introduction – know your product

She comes from Ireland, she’s very beautiful
I come from Brisbane, and I’m quite plain
– The Go-Betweens, Lee Remick

If popular music really is a universal language, it’s curious how easily a song – even a commercially obscure one – can come to symbolise a city’s identity. The stories of London, Liverpool, Manchester, Dunedin, Detroit, Memphis, Nashville, New York, New Orleans, San Francisco and Seattle are inextricably entwined with the music made there. Robert Forster, however, could never have imagined that his self-deprecating paean to an actress would become so fabled in his home town.

This is understandable. Queensland’s often stifling subtropical capital doesn’t exactly spring to mind when discussing the world’s great musical cities. Partly this comes down to Australian pop and rock’s poor-relation status next to the United States and the United Kingdom. Inside Australia, too, Brisbane for decades wore a provincial reputation as a big country town, at least in the southern capitals of Sydney and Melbourne.

Of course, one of the most successful bands in recording history began life in Brisbane in the late 1950s. But the
Bee Gees didn’t so much outgrow the city as outgrow Australia. Struggling for recognition, the Brothers Gibb began an exodus of musicians out of the country when they left for their native UK at the beginning of 1967, the year before a peanut farmer, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, took control of Queensland’s ruling Country Party (later the National Party).

The literature on Australian pop is only beginning to accumulate, so again it is understandable that Brisbane, so far, has rated little more than a footnote. The bigger problem is that the footnote has remained the same, recycled in various contexts by various authors: that music in Brisbane – especially the punk scene of the late ’70s – was overwhelmingly a reaction to the repression of the Bjelke-Petersen era.

This is partly true. Bjelke-Petersen’s rule of Queensland between 1968 and 1987 was nothing if not iron-fisted. Public displays of dissent were often brutally suppressed; the rule of law was routinely bent to the will of those charged with its enforcement; minorities were treated as simply another obstacle on the path to development. To top it all off, the electoral system was hopelessly rigged in favour of the incumbents. ‘Here,’ writes Rod McLeod, ‘in a city practically under police curfew, you fucked and fought, got stoned, got married, or got out of town.’

But it makes little sense to give a politician too much credit for the creation of a music scene. Major cultural movements result from an intersection of local, national and international factors. The Saints were not so much a reaction to living in a police state as they were a response to the music of not just the Stooges and the MC5, but the Easybeats and the Missing Links. And it’s doubtful the national success of a string of Brisbane acts in the ’90s – from Powderfinger to George – could have happened without the nationalisation of the Triple J network.

Of course, it would be naive to suggest that growing up in a climate of fear and loathing did not heavily distort the prism through which these artists saw the world. As Saints guitarist
Ed Kuepper says, ‘I think the band was able to develop a more obnoxious demeanour, thanks to our surroundings, than had everyone been really nice.’ In the words of Australian music historian Ian McFarlane, ‘That Australia’s most conservative city should give rise to such a seditious subcultural coterie is a sociological phenomenon yet to be fully explored.’

This book is my attempt to document the substantial yet largely unsung contribution that Brisbane has made both to Australian popular culture and to international popular music. In doing so, I aimed to chart the shifts in musical, political and cultural consciousness that have helped shape the city’s history and identity. In its broadest sense, Pig City is the story of how Brisbane grew up.

Pig City concentrates on the quarter-century from 1975 to 2000. It only touches on the ‘60s and early ‘70s, by way of explaining the convergence of political and cultural forces that began to exert their pull upon the city at the dawn of the punk movement.

By the 1980s National Party campaign billboards featured the benign face of the premier accompanied only by the words ‘Joh’ and ‘Queensland’, so synonymous had the two become. Thus, when the government finally fell in 1989, it marked a divorce that could only be read as a metaphor for broader changes. As novelist Andrew McGahan writes in Last Drinks, his fictionalised account of the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police corruption that eventually resulted in the government’s downfall:

For 30 years those in government and their friends had, in looking after their own interests, kept Brisbane frozen in time. The city was caught in the perpetual twilight of the 1950s, as though the ‘60s and ‘70s that had wrought so much havoc around the rest of the world had quietly passed Brisbane by. But it couldn’t have remained frozen that way forever. Even if
the Inquiry hadn’t come along and split the state apart, something else would have given somewhere. But because it had all been dammed up and fettered for so long, it meant that when finally the regime did fall, decades of pent-up energy burst forth in a fury. It wasn’t simply a generational change. It was an explosion.3

As it happened, the state election of 2 December 1989 coincided with the second Livid Festival. Away from the bands, a crowd of punters gathered around a single black and white television to watch as the results poured in. The city’s youth had always reserved a special place in their hearts for the National Party: when it was announced from the main stage that the government had been overthrown, the answering roar was just about the loudest thing heard all day.

