

Last Drinks at the Abercrombie Hotel

A report from Bow River Publishing's Sydney based journalist Dominik Giemza

Next to the wasteland that is the freshly razed Carlton Brewery, the smell of beer wafted through the dust and diesel fumes. As I started questioning my sanity, battling images of the ghosts of brewers past, my eyes were drawn to sunlight glinting off curvaceous streamlined tiles. There were indeed signs of life here but they were at the now solitary edifice at the corner of Abercrombie and Broadway.

Thirst and curiosity lead me to the pub at the corner, formerly known as the Australian Hotel. What could be more "Australian" than an afternoon bevvie, I thought. On a dusty window a simple poster advertised a "Brit Pop" party and "Last Drinks" at the Abercrombie Hotel. The date advertised was 16 January 2010, the date I stared at my reflection in the gritty deco windows.

As I waited for the doors to open I watched the pedestrians walk by wondering who else would attend such an event. Would it be the tanned German tourists imitating Uluru with their copper glazed skin or the King Gee wearing bloke stumbling by with paint stained elbows and leathery working man's skin? Perhaps it was the bright eyed girls in summer dresses that sashayed toward Railway Square or the naphthalene scented senior navigating council potholes back to the concrete security of the housing estate?

The queue that was forming at the door couldn't be more different. It was full of the edgy, the grungy, and the dark clothed and pasty faced. They gathered with ripped jeans, and second hand suits with hair of red and green in Mohawks and fops. This generation had never known a world without light beer and made this thirty something embarrassed with age and reluctant to mingle.

The crescendo of trepidation was pierced by blue eyes on a round face, smiling above a Union Jack tablecloth; "Ten bucks mate, all night. Your last chance". The door crew was all smiles more door darlings than door bitches and not a bouncer in sight. Hadn't they noticed my Target threads missed the target demographic by a generation or two? Before my wallet was safely tucked away I headed past a silent staircase into the din inside. The Smiths were spinning on the platter and the dance floor carpet revealed its full glory of beer stains and stray spaghetti threads.

Where was Barnesy, the Crawl, the Oils or the Angels? Where were the shimmering guitars and distant vocals calling like a swimmer outside the flags? They were replaced by sounds from an older much grayer country, of brooding bass and vainglorious lyrics. At least I was certain Peter Garret was safely in Canberra saving the nation from youthful idealism and plastic bags. I wish Morrissey was there too.

And where were the crowd? They were huddled in a line up of couches in the corner busy networking and texting, oblivious to the delights of Jarvis Cocker or the crazy mural above them. A product of artistic innocence and Dulux' finest, the mural was in the improvised style of the graffiti generation. Bold colours and caricatures of comic book beer drinkers mingled with extraterrestrials and a giant octopus. The draught horses and the brillantined sporting men of the pub art genre were obviously long consigned to Davey Jones' locker or at least the antique shop down the road.

At least the far corner showed some signs of the pubs of old, a panel of cream pub tiles, some weary armchairs, a stolen street sign and a dimly lit cigarette machine in all its peeling laminex glory. Through the poster clad window I could see the Broadway traffic like another distant world racing by. But this scratched image was no closer to the breweries and factories of the world that passed, oblivious even in memory to all present but one.

As I fumbled up to the bar I was greeted with a wry smile from the barmaid and a look that was a year or two ahead of the others in the University of Life. Old was not available on tap and the only glassware was the disco ball. But she took an interest in my camera, a keen photographer herself, with an eye for colour and sympathy for the outsider. For a moment we crossed the age barrier by the familiar rapport that bridges both sides of the bar. It was short lived as Spiderman and Bat girl sauntered up for their pre mixed rum and cokes. Spiderman hammed it up for my camera. Next to him was a 19 year old University Cadet in his army fatigues, I asked if he'd heard of Redgum. He said he couldn't afford the costume hire.

The plastic ambiance was soon forgotten as the cold lager hit my throat. Relaxed by the brew and the droning tones of The Cure I moved to the dance floor again. A slender young lad was inscribing circles in the floor with his chiseled leather shoes. They weren't Blundstone's and he needed a haircut. His skin was pale, it was not weathered by work and sun and his limbs had never felt the weight of bricks or spanners. He was alone, spinning to the melancholy melodies and presumably saving the mingling for my space, face book or something else virtual. His Carlton Draught was caught resting in a corner, not earning its keep. Bon Scott would be spinning in his grave.

Eventually my eyes glaze over and I step out to the beer garden which is only a half truthful description. It is a concrete courtyard full of beer and bodies, more than a little post apocalyptic in feel. At least its walls are busy with tags and caricatures from unicorns to buxom blondes which soften the effect. In the corner sits a toilet block its walls melding into the courtyard so you don't know at which point the convenience ends and the street art begins. The foppish face booker comes up to me, refreshed by his solitary dance and introduces himself. We are soon joined by his curvy female friend lugging jugs of beer and smiles to share. After some warm introductions and another plastic cup of ale we all begin to inhabit the same world. It is a place of beer, bullshit, anecdotes and laughter and soon the concrete takes on a warm glow.

People make pubs. The beer helps too. Eventually the hops lubricate the wheels of interaction and make the sidelined social and the alien familiar. The music may change and the décor may become unrecognizable but the public house transcends the destruction and renewal around it. The Abercrombie will disappear like much that has gone before it but the broth of shared experience will continue to brew somewhere.

With The Clash ringing in my ears I eventually stumble back on Broadway. My nostrils are filled with the smell of hops brewing, the road is busy as ever and nothing much seems to have changed. I couldn't hear the simmer of the brewery stills above the traffic but on the way out I found the bouncer, he was older than me and wearing a "Goodies" t-shirt.