



'The show *has* to happen and they'll do whatever it takes for that to happen.'

JIMMY BARNES

ROADIES

— THE SECRET HISTORY OF —
AUSTRALIAN ROCK'N'ROLL

STUART COUPE

II

Elvis, The Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd . . . and Lou Reed

Not many people can be at the end of a three-hour conversation about their life in rock'n'roll and just throw in – almost as an afterthought – the line, ‘I managed Lou Reed for a little while.’ Bill McCartney can. He worked on the road with Elvis Presley, was the Australian production manager for The Rolling Stones on their 1973 tour, just avoided being on the plane that crashed and killed the key members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, and did a stint in New York trying to look after the notoriously difficult-to-manage Lou Reed. Not bad for a guy who started as a roadie with bands around Melbourne in 1967.

McCartney grew up in Glenroy, part of a migrant family. He recalls that Angry Anderson (who at the time had shoulder-length hair) and his band used to rehearse nearby, while Joe Camilleri was around the corner – something he remembers because ‘Joe had a very attractive sister’.

It was while doing an apprenticeship as a mechanic that McCartney came into the orbit of music and bands, and for a number of years he did roadie work as well as learning a trade.

‘With mechanics in those days you learnt everything,’ he says. ‘They made actual parts and didn’t just replace parts. These were skills that helped me a lot later on.’

One of the other mechanics was the drummer for The Chessmen, the band that backed the then rock’n’roll and later country singer Johnny Chester. The band had an impressive claim to fame: they’d supported The Beatles on their Australian tour.

McCartney went along to a few gigs with them and ‘caught the bug’, starting to cart gear around for them and other bands, such as The Nova Express, on the fringe of the Melbourne scene. Things evolved from there. ‘For some reason I seemed to find myself doing all the pop groups that no one else wanted to do, bands like Zoot and later The Mixtures. I didn’t mind this, because they made money and could pay their bills, which therefore meant paying me. And with the pop bands it was easier, as they usually didn’t have things like Hammond organs.

Before working with those bands, McCartney owned the truck, but he wasn’t getting paid because there wasn’t enough money coming in. ‘But it was an adventure. And a busy one, particularly with a very popular band like Zoot, who played constant gigs.

‘It could easily be four gigs in a day. That might start with a show at the ice-skating rink at Ringwood at one o’clock in the afternoon, then we’d go to Mentone for an early session at the drive-in, then we’d drive to Werribee and be the opening act for a gig down there, and then to Q Club to do a spot, and then maybe something later in the city. That sort of work schedule really made you close with the band, because if you weren’t really on top of everything, then things didn’t happen.’

McCartney quickly became part of the family of Melbourne roadies. It was a comparatively small band of guys, and everyone knew and helped each other out. ‘Usually on a Sunday everyone would go to Bertie’s and hang out and help whoever was working load-out. If you were there, that was the done

thing – you helped out. You didn't even think about it. And that attitude stayed right through when I started working with international acts.'

By 1970 McCartney had finished his apprenticeship. As well as road crew work, he was doing a spot of earthmoving to bring in some money. Then he was offered work on some early international tours, including one by the American bubblegum pop band 1910 Fruitgum Company. The support bands included Zoot and The Mixtures; McCartney thinks they were offered shows so the headliner could use their gear. The tour was being partially sponsored by TAA airlines, so there was a lot of loading in and out of planes around the country.

After that, McCartney found himself being offered an array of astonishing work opportunities, including the early 1970s Australian tour by Pink Floyd. There was Manfred Mann, again with Spectrum on the bill – more for the use of their equipment than the need to sell extra tickets. Throw in Free, Deep Purple and the like.

There were lots of shows at Festival Hall – which McCartney refers to as Festering Hall. 'The venue had the most basic of equipment, very rudimentary. The sound system was designed for boxing, and the ring for that was in the middle of the room, so they weren't in any way designed for concerts.'

The tours kept rolling along. Cliff Richard, Cat Stevens, Rod Stewart and The Faces – as well as the cream of them all in that era, The Rolling Stones. McCartney was the production manager. In those days the Stones were far less aloof than today, and McCartney was not alone among the crews on that tour who had a lot of interaction with the band.

'In Perth, I'm sitting there mixing the support act and Charlie Watts is over my shoulder watching and listening. Mick and Charlie, in particular, were very approachable. They were just lads having fun.'

This was the tour when, according to McCartney, Mick Jagger – although some claim it was Keith Richards – came up to legendary electrician and stutterer Peter Wilson and asked about the weather. Wilson famously replied, ‘M-m-m-might r-r-r-rain, m-m-m-might n-n-n-n-not.’

Looking back, McCartney recalls all these tours as fun – lots of fun – and, obviously, hard work. ‘You were doing things you’d never done before. That was the whole attraction. The hard work was just what you did.’

In early 1974 McCartney went to Asia with Rod Stewart and The Faces, playing shows in Hong Kong and Tokyo. He’d been invited to work on that tour by the pioneering and hugely innovative sound guy Bruce Jackson, among other things the founder of Jands. While in Tokyo, Jackson asked McCartney if he wanted to continue on to the States and do some work with him on a few Elvis Presley dates. ‘They were very short tours, maybe 20 shows in 18 days. But that was the longest tour Elvis ever did. And I did a shorter one with him too.’

The fist gig was at Oral Roberts University. Oral Roberts was a preacher who had built a university from the donations he’d solicited, and Elvis was playing the campus auditorium. ‘I almost got into serous trouble at this gig because we’d been told not to get up on the stage. Anyway, one of Elvis’s microphones stopped working during the show and I didn’t even think. My way of doing things in Australia just came to the fore and I hopped up onstage to fix it. I looked up and there’s Elvis looking at me. So I fixed the mic and came back to the side of the stage, and had shit poured on me from all the people around Elvis. I went home from the venue that night really pissed off. I mean, you didn’t exactly have a surplus of microphones in those days. When we pulled in to the next gig, everyone’s being very nice to me, and I couldn’t understand why. Then finally someone told me that Elvis had liked what I’d done and so it was all okay. But I made sure I never got up onstage with him again.’