The first Livid Festival, held on 21 January 1989, was a circuit-breaker for Brisbane. Featuring a line-up consisting almost entirely of expatriate Brisbane artists, it emphasised the unusual strength of the connection between the city and its music scene. ‘We had some really great home-grown stuff, and we wanted to bring it all back, put it together and have a best of Brisbane,’ festival producer Peter Walsh says. Queensland is a parochial place, and not just about its football teams.

Truly universal pop songs, though, may as well come from outer space. Savage Garden, for example, grew up in the city’s working-class southern outskirts, something that had no discernible impact on their sound. Yet when the pop duo played the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sydney 2000, they were heralded as municipal ambassadors at home. For Darren Hayes, however, playing to a worldwide audience from the biggest stage in the world was simply the fulfilment of a childhood ambition:

I just know that ever since I was about 12 or 13 I’ve had this vision of standing on a stage in front of about 80,000 people. I
sometimes wonder if, when I get there, I’ll actually like it, but it’s necessary. For whatever reason, I have to follow this through to its logical conclusion. I can’t see any other way.

In a book of this scope, many worthy performers have inevitably fallen through the cracks. *Pig City* was never intended to be an encyclopaedia of Brisbane bands. Nevertheless I have tried to give space to those groups who, while not being afforded wider recognition, succeeded in leaving their mark. To have excluded the likes of Razar and the Parameters for the perfectly sound reason that relatively few people even inside Brisbane have ever heard of them would not only have been neglectful of their contributions, it would have been an abrogation of this book’s purpose.

While history’s light always shines most brightly on the successful and the influential, *Pig City* at least attempts to place their achievements within the context of their surroundings, and to provide a glimpse into the soul of a town that, for all its banality, unwittingly tilled the soil of its very own rock & roll creation.
pineapples from the dawn of time

(1971–1979)
The fist made a sound like two footy boots smacking together and the blood spurted and the student went down, and the line of police blue seemed to smile benignly.

— Pat Burgess

When the charge came, it was as unexpected as it was brutal. As the police stormed over Wickham Terrace with batons raised, protesters paused in shock, frozen for an agonised second, caught as their minds instructed their bodies to fight or flee. Many were inexperienced campaigners at their first demonstration.

Steve Gray was not one of them, though. He’d been here before, been at this very spot the previous evening, when nothing untoward had happened. Restless, he’d been cruising around the scene, cheekily pointing out the undercover officers mingling among the crowd. But now things were serious. With the screaming crowd breaking up all around him, he fled down the hill into the darkness.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, Gray paused over the steep drop as two friends rushed to join him. Some jumped heedlessly; others turned towards the rocky face and clambered down. Most just slid on their backsides. Small and agile, Gray negotiated the small cliff-face with ease, but one of his friends
fell, twisting an ankle. Moving more slowly, they soldiered on towards the brightly lit Roma Street markets.

Once safely inside the maze of alleyways, the trio relaxed, and began making their way back to the safety of Toowong. Rounding a corner, they almost collided with three heavy, brown-shirted police officers. Quick as a snake, one of them grabbed Gray by the hair. Twisting its length around his wrist, he hoisted his slightly built opponent to eye level.

‘Bang. Bang. Bang,’ said the sergeant. ‘If I ever see you at a demonstration again, I’m going to kill you.’

It’s both an understatement and a cliché to say that Queensland is different. Peter Charlton wrote a book trying to explain why in 1983. He came up with two words: ‘Distance. Climate.’ It is indeed an enormous state: from the capital, it is nearly a 24-hour drive north to Cairns, even further west to Birdsville. It’s also hot: even Brisbane, in the south-east corner of the state, endures a prolonged summer in which the mercury hovers around 30°C for five months or more. Winter days, if they can be labelled as such, average around 20°C.

