POP LIFE.

Inside SMASH HITS Australia

1984–2007

Marc Andrews, Claire Isaac & David Nichols

Affirm Press



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Marc dedicates his third of this book to Gabriel Porras, his Cuchi; Claire dedicates hers to Nick Rhodes, Robbie Williams, Simon Le Bon and Lee Devaney; and David to the poptastic Mia Schoen.

CONTENTS

9 *PROLOGUE*

12 *HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF*
A teenage pop fan in 80s Australia
Claire Isaac

20 *OUT OF THE UNKNOWN*
The origins of Smash Hits *Australia 1984*
David Nichols

34 *LIKE A VIRGIN*
Young, queer and in Queensland
Marc Andrews

46 *FUNKYTOWN*
The Melbourne years 1984–87
David Nichols

60 *CHAIN REACTION*
Taking on the anti-pop brigade 1987–89
David Nichols

79 *ALL FIRED UP*
'Blagging' into pop journalism
Claire Isaac

87 *THE ONLY WAY IS UP*
The golden age of Smash Hits *Australia 1988–90*
Marc Andrews

105 *MOVING ON UP*
Time to break free
David Nichols

114 *HANKY PANKY*
An interlude at Smash Hits *UK 1990–92*
Marc Andrews

138 *RIDE ON TIME*
From fan to features editor 1992–95
Claire Isaac

156 *KILLING ME SOFTLY*
Troubled times at Smash Hits *Australia*
Marc Andrews

166 *CAN'T GET YOU OUT OF MY HEAD*
EMAP returns 1998–2006
Marc Andrews

175 *IRREPLACEABLE*
The demise of the world's best pop magazine
Marc Andrews & David Nichols

184 *ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS, ED?*

187 *THE ALL-TIME* SMASH HITS *TOP 10!*

190 *ZOINKS! THE* SMASH HITS *GLOSSARY!*

Foreword

As a teenager growing up in Brisbane in 1987, and being a massive fan of Michael Jackson, *Smash Hits* magazine was my window to another world. I would fantasise about visiting this metropolis called London and attending these Wembley Stadium shows that my idol sold out within minutes.

In Australia, Michael Jackson was not being received positively. In the schoolyard, being a fan of him or pop music in general was cause for ridicule. Surrounded by peers who were into hard rock music, teased for my burgeoning sexuality and sensitive nature, I took solace in this window to another world where it was okay to adore MJ.

I remember proudly laminating a quote from an interview the magazine did with Terence Trent D'Arby onto my school diary that defended Michael Jackson. I can't recall the exact words, but it was essentially a 'Fuck you!' to the Michael Jackson haters, and it used that exact language. I got into trouble when my biology teacher saw the quote, but after proudly defending it in class I managed to keep the offending scrap of *Smash Hits* magazine on my diary for two years until I graduated.

I saw it as my mini rebellion and a glimpse into my future in the music industry.

Darren Hayes, who has sold 25 million albums worldwide both solo and as part of 10-time ARIA winners Savage Garden (he was also on the cover of Smash Hits *in 1997 with his Savage buddy, the same year their hit 'Truly Madly Deeply' became the longest running #1 for an Australian artist since 1971. According to* Billboard *magazine that same song is also #30 on the all-time top 100 in the US. Truly!).*

December 2011

PROLOGUE

The roots of *Smash Hits* go deep in English music journalism. In the 1970s, the *New Musical Express* (*NME*) – the English rock fan's bible of the time – was brought to searing relevance (so the story goes) by one Nick Logan. After five years with that mainly black-and-white, pretty serious and often pompous publication, Logan was burnt out and he quit.

The *NME* was printed by East Midlands Allied Press (EMAP), which had just started its own magazine division as a publisher rather than merely printing for others. It proudly boasted sterling titles such as *Angling Times* and *Motorcycle News*. Logan went to EMAP with a bunch of ideas for new magazines, including one he called *The Pop*, which he later described as 'one extreme' of his brainstorming.

That was the one EMAP liked, but obviously didn't really understand; they wanted to call the new publication *Disco Fever* and Logan told them in that case they could forget it. He wanted to do a magazine that could feature punky pop groups like Sham 69 and Blondie. EMAP compromised, as they seemed very willing to do with Logan, either because they didn't know what they were doing or they thought he really did; the same reason, presumably, they soon took on Logan's preference for the unusual publishing schedule of a fortnightly magazine. They came back with another title: *Smash Hits*. Logan thought it was 'pretty corny' but decided to give it a go. Key bits of the formula he had sorted from day one: songwords were always important, as were puzzles and high-quality colour photos and pin-ups.

