceeds to duck walk and play 20-minute guitar solos. The fans love it! — TM

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