More to the point, as any southern visitor will moan, it’s bloody humid. From September onwards, thick black thunderheads form over the MacPherson and Main Ranges to the south-west before dumping huge amounts of rainfall over the city. With the humidity comes a certain sluggishness, and it’s equally a cliché to observe that isolated cities in warm climates move at a slower pace than elsewhere. While fostering a more casual attitude to clothing and a laid-back demeanour, such places also tend to be conservative, slower to warm to new ideas.

But Brisbane made an early exception for rock & roll. In February 1958 Buddy Holly played three of his six Australian shows at the Cloudland Ballroom. The same year the Bee Gees arrived in Australia from the Isle of Man and began performing anywhere they were allowed, including the
television program *Brisbane Tonight*. Another teenage guest was one Little Rock Allen, later known as Billy Thorpe. After both the Bee Gees and Thorpe moved on to seek their fortunes elsewhere, the Beatles’ Festival Hall show in June 1964 provided an infinitely bigger jolt to the city’s youth culture.

For a few short years the doors of the city’s clubs were thrown open to rock & roll bands. The best of them was, unquestionably, the Purple Hearts. Playing a brash, uncompromising brand of R&B – their name was derived not from the war medal but from the uppers favoured by English mods – the band’s tough sound was easily the equal of the early Master’s Apprentices and even Sydney’s Missing Links, whose song Wild About You the Saints would, years later, cover on their debut album.

But with less than an album’s worth of material released during their entire existence, the Purple Hearts lack the recording history of the few breakout Australian acts of the ’60s. After moving to Melbourne, the band broke up in January 1967, their promise largely stillborn.

Queensland had been ruled since 1957 by Country Party leader Frank Nicklin, a farmer, teetotaller and Methodist preacher. It was a background shared by many of his colleagues and, indeed, the Labor opposition of the time. Queensland politics was peculiarly rural in outlook, with the Country Party (renamed the National Party in 1973) the dominant conservative coalition partner over the city-based Liberals. Such remains the case today; the reverse, of course, applies in all other Australian states.

The sharpest illustration of the primacy of the bush in Queensland political life was the infamous gerrymander, introduced not by the Country Party but by Ned Hanlon’s Labor government in 1949. In fact, the term gerrymander was something of a misnomer. A gerrymander represents the drawing of electoral boundaries in a way that serves the
interests of the governing party. This certainly took place in Queensland, but it was the malapportionment, which meant that one vote in the west of the state was worth up to three in Brisbane, that was the critical issue.

The ‘malamander’ was designed to prevent the metropolitan zones, which held the largest number of voters, from dictating political terms to those in the regions. It did more than that: for four decades the malamander ensured the vast, sparsely populated territory west of the Great Dividing Range lorded it over the populous cities. Originally the malamander had advantaged the Labor incumbents it was meant to serve; when the disastrous Labor Party split of 1957 handed government to the Country Party, the situation was reversed.

After further tweaking the electoral system to their own benefit, the Country/National Party found itself able to secure a majority of seats in parliament even if it polled the lowest percentage of primary votes. Over time, this reduced both the Labor and Liberal parties to virtual irrelevancy and laughing-stock status.

Having the seat of power lying out beyond the black stump threw up some interesting parliamentary statistics. By the late ’70s the members of the National Party cabinet all shared very similar backgrounds. All were men, hailing from the bush or small country towns. All had worked in the primary industries sector before entering politics. None had undertaken tertiary studies; many, including the premier, had barely progressed beyond primary school. All were married and had raised their children long before the social challenges of the ’60s and ’70s.

For much of the 20th century, education in Queensland was chronically neglected. Between 1919 and 1939, the textbooks in the small number of secondary schools remained unchanged; between 1924 and 1952, not a single new high school was built in Brisbane. The men ruling the state were the products of this system and the inheritors of its failings. As Peter Charlton observes, ‘It explains much of the state’s
conservatism, suspicion and resistance to change. It also accounts for the nickname given to Queensland by many commentators: the Deep North.

