

Long Paddock

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Vagabond Holes: David McComb and The Triffids, edited by Chris Coughran & Niall Lucy

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Beautiful Waste: Poems by David McComb, edited by Chris Coughran & Niall Lucy, with an introduction by John Kinsella.

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96 pp, ISBN 9781921361708, RRP \$24.95 pbk

The Triffids were formed in Perth in the late 1970s. Their singer and main songwriter David McComb was a fan of the gothic 1960s avant-pop of The Velvet Underground and the 1970s "new wave" sounds of Television, The Modern Lovers and Patti Smith. Together with friends, Alsy MacDonald and Phil Kakulas, they wrote and recorded songs on a tape recorder in the basement of the McComb family's stately home. By 1978 the fledgling Australian Punk movement had begun to take shape and though it never challenged the mainstream the way it did in the UK, in each major capital city there were enough like-minded people who were able to take the DIY ethic of punk (and its older, more sophisticated brother, post-punk) and turn it into some of the most original and creative music ever produced in Australia. In inner city venues across the country, bands formed, recorded a single or an EP, then broke up overnight. It was all very fast in its execution and the results were often equally chaotic. It was a triumph of ideas over ability, and though it is an oversimplification to say that the punks "couldn't play" their instruments (listen to any of the early punk records; The Sex Pistols, The Ramones, The Clash etc and it is clearly evident that they can "play" their instruments; they are not virtuosos but then that was the point), the early Triffids 45s are excellent examples of bright, jangly guitar pop in the style of Big Star and The Flaming Groovies.

In recent times there has been a huge amount of interest in this period of music both here and in the USA and the UK. Simon Reynolds' recent volume, *Rip It Up (and Start Again)* documents the punk and post-punk movements in the US and the UK but generally ignores the Antipodean contribution to the music scene. We only have to remember that it was four wild boys from Brisbane, The Saints, that produced one of the first Punk manifestos, *I'm Stranded*, this before The Ramones had even released their first LP. The definitive history of the Australian Punk and Post-Punk scenes is yet to be written but in the meantime we have *Vagabond Holes*, a book which, among other things, neatly describes the early days of the Triffids and places them within the context of the punk and post-punk music that was being created at the time.

As the recent Sydney Festival "1979 Symposium" showed, fanzines, records, and small gigs in inner city venues were all part of the cultural and musical mix that was self-produced and self funded, then committed to tape in all night sessions in recording

studios (when studio time was cheaper). Community radio played its part too. None of this so called "new wave" music was ever going to be played on the local commercial radio, and of course it rarely got an outing on that mainstay of Australian music, *Countdown*. Of course as bands like The Go Betweens and The Triffids started to make more radio-friendly, catchy songs they did eventually get gigs on *Countdown* which provided a much wider audience for these artists. But as with previous generations of Australian artists and writers, London was the favoured destination of young musicians eager to make their mark on the world. Bands with more ambition simply had no choice. They could stay in Australia and play to the same 300 people in a Surry Hills pub or they could venture further afield and try it on with the big girls and boys in the UK.

There is still a tendency to assume that bands like The Triffids arrive fully formed when the mainstream discovers them for the first time, but by the time David McComb and his band finally had a "hit" in 1986 with "Wide Open Road" from the album *Born Sandy Devotional*, they had already released their first LP, *Treeless Plain*, and recorded numerous EPs, singles and a whole set of cassette only recordings which were sold at gigs. Combine this with the constant gigging and long drives from Perth to the Eastern states across the Nullabor and you get a sense of the accomplished, mighty and cinematic band that The Triffids were in the musical wasteland of mid 1980s mainstream music. Of course there was lots of great music being made at the time and if you knew where to look you could find it, but bands like The Go Betweens and the Triffids were not popular or even very well known beyond a select group of devout music fans looking for an alternative to the usual record company fare. We do not need to spell it out. It's obvious that none of this music troubled the mainstream charts. A casual look at the top selling albums of 1986 shows us the horrors of what was on offer to mainstream audiences: Jimmy Barnes, Dire Straits, Whitney Houston and, of course, Whispering Jack.

Vagabond Holes comprises essays, poetry, interviews, photos and reminiscences from friends, bandmates and fellow travellers. Most well known to general readers will be the pieces by Robert Forster, Nick Cave, DBC Pierre and Judith Lucy. There is also poetry by John Kinsella, Steve Kilbey and even a couple of pieces by McComb himself, as well as more standard analytical essays and contributions. One stand out contribution is by David Nichols, his piece "Wow and Flutter" is a fascinating account of the music of the band's first six cassette albums, recorded long before they were signed to a major label. Unless you were a friend of the band or went to one of their early gigs you would not have heard this music or even been aware of its existence. Thankfully a soon to be issued CD box set will rectify this problem.

It is not a biography, though there are many elements of the biographical in it. It gives the reader the chance to dip in and out of the world of the Triffids and the mind of McComb. If you are a fan of the music already then no doubt you will be familiar with much of the history and music as described here; however, there is also a great deal of information and insights that will be completely new even to long term fans. If you know nothing about McComb and his band The Triffids, then the book will provide insight into the nascent post-punk musical scene of late 70s and early 80s Australian "rock" and to encourage you to explore the musical output of this great band.

If *Vagabond Holes* is a kind of anthology describing the historical and personal events dealing with the life and music of David McComb, then *Beautiful Waste* is a more straightforward collection of poetry, written during the 1980s and 1990s and subsequently discovered after his death with a note; "IF FOUND PLEASE PUBLISH". None of these poems were actually published during McComb's life so the publication of the poems in this current volume is to be applauded.

In his introduction, Kinsella provides a useful commentary on the work. He contextualises McComb's poetry and declares some of the main themes and influences. It is essential to locate McComb and the Triffids in the tradition of "writing about landscape". You cannot traverse the Nullabor and not be influenced by the enormity of the sky and the flatness of the land. It is this feature of Australia that makes our artists stand out from the crowd and our most successful visual artists, writers and musicians have been able to incorporate this landscape into their work without resorting to cliché. It is this that defines our "Australian-ness" and not some simplistic beach-babes and vegemite marketing drive. As Kinsella says, "it's connecting with landscape because a truth can be found in sea, sand, air, trees, rocks, space... if you want to find it."

McComb was a prolific note taker; diarist and journal writer and I hope one day that these will be published also. The poems provide us with an opportunity to focus on the words, away from the music that would normally accompany texts such as these. The book is divided into five sections and though it is unclear how much rearranging or editing occurred to get the manuscript into shape the editors do state in their brief introduction that all versions of the MS began with the poem "Prayer for One". This is hardly surprising as it is easily the best, most accomplished poem in the book. Thematically it deals with the intimacy between two people separated by time and distance. It is achingly beautiful:

Just give me a slight curve of your lips
to indicate a smile.
That's enough.
I'm kindling for you; your fuel.
Even though the cold distance yawns.
Let me subtract chill from your fingers,
Let me burn for you a while.

McComb was masterful in the way he was able to write (and sing) about loneliness, distance and the Australian landscape. The poems in *Beautiful Waste* are deeply personal. They are explorations of what it is like to be alone in a hotel room thinking about a loved one somewhere on the other side of the world and how that sense of physical separateness can be overcome by a brief glimpse out of the window at the night sky, curtains moving in the breeze, and a glass of something warm held close to the chest.

There was no "beautiful waste" when McComb's life ended in 1999 shortly before his thirty-seventh birthday. It was a creative life cut tragically short. Fortunately we have the recordings, recently reissued with bonus material and now we have these two books which enable us to see another side of the character and personality of David McComb. It is a character well worth investigating.