

floor of the venue and nothing could have echoed our thoughts more aptly than Dave's lyrics: 'it's too hot to move and it's too hot to think.'

One Christmas holidays I worked for the FTI cinema in Fremantle where we were supposedly hosting a 'cutting edge' collection of Australian music clips — we're talking videos that make The Buggles' 'Video Killed the Radio Star' look like *The Fifth Element*. My mind-numbing job was to walk around this room all day to make sure nothing was stolen (were people going to smuggle a television out in their sleeve?) but I would always time it so that I never missed The Triffids' 'Wide Open Road'. Unlike the other clips, this one was about my home.

When I was still relatively young I went and visited my brother who had by then moved to Sydney. We went and saw The Triffids and once backstage, no doubt trying to impress the object of my affections, I made one of my first and most pathetic attempts at smoking. My brother's girlfriend told me off in front of the whole band — in front of Dave. He'd never sleep with me now.

I got older and while my adolescent crush for this tall, eloquent man had been replaced by a much more realistic one on George Clooney, every year as soon as it grew hot in my new home of Melbourne, I would drag out my Triffids vinyl. For me no other band captures summer in Australia, particularly WA, like The Triffids.

Occasionally I would see Dave around. His health by now was poor, and certainly he did not cut quite the same figure he once had, but I found him no less intimidating. I would say hello but generally that was all I could muster. At the 3RRR ball, Dutch courage enabled me to actually sit down next to him and make my confession. His reply was gracious and I suspect not true, but the fact that he was talking to me at all was more than enough.

Suburban Stories: Dave McComb and the Perth Experience

Jon Stratton

While much of Dave McComb's lyrical output for The Triffids uses imagery drawn from the bush, the organizing structure of such lyrics is based on a mythic understanding of Perth as experienced by the inhabitants of that city. This understanding is infused with the idea that living in Perth is a suburban idyll. Consequently, any major crime in the city is experienced as excessive and transgressive — a Gothic eruption into the utopian everyday. In other large cities, a major crime is seen as an unfortunate element in the experience of everyday life; in Perth it is considered a threat to the idyllic community and a marker of the city's decline.

In 1962, the year McComb was born, Perth was embroiled in a crime wave perpetrated by Eric Edgar Cooke, who was apprehended in 1963 and hanged for murder the following year. The effect of Cooke's criminal acts on the people of Perth is summarized on the flyleaf of journalist Estelle Blackburn's chronicle of the Cooke case, *Broken Lives* (1998): 'The end of Estelle Blackburn's childhood saw the end of innocence for her safe little home city, all because of one man.' Construed as a Gothic bogeyman, Cooke was held responsible for various changes, such as loss of community, more often associated with urban expansion.

In 1986, three years after The Triffids had left Perth, Catherine and David Birnie commenced serially abducting, raping, and murdering girls. They were both given life sentences in 1987. The reaction in Perth was similar to that experienced in the aftermath of the Cooke case, as an ABC news report on David Birnie's prison suicide, in 2005, makes clear: 'Graeme Scott, a retired Supreme Court judge who also prosecuted the Birnies, says the case changed Western Australia. "I think it's

CE PUB 53513-1
STRATTON
357

probably the first time in Western Australia's history, apart from Eric Edgar Cook[e], where I think the public were justifiably in a general sense [as] apprehensive ... as they are now about terrorist bombings," he said.¹ Here, again, we have the idea of a set of crimes transforming the way residents of Perth experience their city. Again, the sense is of the loss of the suburban idyll.

McComb grew up in Perth when the rhetoric of a loss of innocence, a loss of suburban utopian community as a consequence of awful acts constructed in Gothic terms — of Cooke's actions specifically, and of the constant apprehension, to use Scott's word, that something similar might happen again — were the dominant ways of thinking about living in the city. Through what is generally regarded as the highpoint of the Triffids' corpus, however, McComb wrote very little about Perth and suburbia as such. Rather, the bulk of his lyrics concerned the male experience of female rejection, in other words thwarted or failed relationships. In these songs the man is left desolate, unsure of his identity, unable to move on, and at times, suicidal. I want to suggest that this pattern, too, is a function of the social order of suburbia.

Of course, suburbia is not unique to Perth. As a form of spatial organization it can be traced back to the expansion of eighteenth-century London and contemporaneous developments in the middle-class way of life, such as the establishment of the privatized nuclear family as the norm. However, Perth — along with Los Angeles — is one of the rare cities in which the suburban spatial form has become dominant to the almost complete elimination of a central business district.² Although recently an attempt has been made to increase the population density of the inner city in order to slow suburban sprawl up and down the coast, during the 1960s and 1970s — when McComb was growing up in the riverside suburb of Peppermint Grove, midway between Perth and the port city of Fremantle — the suburban dream was much vaunted and widely celebrated.

In Perth, the cultivation of suburbia coincided with what Veronica Brady describes as 'the Arcadian strain in Western Australian writing.' This tendency, Brady notes, is in keeping with 'a society founded by English gentilefolk in search of the "good old days" which, it seemed, would not come again in England.' For Brady, the Perth experience precipitates the kind of 'passionate need' that continues to drive

denizens to the beach in summer, 'something more than the heat and a hankering for unlimited water,' which Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote about in *Intimate Strangers* (1937). According to Brady, this need 'arises from the pressures of place and history or rather, the lack of history. On the one hand the sheer distance which separates the West Australian from the rest of the world, and on the other the uneventfulness of life leads to the sense of *ennui*, the classical *accidie*.'³ The beach is the one place where the utopian elements of the Arcadian and the suburban come together. In Perth it is the most generally accepted site of pleasure.