The anti-intellectualism of the government and the poor education levels of its representatives meant Queensland, and Queenslanders, became a frequent target of ridicule and derision in the south. A former lecturer in education, Rupert Goodman, remarked in 1969:

> The rest of Australia thinks Queensland is a hillbilly state and that we’re an uncultured mob. Frankly there’s a lot of truth in that. You only have to look at most of our politicians and listen to them in debate. Unqualified, unskilled, untrained, and undereducated, many of them repeat themselves, have bad diction, poor language, are unable to think on their feet or get any message across simply or succinctly.  

For many Queensland voters, however, such bumbling was endearing. When one considers the comet-like rise and fall of Pauline Hanson, whose One Nation party achieved its most spectacular success in the Queensland state election of 1998, it still is. It means the politicians are never too far above their masters. As Andrew McGahan writes:

> Queenslanders were always wary of the more sophisticated types – they liked their representatives to be awkward and stumbling. They mistook it for honesty. So much so that the Queensland parliament sometimes bordered on a sideshow collection of the ugly, the misshapen and the incoherent.

The New Left movement of the late ’60s was galvanised in Queensland by the intertwined issues of the Vietnam War, conscription and civil liberties. Before this time, as historian Ross Fitzgerald points out, public marches were rarely used as tools of political action. After the first conscription demonstrations were held at Monash University in Melbourne
in 1965, however, they were to become a regular feature of Queensland life.

**Ed Kuepper (The Saints):** There were other things that linked people together in those days [besides music]. Politics was an important area. Australia was still involved in the Vietnam War, so the moratorium marches were a big thing. You’d meet people – they became social events as well as being expressions of political consciousness.

But to protest in Queensland usually meant committing a crime. Under the Traffic Act, police permits were required to hold meetings, to march along any road, and to carry and display placards. (Placard permits came at the additional fee of $1.) Permits could be refused without reason, although appeals against refusal could be argued before a magistrate.

On 5 October 1966, 26 people were arrested during an anti-conscription demonstration. Marches had been held in capital cities elsewhere throughout Australia on that day without incident. This set the tone for subsequent events, conjoining the issues of the rights to free speech and free assembly with anti-Vietnam sentiment.

The radical movement found a natural haven in the sprawling, leafy surrounds of the University of Queensland in the inner western suburb of St Lucia. In 1967 two groups were formed on campus: the Civil Liberties Co-ordinating Committee and the Society for Democratic Action. From these two groups came the nucleus of students that would establish community radio station 4ZZZ in the ’70s.

**Alan Knight (4ZZZ):** There were two things that influenced us. We were culturally influenced by the whole rock music explosion; the Beatles and things like that. But we were also to an extent influenced by the hippies. So you had this mixture of rock music, psychedelic drugs and ultra-leftist politics, which led to a lot of very strange demonstrations.
By 1966, however, the initial spark of the post-Beatles boom had faded. The biggest new band in Brisbane was Bay City Union, led by Matt Taylor, later the leader of Chain (Bay City Union also featured latter-day Master’s Apprentices bass player and prominent manager Glenn Wheatley). But with only one single to their credit, Bay City Union’s résumé was even thinner than that of the Purple Hearts. The band split in 1968.

Brisbane was dull. The city simply shut down on weekends. The saying used to go that on Sundays you could have fired a cannon down Queen Street in the city centre and not hit anyone or anything. For young people, the prevailing atmosphere was a fetid, fermenting mixture of enervating heat, boredom and unrelieved tension.

Two noted radicals, Mitch Thompson and Brian Laver, found a novel way of releasing the pressure, staging multimedia extravaganzas at the old Communist Party headquarters at Brisbane Trades Hall, near Central Station. These Sunday-evening speakeasies were named Foco, a Cuban–Spanish word meaning guerrilla encampment.

**Brian Laver:** We wanted to politicise people, we weren’t just about providing entertainment. But the formula worked, I think, because there was nothing to do on a Sunday night, it was boring as shit, and so people mobilised in their hundreds. I don’t think there would have been a time where we had less than 500 people.

