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**BON  
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BACK IN BRONZE



# BACK IN BRONZE

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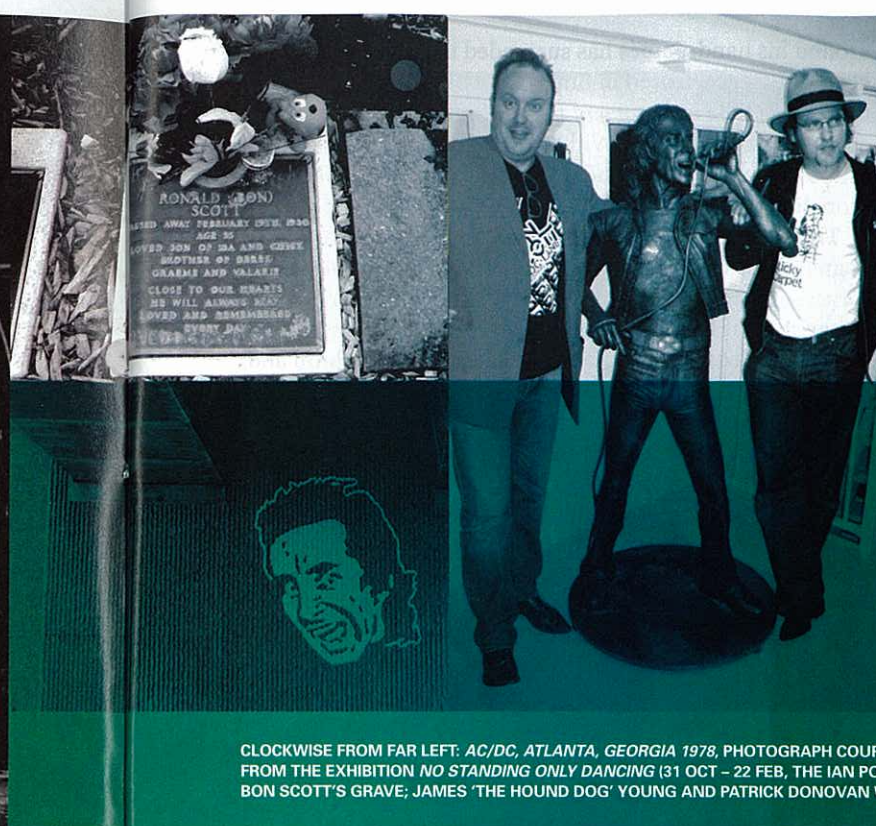
WITH AC/DC'S NEW ALBUM SET FOR RELEASE, IT'S TIME TO SALUTE THE MAN WHO TOOK THEM TO THE TOP: BON SCOTT.

RICK SPENCER DISCOVERS THAT BON SCOTT, THE HARD-LIVING AC/DC FRONTMAN, HAS BEEN CAST ANEW: AS A FIGURE OF ENDURING CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE.

**You may have seen him in Cicerello's** fish'n'chip shop, on Fremantle's Fishing Boat Harbour. Belting out a few tunes, giving it his all. A familiar grimace in his face. A deft swagger. His waistcoat open. The crotch of his pants a little too tight. He's an easily recognisable figure, a famous one. And he's been getting plenty of visitors, but none of them really listens. There's nothing to hear, not any more. This bloke's a statue – a solid bronze cast by Greg James of the irrepressible Bon Scott.

Mixing it with the fisherman coming off their boats and the tourists looking for some vestige of history, this bloke is a long way from the top but closer to his early trade, trawling for crayfish. Scott and the fisherman have another thing in common: James' statues of fishermen are already in place and the fishing industry's memorial is well visited. Scott will soon be nearby on Fremantle's Fishing Boat Harbour. He'll be in good company.





## BON SCOTT

(9 JULY, 1946 - 19 FEBRUARY, 1980)

A Scot by birth, Ronald Belford 'Bon' Scott arrived in Melbourne with his family in 1952, when he was six. Four years later the Scotts moved west to Fremantle, where the young Bon joined his first band, the Fremantle Scots Pipe Band, as a drummer. At the age of 15, Scott's bad-boy image blossomed: he did time at juvenile institutions for such miscreant activities as stealing petrol and having unlawful carnal knowledge. Scott also did time in a number of bands including the Spektors and prog-rock outfit Fraternity.

In 1974, the now Adelaide-based Scott joined AC/DC to add a bit of glam to the mix. Over the next five years AC/DC gave the rock world such legendary albums as *High Voltage*, *Dirty Deeds* and *Highway To Hell*, which reached 17th position on the US charts.

