A STROLL DOWN AC/DC LANE: ROCK MUSIC, DESTINATION IMAGE AND A DIFFERENT TYPE OF HERITAGE

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Abstract

Cities are increasingly looking to popular music connections to contribute to an attractive destination image. This use of music has some similarities to film-induced tourism, though there are also differences. This paper furthers our understanding of these relationships through an examination of Melbourne’s creation of ACDC Lane. Two aspects are particularly focussed upon. First, the debate over its creation illustrates the expectations that are now arising from such developments and the role of the popular media in championing some tourism projects. Second, in honouring a notoriously irreverent rock band, ACDC Lane presents a different type of heritage, in many ways at odds with the more conventional views of how heritage might contribute to a city’s destination image.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1962 it was Greenwich Village
In 1963 Liverpool was the place to be
In 1968 San Francisco was where it was happening
In 1977 ... it was Melbourne, Australia

(Film poster for Dogs in Space, observed in Haight Ashbury, San Francisco, 1987).

Film has been unkind to the city of Melbourne and its destination image. For Geordie (1956) an Olympics-inspired romance made by Shepperton Studios in England, the budget did not stretch to filming on location, so stock footage from an earlier Olympiad stood in for the MCG. In 1959, On the Beach was shot on location in Melbourne, but it is chiefly remembered for a journalist's invented quote from Ava Gardner that this was the prefect place for a film about the end of the world. In He died with a felafel in his hand (2001) the running joke is that it rains in every scene set in Melbourne. And while Crocodile Dundee visited New York and Los Angeles, he never made it to Melbourne.

In contrast, popular music has been a much more powerful medium in shaping Melbourne's destination image. At various times Melbourne has laid claim to be Australia's music capital, both serving as a base for up-and-coming local bands and attracting a wide range of touring artists. However, the image that rock music projects sits unhappily with the sorts of images most destination marketers would like to utilise for a city. According to rock historian James Cockington (2001) it was the unattractive combination of Melbourne's dull climate and gloomy gothic architecture which encouraged a vibrant alternative music sub-culture. The grunginess of Melbourne's music scene was well reflected in a number of music-related films. Dogs in Space (1987) starred INXS lead singer Michael Hutchence as an inarticulate punk singer living in a squalid shared house. The film culminated in the death through heroin overdose of his girlfriend. Similar themes of Melbourne as a city with an underworld of music, grunge, drugs and petty criminals were explored in Monkey Grip (1982) and Death in Brunswick (1991).

In recent years there has been increasing interest in how media shapes potential tourists' expectations and motivations. Much of this focus has been on film and television (Frost et al, 2004; Beeton, 2005). In contrast, discussion of the influence of music has been far smaller (see Brabazon, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Connell and Gibson, 2003; Gibson and Connell, 2005 and Wolver, 1996). Such limited interest is surprising, for this growing literature suggests that music influences tourists in different ways to film. While film projects a strong visual image, music may exert a more powerful emotional influence, particularly given that through radio, records and compact discs songs may be heard many times. Another important contrast is that while film often encourages visitation to romanticised rural destinations, song is often more closely linked to cities and their harsher images (consider, for example Liverpool and Memphis).

This paper extends this discussion through a case study of Melbourne's creation of ACDC Lane as a tourist attraction celebrating the city's musical heritage. On 1 October 2004 the Melbourne City Council renamed one of its laneways after AC/DC. AC/DC are Australia's most successful rock band and with over 130 million album sales the fifth most successful group in the world behind the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and the Eagles (Donovan, 2004A). In an incongruous ceremony Melbourne's conservative Lord Mayor John So proclaimed 'Let us rock' as bagpipers covered an AC/DC song (Donovan and Boulton, 2004). Since then ACDC Lane has functioned as a place for
tourists to visit for a few minutes (particularly for fans to have their photos taken posing next to the laneway’s sign) and as a venue for a series of open-air performances and street parties linked to the band and rock in general (Donovan, 2005).

As a case study, ACDC Lane is important in four ways. First, it can best be understood as a different type of heritage, both in meaning and form. While heritage is often presented as ‘high culture’ in formal museum settings and displays, it may connect more effectively through ‘low culture’ performances and interpretation (Garton Smith, 1999). Second, it clearly demonstrates the public perception that a rock-related site will attract tourists and contribute to the city’s destination image. Indeed, as will be seen, it is striking how widely and uncritically it was accepted that this development would attract tourists. Third, it is a valuable example of the public policy process. It was not simply that a decision was made to promote Melbourne in this way. Rather, there was a complex drawn-out process involving competing groups of stakeholders and a city council agonising over whether this was the image they wanted or not. In order to understand this long process, this case study is presented as a four-phase narrative rather than a more conventional examination at a single point of time. Fourth, it is also an exceptional example of the role of media in developing tourism. In this case, the media was not just a commentator, but rather an integral player in the process. The idea for ACDC Lane was first suggested in a newspaper and that newspaper waged a successful public campaign for its creation, even after it became apparent there was opposition to the concept.