The shows were a melange of live music, theatre, film, food, poetry and debate spread among the venue’s rooms, with bands sharing the main hall with theatre group Tribe, featuring a young Geoffrey Rush. But as Foco grew – to the point of regularly attracting turn-away crowds – it inevitably became a political target. When an MP claimed it was a distribution centre for illegal drugs, the end was near.
John Stanwell (4ZZZ): It became a real threat, because good middle-class kids were going to see it. So the [authorities] basically smashed it. They set it up with a drug scare on a night where we had brought up a band from Melbourne, the Wild Cherries, which was our biggest financial exposure, and it bankrupted it.

The Wild Cherries had formed in 1964 as a jazz combo, but they had been transformed into a relentless psychedelic outfit by the arrival of former Purple Hearts guitarist Lobby Loyde in 1967. Soon after, Loyde joined the Aztecs, fronted by another Brisbane expatriate, Billy Thorpe, with whom he explored a harder blues-based sound.

During the same period two of the remaining Purple Hearts returned to Brisbane, forming a new band, the Coloured Balls. The band gigged around the city until 1969 without committing anything to vinyl. It wasn’t until February 1972 that Loyde, who had remained in Melbourne, took the name for a new version of the group, releasing the cult classic Ball Power the following year. But by then the bottom had long since fallen out of the beginnings of an original music scene in Brisbane.

Ed Kuepper: There wasn’t anything happening musically to speak of. It was an incredibly dead scene. It seemed unbearable to me at the time. Bands that were working were doing covers of Deep Purple, which I found pathetic. I had nothing but total contempt for that area of musical existence. There was just nothing.

If inspiration were to be found, it would have to come from elsewhere.

Frank Nicklin retired from politics in January 1968. His long-serving deputy, Jack Pizzey, was elected unopposed
as Country Party leader and premier. The deputy leadership was contested by three men: Ron Camm, the Minister for Main Roads; Lands Minister Alan Fletcher; and the Minister for Works and Housing, 57-year-old Johannes Bjelke-Petersen. Although little known in the wider electorate and not highly regarded either inside or outside his own party, Bjelke-Petersen was a shrewd numbers man, and he won the job, along with the additional portfolios of Aboriginal affairs and police. When Jack Pizzey dropped dead of a heart attack six months later, Bjelke-Petersen, against all expectations, was elected unopposed as premier.

Born in 1911 in New Zealand to Danish immigrants, Joh Bjelke-Petersen had a difficult early life. His family moved to Queensland three years after his birth, settling on a farm (later named Bethany) outside Kingaroy, near the Bunya Mountains north-west of Brisbane. With his father frail and his family extremely poor, farm duties were left largely to Joh.

His older brother, Christian, was studious and sensitive, with no taste for the backbreaking labour of farm work. He later died at the age of 22. Joh maintained that the stomach ulcers that cut Christian down were brought on by too much study, a telling assessment.7 Joh was a doer, not a thinker, with no time for abstract philosophy or cultural pursuits, unless it involved spreading the good news of his strict Lutheran faith.

A bout of childhood polio briefly slowed Joh down, leaving him with one leg half an inch shorter than the other. But he was made of sterner stuff than his brother, and at 13 he left school to work the farm full-time, dreaming of lifting his family from poverty. He was convinced that his faith and, above all, hard work would reward him.

I was filled with a tremendous desire and a tremendous determination to work and to strive and to overcome the problems
that confronted my parents and I was encouraged by my mother who worked long hours . . . We had extreme poverty but I was rich in that my parents gave me a deep understanding of spiritual things by their lives and their influence.8

This Calvinist outlook of ‘hard work = money = success = salvation’ accounts for Bjelke-Petersen’s fanatical pursuit of state development while premier.9 Whether it was the drilling of oil on the Great Barrier Reef or the tearing down of historic buildings, Bjelke-Petersen was not about to let arcane concerns about conservation and heritage get in the way of the more important business of wealth creation.

It also explains his passionate pursuit of unfettered free enterprise and his hatred of anything that smacked of socialism. After entering parliament in 1947 as the member for Nanango, Bjelke-Petersen’s maiden speech – indeed, almost all his speeches – stressed the freedom to develop without any kind of regulation from the state. Instead he attacked the evils of drinking, gambling (including the broadcasting of horse-racing), imported films and working on the Sabbath.