In 1980 at the Music Machine club in London, the 33-year-old Scott passed out after a heavy drinking session and was taken to a friend's car to recover. He was found there the next day, lifeless. Scott's official cause of death was listed as "acute alcohol poisoning" and "death by misadventure".

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: AC/DC, ATLANTA, GEORGIA 1978, PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE RENNIE ELLIS PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE, RENNIEELLIS.COM.AU FROM THE EXHIBITION *NO STANDING ONLY DANCING* (31 OCT - 22 FEB, THE IAN POTTER CENTRE, NGV AUSTRALIA, FEDERATION SQUARE, MELBOURNE); BON SCOTT'S GRAVE. JAMES 'THE HOUND DOG' YOUNG AND PATRICK DONOVAN WITH SCOTT'S STATUE: *APPARITION* BY BEVAN HONEY.

Bronze statues have a history of propaganda and elitism, but Scott's statue isn't a bad one. It contains vibrancy; it captures the subject matter's work in one burst of energy. It will remind visitors to Freo that this is where AC/DC's groundbreaking frontman hailed from. But the statue doesn't account for everything that Scott gave to this place and the legacy he left. Those kinds of things just seep into the very fabric of a city.

This statue was finished and unveiled at a tribute concert a while ago, but there was nowhere to put it. A couple of places were suggested: opposite the train station was one, but city officials didn't want the old rocker greeting visitors coming off the train; alongside statues of Freo's war heroes was another option, but some thought Scott didn't fit with such a gallant line-up.

But near the chipper is a good spot. It's working class. It's close to the people. It probably reminds Scott of his diet in Kirriemuir, Scotland, where he was born.

Scott's statue evokes the love-hate relationship Aussies have with art, especially public art. This is a good test case: how do you best represent something as enigmatic as Scott's legacy? The statue is a good one. It honours the man. But across town at the Fremantle Arts Centre they had a go at this in a slightly different way, with something called the Bon Scott Project.

The Project included a blog by Lucas Ihlein ([bonscottblog.com](http://bonscottblog.com)), documenting Ihlein's travels from the east coast to the west in search of Scott stories, which of course he found everywhere. There was an exhibition of Scott's letters, put together by Katie Dyer, which gave some

real insights into the singer's life as a touring artist, as well as what he thought of himself and what was happening to his life. There was also a panel discussion on the ugly/sexy factor, discussing why everyone loved Scott when he probably wasn't the best looking bloke around.

In Australia, cultural ownership is a big thing: we all want to lay claim to a part of it, not have it hanging in a national gallery or hidden away in some corporation's collection. We love public entertainment, we also love a personality and to see this personality grow into an Aussie myth.

The artwork included in the Bon Scott Project wasn't meant to be a sub-cultural homage; it was made more in an attempt to understand broader cultural issues of why we might put someone like Scott on a pedestal.

What the artists' work did manage to illustrate was that Scott is a public entity and we all own a bit of him - whether a statue, a blog, a photo or a download.

One of 17 artists commissioned for the Project, Bevan Honey, created *Apparition*, a projection of Scott's portrait under the Fremantle Bridge, fusing the images of the man with the landscape that shaped him. It left visitors coming over the bridge into Fremantle in no doubt as to whose territory they were entering.

Rebecca Dagnall spent some time visiting Scott fans and photographing their tattoos. This old-school respect for Scott, etching his portrait onto skin, gives a sense that some people really wanted to identify with his image, to be part of the man...or vice versa. This signifies Scott as both public and private property, an image on skin being

the space between the two. What Dagnall's series of photos asked is not what did Scott stand for, but what does his image signify to different people?

Ihlein grapples with this in his blog: "Bon is not a man; he is a fragmentary, cumulative process - the aggregate of a thousand disparate, dissenting voices - each with a constantly evolving story." In other words Scott belongs to everyone because he becomes everything - Scott today must be the most egalitarian art piece going around. He created great music, great theatre and great art, and became a romantic public icon on the way.

*Dr Ric Spencer is an artist, lecturer, dad and writer based in Fremantle.*

## RIDE ON

**PATRICK DONOVAN MAKES A PILGRIMAGE TO BON SCOTT'S HOME TOWN, SEARCHING FOR THE MAN BEHIND THE POPULAR MYTH.**

**It's 10am and DJ James 'the Hound Dog'**

Young and I settle into our seats on a flight from Melbourne to Perth. AC/DC blares from our headphones - Angus Young's blistering lead solos in the left ear, his brother Malcolm's razor sharp rhythm guitar blasting into the right - as Bon Scott screams his hedonistic and defiant anthems.

Beers are drunk, heads bang and although we can't hear ourselves, by the stares from other passengers we are obviously loudly whispering the chorus to 'Let There

be Rock'. These seats really are way too small for a three-hour rock session.