Logan wrote most of the articles and negotiated for the rights to print lyrics. He chose to work with an up-and-

coming designer, Steve Bush. At first, Logan thought his shift from editor of the prestigious and stentorian *NME* to something his peers might have considered a lowly kids' fun paper was embarrassing. So he edited under the pseudonym 'Chris Hall' (taken from the names of his children, Christian and Hallie). Presumably, Steve Bush had the same idea: design of the first issue was credited to 'Ross George'.

But after three issues, Logan remembers thinking 'this is going to work, I can work with these people' and started using his real name. Work it certainly did: *Smash Hits* – the first issue had Belgian punk popstar Plastic Bertrand on the cover – sold brilliantly from the very beginning, and as high as half a million copies a fortnight by the early 1980s. Where it deviated most strongly from the other music magazines of the time was it didn't try to tell readers what to like: it celebrated what they already *knew* they liked.

Within a year, Logan had moved on to new projects – one being the launch of what would become style bible *The Face*. EMAP declined the offer to publish it because they didn't think it would work. But they were perfectly happy for Logan and Bush, the star performers who were making them bucketloads of money, to develop the project in *Smash Hits* time.

Smash Hits was such a great idea, it was bigger than any of the people who worked on it – from Logan and Bush (who would later take the mantle of editor) and celebrities-in-the-making like Neil Tennant.

So successful was Logan's brainchild – and so right for the late 20th century – it spawned international versions like *Star Hits* in the US, a slightly cooler answer to more established US pop magazines. *Smash Hits* Australia was an entirely different beast.

Created in 1984 on the initiative of a young-ish music journalist and bookshop proprietor called James Manning, it took the relevant (to Australia) chart stars from the UK edition and added Australian content to the mix. In its heyday, *Smash Hits* was the biggest-selling music magazine Australia has ever seen and is likely to ever see again. It was a phenomenon.

Every fortnight, Australian teenagers would bolt to their newsagents for a fix of songwords, interviews, posters, *Bitz* of news, and letters (Black Type, you are missed!). As teenage pop culture exploded, *Smash Hits* became the pop bible.

During Australia's bid for pop cultural imperialism in the 80s, when it began exporting new sensations like INXS and a raft of soapie-bred pop stars, *Smash Hits* was always there to give the young hopefuls a platform and, of course, find out their favourite colour. Australian-bred talent spun round the globe faster than a 12" Stock Aitken Waterman record, baby, right round (round round), and by the early 90s the UK edition came to rely on *Smash Hits* Australia for content.

More importantly, *Smash Hits* reported back on the prevailing trends of the day, be it music, TV, film, or even the NBA (call it a Shaq attack!) and brought the pop world to a suburb near you.

And what you have in your hands now, readers, is the unofficial insider's guide to that pre-Facebook, 3G and Lady Gaga era, written by three of the people who knew and understood it best – former *Smash Hits* writers and editors. It's the story of a generation of Australian pop music fans. It might just be your story too.

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF

A teenage pop fan in 80s Australia

Claire Isaac

Smash Hits UK was a lifeline for me as a teenager; a link from Sydney's upper north shore, where I lived, to the magical world of pop music in the UK from where my family had emigrated. Australia in the 1980s was firmly a rock nation as far as my fellow high schoolers were concerned. I was 12 and taking my first faltering steps into being a 'mod' (by which I mean I had a Harrington jacket and liked Madness – rather than a fondness for scooters and an amphetamine addiction). The girls in my class either liked AC/DC or didn't care about music at all and spent weekends at the beach. This isn't to say I was better or worse or more advanced or more ridiculous, simply that the world I came from (Plymouth in Devon, by the way, not the Kings Road, London) had been different.

Music and magazines brought me closer to the place and people I had left, and became something of an obsession. As time went on, my obsession grew and it brought me more happiness than the sport, youth groups and dope smoking of my fellow Turramurra teens who, truth be told, wanted little to do with me.

I bought *Smash Hits* UK to keep up with the music my friends in Plymouth, Rachel and Karen, wrote to me about. Rachel told me that Karen had become a 'peacock punk' which was an early incarnation I guess of the New

Romantics, and I wanted to be one too – all you had to do it seemed was like Adam and The Ants (I was an Ant person), Duran Duran (hell yez!) and wear scarves and frilly shirts (erm, kinda). I found, among the local Acca Dacca and Cold Chisel fans, two girls who would not only cement my love for these bands but also join me in my passion for pop – Gabrielle who I now think of as my Adam and The Ants friend, and Julie, who was more the Duran years.