After becoming premier, Bjelke-Petersen retained the police portfolio, vowing to make law and order his own personal crusade. He was less concerned about the allegations of official corruption swirling around the force. A tightly controlled Royal Commission held over the summer of 1963–64 had turned up nothing, but then, the government was in the force’s pocket. Journalist Evan Whitton characterises the relationship in these terms: ‘you stand for law and order; we are your loyal spear-carriers in this unending battle; an attack on the force, or individuals therein, is an attack on you and your policies’.10 This mutual agreement would ultimately benefit both parties.

Bjelke-Petersen had been a vocal critic of the gerrymander during his time on the opposition benches. Once in power, he became its staunchest defender, further manipulating the system to his advantage. ‘We believe,’ he said in a statement
thick with unintended irony, ‘in the rights of the minority as well as the rights of the majority.’

A more humorous but revealing comment on Bjelke-Petersen’s attitude to democracy came from a National Party conference in July 1977. Rebuking the prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, for criticising the South African apartheid regime, Bjelke-Petersen offered the following: ‘We have got to get away from talking about majority rule – it just doesn’t add up.’

The real genesis of this story lies not in the foundations set down by any band, but in the unlikely shape of a sporting tour by the South African rugby union team in the winter of 1971.

The Springbok tour came amid a rising tide of condemnation of South Africa’s apartheid laws, and their arrival in Australia was met with fierce demonstrations, which rolled continuously as the team and their entourage were hounded from state to state. Matches in Melbourne and Sydney were interrupted as protesters invaded the pitch. Hundreds more in the stands blew whistles similar to those used by the referees, turning the games into high farce.

Bjelke-Petersen was at the low ebb of his early premiership. The previous October, he had survived a challenge from within his own ranks by a solitary vote, his own. He was perceived, even within his own party, as a wowser and a country bumpkin. Further, both he and his ministers were under pressure over conflict of interest allegations in relation to their numerous share portfolios, in particular with mining giant Comalco, and Bjelke-Petersen’s defensive media handling of the issue saw him branded a weak and ineffective leader.

The Springbok tour gave the premier the law-and-order ticket he needed to banish that perception for good. His proclamation of a month-long state of emergency caused immediate uproar: the suspension of civil liberties and the
granting of extraordinary (and unspecified) police powers on the pretext of protecting a visiting football team from political dissenters was unprecedented. It earned the premier the nickname Jack Boots Bjelke.

The result was predictable. Protests against the tour were further inflamed, and the government itself became the target, with 40 unions declaring an immediate 24-hour strike. With the government preparing to go to two by-elections, Bjelke-Petersen wasted no time in linking the unions (and by extension the ALP) to anarchy in the streets. No one, however, foresaw the level of force with which the protests would be crushed.

The Springboks finally arrived in Brisbane on 22 July. They were greeted outside their lodgings, the Tower Mill Motel, by about 300 demonstrators and an equivalent number of police. The standoff did not prevail long: after just 15 minutes, police charged the crowd, scattering them into Wickham Park below. Many were assaulted. But they were not easily dissuaded.

**Alan Knight:** What you’ve got to understand with these demos, they didn’t last for an hour or so. They went for days, in the face of this police violence. People just kept coming back. They’d get biffed or roughed up and then they’d come back later on.

Demonstrations began again the following morning, and ended in a stalemate when staff from the Holy Spirit Hospital, next door to the motel, complained to police that noise levels were disturbing patients. A silent vigil ensued and eventually the crowd dispersed peacefully, although some remained through the night. It was the next day – Saturday 24 July, the day of the Springboks’ first match – that was to bring matters to a head.

The premier issued a warning. ‘I would not be surprised if the demonstrators open a new line of attack. I have heard that it could be rough in the streets today.’

The proclamation of the state of emergency had enabled the
government to move the match from the scheduled venue of Ballymore Oval in Herston to the Royal National Association showgrounds in Bowen Hills. Surrounded by high walls and topped with barbed wire, the fortress-like showgrounds were considered the better venue to deter protesters. Thus, instead of targeting the game, between 1500 and 2000 demonstrators assembled in Victoria Park opposite the grounds before marching slowly up to Wickham Terrace, eventually camping themselves once again at the foot of the Tower Mill in the gathering darkness of the late afternoon.