**PHASE 1: SUGGESTION**

The catalyst for ACDC Lane was the film *Thunderstruck* (2004). It tells the story of five young men who make a promise that whenever one dies, the others will ensure he is buried next to the grave of AC/DC lead singer Bon Scott. Scott, who died in 1980 just as he was achieving world-wide star status, is buried in Fremantle, Western Australia. Such a premise is based on the phenomena of fans visiting the graves of Jimi Hendrix (Seattle) and Jim Morrison (Paris). Such visits may be seen as part of a growing group of tourists behaviors which have been termed ‘modern secular pilgrimage’ and create new sacred places (Digance, 2003: 144).

When the film was released, Patrick Donovan, a rock columnist for Melbourne’s *The Age* newspaper, wrote a piece arguing that Melbourne was a more appropriate destination for AC/DC fans wishing to engage in pilgrimages (Donovan, 2004A). Donovan listed a range of connections, including that Scott had initially lived in Melbourne after migrating from Scotland as a young boy, the band had been based in Melbourne in the 1970s and the video clip for the song *It's a long way to the top* had been filmed in a Melbourne street. The latter was particularly persuasive, as the song and video were generally recognised as the band’s most famous. Furthermore, the song had become representative of the history of Australian rock music through being used as the title for a highly popular 2001 documentary series and series of concerts.

Donovan argued that potential tourists needed a focal point. He suggested that the blandly named Corporation Lane be changed to honour the band. In support, he cited international precedents, particularly Madrid’s Calle de AC/DC and Joey Ramone Place in New York. While Corporation Lane had no actual connection with AC/DC, it did have the advantage of housing an appropriate rock venue/club (Donovan, 2004A). Mistakenly, Donovan believed that this lane had no real name and that Corporation Lane was just a generic name utilised for any unnamed lane. Instead, the lane was specifically named after a long-closed council depot. Nor did Donovan recognise the two important historical linkages which his proposal contained. First, there was a long history in Melbourne of changing lane names, particularly when they acquired unsavoury reputations (Bate, 1994; Brown-May, 1998). Second, that AC/DC was formed by young Scottish migrants fitted well with Melbourne’s history as a place for migrants to improve their lot. Indeed, Melbourne is a city with a long Scottish heritage.
The idea of AC/DC Lane struck a chord with the Melbourne City Council and the Victorian Minister for the Arts. A council report recommended the name change. It judged that the new name recognised the importance of musical and popular culture to Melbourne’s heritage and was appropriate to the nature of the surrounding area (Boulton, 2004A and 2004B; Donovan and Boulton, 2004A; Smith and Evans, 2004).

**PHASE 2: OBJECTIONS**

However, within a short time some Melbourne City Councillors began to have second thoughts. Melbourne’s strategy had been to promote a destination image based on upmarket shopping and restaurants, art and theatre and nineteenth century streetscapes. After the initial rush of enthusiasm, a more sober reflection indicated that adding rock music to this mix seemed jarring and risky. This was particularly so, considering the band to be honoured were notorious for their irreverence, loudness and extreme rock and roll lifestyle, culminating in the premature death of their lead singer (Walker, 2002). Perhaps this was too different a type of heritage.

Following on from the publicity over the renaming, the council received 30 submissions of support and four objections. One objection was from a fundamentalist religious group in Queensland which, ‘did not consider the band an appropriate role model for young people’ (quoted in Millar and Donovan, 2004). Another objection was from a nearby restaurant. It argued that given the area had recently been gentrified, celebrating rock music was a step backwards and would only attract undesirables (Millar and Donovan, 2004). In a radio interview the restaurant owner argued that, ‘people who come down to these places to simply do one thing and that is cause trouble’ (quoted in Boulton and Donovan, 2004).

Deferring a decision, some councillors began to float the idea of simply having a plaque set into the footpath of the street where *It’s a long way to the top* was filmed (Boulton and Millar, 2004). Warming to the safer option of simply copying something which had been done elsewhere, some councillors proposed a series of star-shaped plaques in the style of Hollywood Boulevard. This was ultimately shaped into the concept of creating Music Alley, honouring all of Melbourne’s famous musicians and strategically placed near major department stores. Prominent positions could be given to wholesome singers such as Olivia Newton-John and Johnny Farnham, far less confronting than Bon Scott (Donovan, 2004D).