The only thing *wrong* with *Smash Hits* UK was that I had to get my mum and dad to drive miles to the nearest stockist, and there was always the risk that the new edition hadn't arrived yet.

Teenage music fans had only a few places to get their fix; 2SM in Sydney to hear the latest, TV's *Sounds* with Donnie Sutherland on Saturday mornings and *Countdown* on Sunday evenings to see the videos. A betamax at the ready, I joined thousands of teens across the country in commandeering the TV on Sunday evenings ready to press record in case, say, the new Spandau Ballet song or A Flock Of Seagulls came on. When the bands toured and hosted the show – well, *that* could take up a whole tape. (A few years later, when *Live Aid* was on all through the night, I got up every three hours to change tapes.)

There were other TV music shows too – *Rock Arena*, with the well-dressed Suzanne Dowling, and *Rock Around the World* which was one weeknight with the equally sartorially splendid Basia Bonkowski on SBS… They were more adult oriented (more likely to play the Psychedelic Furs than Nik Kershaw), but I still loved them because they took music, and delighting in music, seriously. More seriously than *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, for example – you could tell that they just didn't get it.

As well as *Smash Hits* there was the other imported UK pop tome, *Number One* magazine. My walls were soon covered in posters from both, and other one-shot mags we'd save up our hard-earned cash from working at Franklins for, and get from the Gaumont book section of Red Eye Records and weird well-stocked newsagents and bookshops around the place. They were stuck together with the same Blu-Tack that used to keep them covering every inch of wall, except when it got stinking hot in summer the Blu-Tack would melt and the posters would slide off and – gasp! – sometimes rip and my world would literally fall down around my ears. It would take the paint off in great big chunks of our rental house so you can imagine the reaction of my poor mum.

Adam and The Ants was my first proper concert. Gabrielle's mum drove us there, and I still remember us stopping to get petrol on the Pacific Highway, jumping out of the car with white zinc-cream stripes across our noses and me in my mum's frilly shirt. That was 1981. I used to kiss my posters of Adam and drummer Terry Lee Miall good night. Just like millions of teenagers before and since I talked about them endlessly – 'That's weird you say dinner is ready mum, 'cos Adam Ant eats dinner too, you know!' When Duran Duran came out to Australia in November 1982, the day after the concert I had to take off school because I'd got so overexcited.

And then I took my fandom to the *next* level. I didn't realise how OTT I'd become and when I think about it, I'm appalled and thrilled. I was a total superfan – to be honest, I was one of the ones who I later disliked on occasion when I worked on *Smash Hits*. I ate, slept and breathed my bands.

And sometimes, I stalked them.

In 1983, my obsession with Duran Duran began in earnest. They came to Sydney to record the *Seven and the Ragged Tiger* album. A friend called to tell me she had been at Sydney's State Library that day and saw them doing a photo shoot. The band. There… Here! I'm sure I just about forgot to breathe, it was almost too much for me. For three months, I thought of nothing else.

Straight after school, Julie and I would go to recording Studio 301 in Castlereagh Street and wait for the band to arrive to record through the night. We'd take photos, get them developed at one-hour places, bring them back to get signed the next day and take more. We would bring the band presents, and try and get them to remember us. Once, as we walked beside John Taylor from the car park where we had been waiting for him, he put his arm out to stop me walking in front of a car. 'Oh my god! John saved my life!' – whatever the teenage equivalent of 'dining out on that one' was, I did it, and for a long while. I have a piece of paper with a handprint on it, accompanied by the words 'dirt from John Taylor's car'. We'd rubbed dirt off his silver BMW and stashed it away. We once left him a banana on the bonnet.

We'd leave school early and get the school bus up to Turramurra station – bolting down the steps and onto the red rattler trains into town, craning our necks as we went through the city at Central – catching a glimpse of Studio 301 that could be the best or worst moment of the journey. Best if we just saw girls milling about – it meant the band hadn't gone in yet, or if some had, there were more to come. Worst, if we saw crowds of people bunched up in little groups around separate band members. The distance from the platform at Central to the studio was about 400

metres. I sprinted it every time (I could have been school track champion after those three months, if I hadn't been so distracted). A few days, we got the golden goose right there – Simon or Nick getting out of a taxi around the corner, right in our path. Result.

Some of the other girls who hung outside (later than we were allowed out) got invited to sing backing vocals one day. The song didn't end up making it to the album. We were glad, partly – but I had already edited the tale of the recording, told by girls we met there, to include myself, so I was sad the song I supposedly sang on hadn't made the cut! But we had our moments in the sun. After hearing a rumour about some kids from our school being in a commercial, Julie and I joined the school choir and ended up recording the ad in the studio next door to Duran. I can still picture the look on the receptionist's face as she led us into the building after months of telling us to move away from the doors. And the faces of the band when we appeared up there, clutching things to get signed as usual, but this time actually in their domain. Poor things!