We feel like Scott is flying over with us. But, of course, in the early days the band couldn't afford to fly so they drove across the Nullarbor in a rundown van, eating meals on the desert road by torchlight.

The poor guy seated next to us watching *Flight of the Conchords* on his laptop can't believe his misfortune. Surely any minute one of these feral bogans will spill beer on his computer or elbow him in the face during an overzealous air-guitar solo. Sensing his fear, I start some small talk. He responds by asking: "Off to a rock concert are you?"

"No, my friend and I are attending the opening of an art exhibition, a sculpture and visiting a grave!"

He thinks I'm joking. But it's true. Indeed, we are traversing the country and doing all of the above as part of a 24-hour pilgrimage to the resting place of the great Bon Scott, named by British magazine *Classic Rock* as the greatest ever frontman, ahead of Freddie Mercury and Robert Plant.

The Hound Dog has three Scott t-shirts packed for the journey (clearly he anticipates working up a bit of sweat) as well as the requisite AC/DC flag kept up his sleeve to unveil at opportune moments.

Somehow in the last decade, Scott - the loveable working-class larrikin who immigrated to Melbourne from Scotland with his family in the 60s, attending Melbourne's Sunshine Primary School before heading for the warmer environs of Fremantle - has become highbrow.

Freo's favourite son has been given the symbolic keys to the city. As we drive into Fremantle along the Stirling

Highway Bridge, Scott's lyrics from the song 'Rock'n'Roll Singer' flash on a neon sign. We sing along: "I can see my name up in lights!"

We head straight to the Fremantle Cemetery, and a slightly eerie feeling overcomes us. Even though we feel like we know Scott, we have never met him, and needless to say, he doesn't know us from a pack of Winnie Blues. But that hasn't stopped tens of thousands of strangers paying their respects: it is the most visited gravesite in the country.

I have visited Jimi Hendrix's grave in Seattle and Jim Morrison's in Paris, and they were both moving experiences. I recall pondering who they really were as people, not the mass media's perception of them. Scott has given his fans so much jubilation, but it's sobering to think of a life cut short just before the band became famous worldwide.

Scott's remains were cremated and there is only a small plaque commemorating him. We notice that his plaque sits

**"WE WONDER IF WE SHOULD LEAVE SOMETHING... INSTEAD WE PERFORM OUR OWN CEREMONY: WE ERECT THE AC/DC FLAG ON A NEARBY ROSE BUSH, PLAY HIS ANTHEM 'ROCK'N'ROLL SINGER'... SWILL BOURBON AND PLAY A MESSAGE ON THE HOUND DOG'S PHONE FROM SCOTT'S EX-WIFE."**

next to one belonging to Betty Savage and another to Reese White – white and savage – inadvertently representing the good and evil that tore at Scott during his life.

We wonder if we should leave something at the site. We place our matching silver AC/DC rings engraved with Scott's birth and death dates on the grave, before deciding that the next bogan to turn up would most likely pocket them. Instead we perform our own ceremony: we erect the AC/DC flag on a nearby rose bush, play his anthem 'Rock'n'Roll Singer' on iPod speakers, swill bourbon and play a message on the Hound Dog's phone from Scott's ex-wife. For some strange reason, we point the phone towards the grave, as though Scott can hear it. But in a slightly spooky moment, an orange rubber dog that had been left on the grave starts dancing in the breeze to the music.

Next stop is the windswept docklands studio of sculptor Greg James, who was commissioned to make a life-sized bronze statue of Scott with the \$100,000 that was raised at the Bon Scott tribute concert earlier this year.

James explains how he constructed the statue from steel rods, clay and bronze. "Bon has been around the studio for a couple of years now," he says, pointing to a picture-board of Scott cut-outs. From the rock stance to the belt buckle, cut-off denim jacket, skin-tight jeans groaning over his manhood and microphone cord wrapped

around his hand, James has succeeded in capturing the singer's essence, frozen in time (like what Jabba the Hut did to Han Solo in *Return of the Jedi*). But he's missed some important details. Without Scott's signature forearm tattoos, glazed eyeballs and chipped tooth, it looks like more like Cliff Richard.

That night at the Bon Scott Project opening, a lone bagpiper performs on the roof of the old mental asylum-turned-art space and a local supergroup led by Stems guitarist Dom Mariani plays out AC/DC covers. But something doesn't appear right. It's all a bit highfalutin and un-Bon. The band aren't particularly good – the female singer massacres the emotional ballad 'Ride On' – and they pass up the opportunity to bring the bagpiper back for 'It's a Long Way to the Top'.