**PHASE 3: CAMPAIGNING AND RIVALS**

This possible rejection stimulated an impressive media campaign by the *Age* newspaper and radio stations 3RRR and Triple J. A number of famous musicians and celebrities were quoted as being in favour. Attention was drawn to the extensive and positive overseas press coverage the idea had gained, particularly with CNN and the BBC (Boulton and Millar, 2004; Donovan and Boulton, 2004). Much publicity was given to a petition signed by 33 Swiss fans, the implication being that these were the sort of desirable international tourists which could potentially be attracted (Donovan, 2004C; Donovan and Boulton, 2004). Through straight news reports and Donovan’s column, an impression was generated that an out-of-touch council had been seduced by the tacky prospect of copying Hollywood with stars in the footpaths and/or had been frightened by a few objectors (see in particular Donovan, 2004B).

As the council vacillated, a new proposal emerged. The mayor of Port Phillip Council, an inner suburban area including St Kilda, stated that if Melbourne did not proceed, then they would rename a street after the band. The members of AC/DC had shared a house in St Kilda during the 1970s when they wrote and recorded their first album. Furthermore, St Kilda had a strong alternative culture and musical heritage (Boulton, 2004C; Donovan, 2004C).
PHASE 4: THE DECISION

Under such pressure, the Melbourne City Council finally had to make a decision. While some councillors argued for Music Alley and its star-shaped plaques, four councillors spoke passionately in support of the original proposal. Not surprisingly, these were relatively younger councillors. Faced with a strong media campaign and ten submissions in favour for every one objection, the council’s ultimate and unanimous decision was to create ACDC Lane (Boulton, 2004D; Boulton and Donovan, 2004; Donovan, 2004C; Donovan and Boulton, 2004B).

However, there was one qualification. The band’s name is divided by a lightning flash, usually represented in print by a slash, thus AC/DC. Under council policy, street names are not permitted to have such symbols. As such it was officially named ACDC Lane. Nonetheless, conscientious fans have made their own lightning flashes and bolted them to the street signage. As fast as council workers remove them, the fans replace them (Donovan, 2004D). Intriguingly Melways Street Directory also utilised the lightning flash in its depiction of the lane’s name.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is difficult to gauge ACDC Lane’s success as a tourist attraction. Occasional events draw good crowds and media coverage (Donovan, 2005). On the other hand, the lane is often completely deserted. Strangely, during the debate over its creation, all sides shared the common assumption that it would attract tourists. Those in favour of it pushed the idea of high-yield European independent travellers, exactly the sort of tourist that Melbourne craves. In turn, its opponents also painted an image of success. However, the nearby restaurant owner feared it would attract the wrong type of person, the fundamentalist church argued that it would influence impressionable youths. No-one, it seemed, contemplated that it would have little effect.

Whether or not ACDC Lane was a good idea, it is the process which resulted in that decision which is of prime importance. Many cities are searching for ways to diversify their destination image and attractiveness to tourism. In some cases the wrong choices are made and major resources are misallocated. In the case of Melbourne, the last decade has seen the creation of a number of tourist attractions which attracted visitor numbers far below those planned for. Examples of such under-performance include Crown Casino, the Melbourne Museum and the Australian Football League Hall of Fame. To avoid the repetition of such mistakes, it is important to increase our understanding of the processes of decision-making.

In the instance of ACDC Lane, its cause was championed by a small group of people. Significantly, they were not members of the decision-making body (the Melbourne City Council), nor did they seek to gain any financial benefit. Rather, they may be characterised as general community stakeholders. That they were successful was due primarily for their mastery of the media, in particular through presenting the idea, explaining its benefits and out-arguing their opponents. Such mastery arose through their active roles within the media, as journalists, columnists and radio presenters. In contrast, their opponents had neither the media skills nor access. As such, ACDC Lane is an instructive case study of how influential the media may be in affecting tourism policy.

Media skills were important to the advocates of ACDC Lane, for this was very much a case of contested heritage. In honouring AC/DC, the intention was to celebrate a different type of heritage. Such a view of heritage was very much at odds with the conventional view of heritage which has often been utilised for the city’s destination image. It was notable that much of the opposition to the idea drew on the safer traditions of heritage. Some argued that the move jarred too much with the ongoing gentrification of the city, others favoured an attraction based on blander mainstream performers. In the end, Melbourne bravely took the riskier path.
REFERENCES