We also managed to buy some front-row tickets to the concert they played at the Sydney Entertainment Centre after the album was finished. Again, I'll never get over the look of Simon Le Bon as we made him laugh by pulling funny faces during the intro to *Save A Prayer*, when he was trying to look moody. Or how the band smiled as they saw us in row A (actually, on reflection, maybe it was more nervous laughter than smiling!).

Once I'd set a precedent, I couldn't let other favourites come into the country without 'meeting' them too. I used to forge my mum's signature on letters so I could get out of school – I should have had the best dentistry in the state!

Spandau Ballet came in 1984 and I was there, outside the now-long-gone Sebel Townhouse. There were a few girls who had become acquaintances during this time – other fans who I could guarantee 'seeing at the Sebel' (sounds like a commercial!) and we would share information about the band's whereabouts. We gave presents, took photos – and I had an unlikely and frankly unlovely moment (because I was horrendously spotty and wearing a teal-blue school uniform) where I had followed the band to the Botanic Gardens and they'd asked me to join them making a video for VH1 in the US. I had to stand there and say, 'Hang around, 'cos Gary Kemp will be back in a moment!' and he jumped up from below me, saying 'I never went away!' Next time I saw them, they all called me 'superstar'. Joy.



But those visits were few and far between. And 'between' was filled with *Smash Hits* UK. It's hard for this not to sound corny, but I really felt like *Smash Hits* spoke to me as a friend about the things I was interested in, whereas most people I knew at school thought it was silly or flippant or 'gay'. When I was excited about something – Simon LeBon's new haircut, a new video, a remix album – *Smash Hits* was excited too. And they did it in a way that made me feel that it was important and *should* be noticed. When you're in year 9 at school and the hairdresser at South Turramurra shops won't bleach just the front of your fringe because 'you can't do that!', someone who writes with glee about it all is like a gift from the pop gods.

I loved discovering bands through the eyes of the *Smash Hits* writers, laughed as they asked ridiculous questions of

rock royalty, swooned as they were flirted with by the pop stars I wanted to flirt with, and stored up the information they put in their pages so I could spit it out later in conversation with my friends. When the writers travelled with the band I was transported to places like Sri Lanka or Japan, where the fans were crazy and caused much hilarity with their antics (I didn't realise, of course, that I was one of those crazy fans, I just spoke better English).

I loved it when the band chatted and laughed together, and the story was simply a kind of eavesdrop. It was like we were sitting around having a conversation. Me and them – and a tape recorder. (In later life, as I worked as a music journalist, I realised how much of that could be wordy decoration of a boring interview in a beige hotel room where you have 20 minutes with someone famous before being wheeled out and the next hapless hack being wheeled in. Give it some flair about dinner plates being left on the table, a scribbled note from a fan left by the door, hot water and lemon on the sideboard for the singer's vocal chords and a ringing phone constantly interrupting as the tour manager tries to get everyone onto the bus, and your story comes alive.) *Smash Hits* created a world that cast a spell over me.

I was a total fan of *Smash Hits* writers like Neil Tennant (who went on to form Pet Shop Boys). They were an extension of my love for the bands – I worshipped them just as much for their words, their take on the music scene, and their involvement in creating the pop world as I saw it.

You may think I sound like a complete nut job when it comes to all this – don't blame you really. But I would later discover that mine was only a mild case of superfandom – I was to encounter far worse out there (Take That fans – oi

vey!). And just to be clear (Mum), it was never a sex or groupie thing. I never wanted it, offered (or got asked – goddamn it!). Ever. I wasn't cool.

I was just a teenager obsessed with the music and the world of cool hair/great clothes/exotic travel. Sure I may have been under the mistaken belief that by stalking bands in my school uniform they'd take me into their inner circle, but I was living the dream.

And then the dream turned into a nightmare. News filtered through in 1984 that *Smash Hits* was about to launch an Australian version. I was 16 and devastated. *Devastated!* My beloved UK version became nigh on impossible to buy, and I knew I'd be subjected to a less glamorous version of *Smash Hits* with shitty Australian bands mixed in with a few lifted stories the editors would see fit to include on bands who were big here. It horrified me but what choice did I have?!? The other option was *Countdown* magazine, which had begun the previous year, and to me that was even less appealing. I was stuck between a rock (magazine) and a hard place.