The only part of the exhibition that really sheds any light on Scott is the collection of his personal letters, many of which have been donated by their owner, and my companion, the Hound Dog (who had bought them from Scott's former wife, Irene Thornton). Others agree. Rugged fan Terry Clayton tells us he thinks the exhibition is in poor taste. "There's not enough about the larrikin spirit in there," he says. "Why didn't they do part of the exhibition at a tattoo parlour?"

Clayton is also bemused by the serving of a perfumed local boutique beer at the opening instead of a more working-class brew of which Scott would have approved. Others express their dismay on the [bonscottblog.com](http://bonscottblog.com). "People can babble on all they like and analyse it to infinity but if an AC/DC fan has to explain why they love AC/DC, the person they are talking to will never understand anyway," writes 'Brian Bitter'.

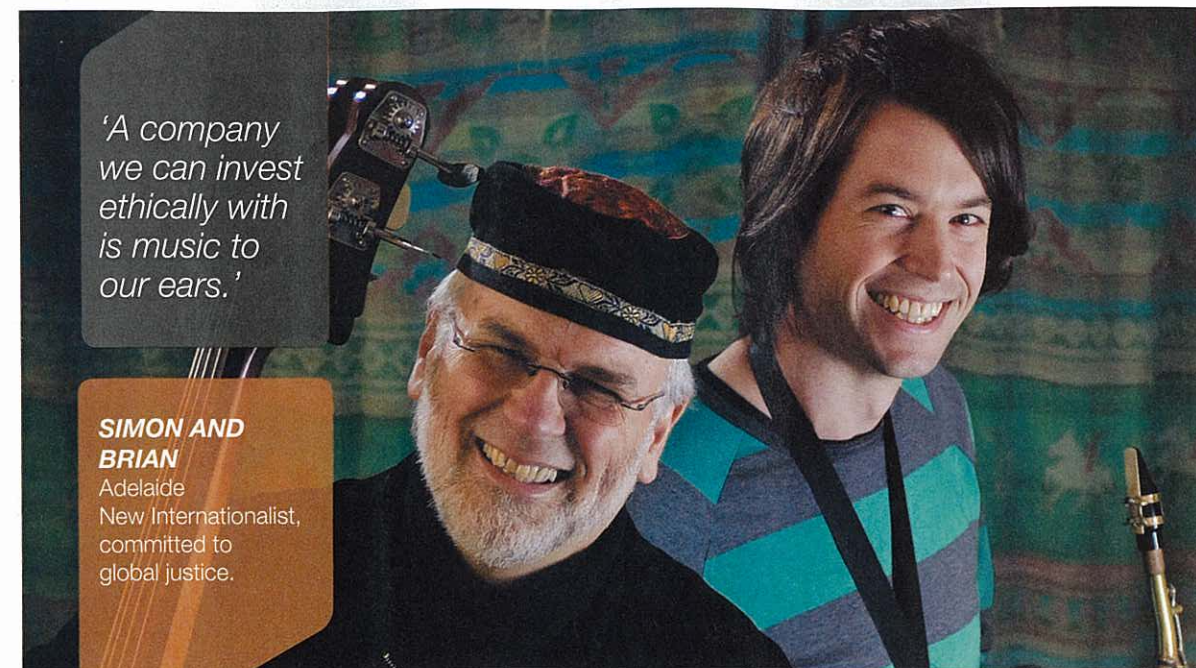
We end up at a nearby party with fellow fans and a few local musicians, and dance to AC/DC songs until the early hours. At one stage, the host finds a huge piece of foam matting, which his daughter Ebony has painted her name on. We cut it up, removing the E and Y, and take turns brandishing the sign that says *BON*.

As we fly back to Melbourne, a little worse for wear, we contemplate the cult of Scott. We surmise that his larrikin spirit, lust for life, cheeky lyrics and soul-drenched voice cannot be represented in a statue or art exhibition. He lives on in our hearts and minds and stereos. And every time we put on our rings we will remember that he gave his life to Let There Be Rock.

As the cab drives us home from the airport, another spooky moment happens: 'Jailbreak' starts pounding out on the radio, and for four minutes, Scott gives us a bit more life after an exhausting but thrilling pilgrimage.

*Patrick Donovan is the music writer for the Age. He started the campaign to change Melbourne's Corporation Lane to AC/DC Lane in his 'Sticky Carpet' column.*

*AC/DC's new album Black Ice will be out 18 October. The Bon Scott Project is no longer showing but [bonscottblog.com](http://bonscottblog.com) is still up and running. The Bon Scott statue will be erected on Fishermans Wharf, Fremantle, in early 2009.*



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