McCartney had the briefest of contact with Elvis on the tours. 'He shook my hand at the start of the tour and shook it again at the end.'

There were many upsides to working with Elvis, not just the money. 'I put a truck on its side in a ditch in Pennsylvania. Basically I fell asleep. Eventually a state trooper came over, and as soon as he saw I was with Elvis he flagged down another truck, got it to turn around and come back and pulled me out. I handed him a few souvenirs from the truck. That happened a few times. I got pulled over for speeding once, but again, as soon as they found out I was with Elvis – *and* Australian – they let me go. A lot of servicemen who had been in Australia during the Vietnam War and had been treated well were now with the police force.'

Aside from these perks and bits of luck, the pay working for Elvis was something McCartney had never experienced in Australia: \$100 a gig – and in American dollars. That was huge, crazy money by Australian standards: \$2000 American dollars for a short tour.

After Elvis, McCartney – who was still only 25 – travelled to the United Kingdom and worked with the likes of Procol Harum, The Faces again and, well, anything. He was doing okay but didn't have any real savings, so he had to keep the money coming in.

Then McCartney started working with Peter Rudge, the man tour-managing the Stones in 1973 and whose clients now included Lynyrd Skynyrd and the 16-year-old Tanya Tucker. McCartney had played Rudge the Australian country rock band The Dingoes, who subsequently joined Rudge's roster.

McCartney also looked after Lynyrd Skynyrd on their first European tour, and continued working with them in the States. There were always visa issues, and McCartney was careful about never overstaying his. He recalls a bus driver for Lynyrd Skynyrd going into Canada and being stopped on the way

back into North America because of an outstanding warrant. McCartney tried to start the tour bus but couldn't get it in reverse due to the heavy snow and sleet. Eventually he went back into the customs and immigration people and persuaded them to briefly bring out the arrested bus driver to show him how to get the vehicle into reverse, after which McCartney somehow managed to drive to the next gig.

With The Dingoes' star on the ascendancy, McCartney toured with them through the latter part of 1977, before they were to join Lynyrd Skynyrd as their support act. McCartney arrived in Austin, Texas, two days before that leg began.

'I drove into Austin and was setting The Dingoes' gear up, as they had a gig there. I'd done a lot of gigs with Southern acts and people in Austin knew me. I was doing my stuff and noticed that everyone was really quiet, and I asked what was wrong. Someone asked if I'd heard the news, which I obviously hadn't. They told me that the Lynyrd Skynyrd plane had gone down that morning.

'The Dingoes just came to a screaming halt in America after that, because most of the tour was supporting Lynyrd Skynyrd. But boy, I was just lucky. If I hadn't gone on ahead, I probably would have travelled on the plane with Ronnie Van Zant and the others, as we hadn't seen each other for a year or so, and since I'd last worked with them they'd become big stars.'

McCartney also worked on Skyhooks' tentative and ultimately unsuccessful foray into America. Australian crew member Michael Oberg came with them and was doing lights, but McCartney recalls that the rest of a skeleton crew was picked up in America.

'I got into trouble with management after I cancelled a show. We were opening for someone and we were given such a small part of the stage to perform on, and it was a very high stage. What use was a singer with a broken leg or worse, as Shirley Strachan moved around a lot. So I pulled the show. Michael

Gudinski wasn't happy but as far as I was concerned, I was the production manager and the safety of the band and crew was my responsibility.'

Next McCartney found himself in New York City managing Lou Reed, a relationship that went back a few years to when McCartney had worked on Reed's first Australian tour. This was the period when Reed was being particularly difficult. He'd recorded *Metal Machine Music*, the double album of electronic noise made to piss off his record company. It had done just that, as well as alienating his diminishing fan base.

'It was just severe babysitting,' McCartney recalls of this period. 'I was stuck in the Gramercy Park Hotel, which wasn't what it is today, doing it by myself. He was living with his transgender partner, Rachel, who I got on fantastically with, although I was well aware of the rather long flick knife she carried with her. But I had to go. I could see the end of the money coming. There was enough to keep Lou going, but I had to tell his lawyers, who I was working with, that it was pointless. He wasn't about to go back into the studio.'

McCartney returned to Australia, before going on to forge an extremely successful career in Asia, working on shows like David Bowie's Serious Moonlight Tour, and then moving into event-styled shows both there and in Europe. He was involved in building stages and roofs throughout Asia in locations that didn't have them, and where it wasn't practical to freight them in and out.

After this, McCartney moved to work on David Copperfield's productions, which he did for many years, taking in seasons in South Africa, Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, China and Russia. He would still be doing it if he hadn't come back to Australia to look after his ailing parents. McCartney still cares for his 98-year-old father.

'I loved it, but on the other hand you do get sick of living out of a suitcase. I've been away from home and by myself most

of my life. A lot of the time I was wondering where the next meal was coming from – and a lot of the time I was doing very well. I never got married. Never grew up. I was a gypsy. A lot of us in the industry were like Peter Pan. It was very much like running away to join the circus. This was the allure even when I was an apprentice. This other world was beckoning. You didn't know what it was, but you wanted it.

'And I've been lucky. I've always worked, in the main, around good and talented people. I've been very lucky in that way. For a little migrant boy, I've done okay. I always told my parents I wanted to travel and see the world. They encouraged me, and I ended up doing exactly that – and for the last 20 years, when I was on the road I was travelling first-class and getting paid to do it.'

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