Commensurate with the Saturday crowd, the police ranks had swelled to an intimidating 500, not just uniformed and plain-clothes ranks from the city, but country ‘brownshirts’, bussed in as reinforcements by the police commissioner, Ray Whitrod. Among the crowd were two young law students, future Queensland premier Peter Beattie and barrister and civil libertarian Terry O’Gorman. For both, what transpired that evening proved to be a pivotal event in their lives.

**Terry O’Gorman:** It was my involvement as a legal observer [of the demonstration] that was my introduction to the whole scene. I remember after the police charge a particular law student who was organising the legal observers came back, thoroughly traumatised by it. Prior to that I’d come from a very Catholic, Christian Brother, right-wing education and family background. So, from that point of view, it was fairly formative.

Wickham Terrace winds along the northern ridge overlooking Brisbane’s central business district, lined by upmarket hotels and medical clinics. Opposite the Tower Mill lies Wickham Park. Fringed by gigantic Moreton Bay fig trees, it slopes steeply down towards Albert Street, which runs directly through the city heart, and the Roma Street markets. At the lower end of the park was a small cliff-face, now a stone wall up to four metres in height. The terrain would put the protesters at an unusual disadvantage.
At five o’clock, Whitrod gave a statement to the crowd: ‘There will be no action from police as a group if you move back to the white line, except that there can be individual police action if necessary and in the event of large police action reasonable notice will be given.’ This pronouncement did nothing to quell the thickening knot of fear rising in the stomachs of the protesters.

Steve Gray (4ZZZ): Moving through the crowd, you could spot the plain-clothes police. The demonstrators were chanting ‘Paint them black and send them back,’ and this busload of cops pulls up. And they get off the bus and start chanting back, ‘Paint them red and shoot them dead.’ So, not surprisingly, the tension started to rise on both sides of the street.

At 6.54pm, minutes before footage of the protest would go live around Australia courtesy of ABC news, Whitrod told his men to ‘move to the other side of the road’.

As commissioner, Whitrod did not enjoy the support of his rank and file. Police Minister Max Hodges had brought in the well-educated South Australian a year earlier after convincing Bjelke-Petersen that he risked being dragged under by the still-circulating rumours of official corruption. Whitrod thus had a brief to reform the force, but his prosecution of some police for malpractice earned him the enduring enmity of not only the powerful police union, but the premier as well.

Whitrod was also regarded as a soft touch on students, preferring conciliation and dialogue to force. Only the previous day the country police he had brought in for the occasion had passed a motion of no confidence in him. Thus the proposed orderly move forward – intended by Whitrod simply to move the demonstrators off the road to the opposite footpath – did not eventuate. The violence of the subsequent charge caught even seasoned protesters by surprise.

John Stanwell: These were the country cops who were
brought in, with the old [khaki] uniform. They’d been brought in especially for the football game by this new commissioner who was regarded as a pinko liberal bed-wetter, and basically they broke ranks and went berserk. We were cannon fodder.

The protesters immediately found themselves being forced down the hill into Wickham Park as baton-wielding police wrought their vengeance. More police were waiting in the park. As the panicked mob fled towards them, they sprung from the shadows of the trees, tackling and clobbering anyone within reach. Those that evaded the ambush were forced to scramble or jump down the cliff-face as the police gave chase.

Lindy Morrison (The Go-Betweens): It radicalised everybody... What I remember most vividly is the actual fear, of running away from police with batons, and seeing them bashing friends. Whoever stumbled and fell got heavily beaten, and all of us were too scared to stop and help.

Peter Beattie: It’s one of those indelible things imprinted in my mind about oppression, about violence, about excessive power. I ran down to Trades Hall and I remember trying to do the gentlemanly thing by letting some of the women in first, and I got beaten up for my trouble.

That same day, the two by-elections were held. The government won both. One seat, Maryborough, had been a Labor stronghold for 56 years; the other, Merthyr, was situated only a few kilometres away from the violence at Tower Mill.

Bjelke-Petersen’s leadership would not be challenged again for another 16 years.