In McComb's corpus of lyrics, indulgence in relaxation — a kind of laid-back hedonism — brackets the Gothic mid-period albums. Thus, in 'Spanish Blue,' an early single: 'Nothing happens here/Nothing gets done/But you get to like it/You get to like the beating of the sun/The washing of the sun/In Spanish Blue.' The sentiment is reworked almost verbatim in 'Bottle of Love' on *The Black Swan*, The Triffids' final studio album: 'Well nothing happens here/And not too much gets done/But you get to like it/You get to like the drinking and the swimming around/Oh, passing around the bottle of love.' This is the easygoing hedonism of suburban, utopian, idyllic Perth.

Summer is the time when this hedonism is most apparent. In Perth, summer offers clear skies and almost unrelenting sunshine. As befits the city's Arcadian mythologizing, the natural world provides a context for the hedonistic experience. Thus, in 'Spanish Blue': 'you get to like the beating of the sun,' etc. But as McComb's lyrics shift to a more Gothic perspective — as on *Treeless Plain* — sun and summer begin to assume a threatening aspect: 'It's been a hell of a summer to be lying so low/Dogs and cats dropping down in the street' ('Hell of a Summer'). This is a summer where the natural world is not in harmony with human — for which, read: suburban — pleasures. Now the sun is *too* hot; pets can't handle it. Friendly relations have soured, becoming toxic: 'Every word of kindness tastes like bile.' In this hellish scenario we find an echo of Eric Edgar Cooke and Perth's anxious preoccupation with murder: 'What you cannot have, sir, you must kill.' This summer is the opposite — if you like, the Gothic, excessive and transgressive inverse — of that suburban, sybaritic idyll: 'And I say to you/It's been hell'; not, McComb emphasizes, the idyllic summertime

pleasures that the people of Perth like to imagine for themselves, but the hellish experience of constant fear and anxiety as when, for example, a serial killer such as Eric Edgar Cooke is at large.

Writing in the same issue of *Westerly* as Veronica Brady, poet Dorothy Hewett repudiates Perth's utopian image, and the commonplace notion of Western Australia as 'a wonderful place to bring up kids.' In her experience, 'Western Australia was mostly innocent, but ... naïve, self-congratulatory and deeply conservative, a perfect field for corruption.' The corruption of Western Australia, Hewett writes, 'is partly hidden, the worm in the bud is secretive, and mainly bears only a silent witness.'⁴

Since awful things do not happen in Utopia, they have to be thought of in terms of that 'excess' which I have been describing as 'Gothic.'⁵ It is not merely coincidental that Gothic, as a generic form of literature, developed in the same historical period that saw the invention of the suburb. The writing of Western Australia abounds with salient examples of the genre, from Peter Cowan's collection of short stories *The Empty Street* (1965), to Philip Masel's neglected novel *In a Glass Prison* (1937). Dorothy Hewett's poem 'Sanctuary', from her collection *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975), 'presents Perth as a place of quiet ... desperation where suicide seems the chief option for wild spirits.'⁶ And forms of violent or unnatural death, such as murder and suicide, offer a crucial challenge to the construction of Perth in terms of a bourgeois utopia.

Conversely, 'the terrors and horrors of transgression in Gothic writing [can] become ... a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety.'⁷ The crimes of Eric Edgar Cooke were constructed, in both the media and the courts, in Gothic terms; Cooke was transformed into a bogeyman figure, and for a generation after the case was closed mothers would tell their children to make sure all the windows and doors were locked 'in case Cookie comes.' The account published by Blackburn in 1998, thirty-four years after Cooke's execution, is structured along the lines of the Gothic doppelgänger, the 'double' characterized in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Dr Jekyll is convinced that human beings are an amalgam of good and evil. He conducts experiments to try to find a way of separating these two components of human nature. Hyde

was the evil aspect of Jekyll. By the same token, in Blackburn's account, Cooke 'was married with seven children, but these nights were his own, when he could give vent to his dark, evil side.'⁸ Further on she writes:

Clumsy and accident-prone as he was at his job, late at night he turned into the most skilful cat-burglar who could creep through houses and steal even while the people were at home. On the prow at night he was a completely different person. People who knew him during the day could never guess the other side of him.⁹

The motif runs right through the book until, near the end, we are told that 'those who knew Cooke were stunned that this charming, helpful man could have such an evil side to him.'¹⁰ Harelip and cleft palate notwithstanding, Cooke is construed as a good suburban family man by day who becomes an evil predator at night, dispensing with middle-class morality and 'going native' as David Punter suggests of Jekyll/Hyde.¹¹ Blackburn credits Cooke—an evil, malevolent force emerging, like the Birnies, from a perpetually obscure working-class background—with single-handedly transforming Perth into a typical Western city. She writes that after Cooke was caught,

the people of Perth were getting over their shock and settling back into the normal life of a city—though a vastly changed one. Perth would never be the same again. Never again would doors be left unlocked and keys left in cars. No longer would people enjoy the safety of a big country town where everyone could be trusted. Perth had grown up to become a city of suspicion and locked doors.¹²

In Peter Cowan's story 'The Empty Street', an apparent recension of the Cooke case, it is the failure of the marriage bond that transforms Michael, the frustrated middle-class husband, into a serial killer of women. Readers have observed that Michael and his wife Leila 'communicate on the most superficial level, confining themselves to bickering over minor domestic issues, without any hope of ever understanding or resolving their incompatibility' and that Cowan develops these 'underground tensions until the explosions of violence and murder seem inevitable.'¹³ The apparent cause of that Gothic excess and transgression, then, is the failure of the marital relationship

that functions as a cornerstone of 'the utopian fantasy, the suburban dream.'¹⁴

In McComb's lyrics the couple never get as far as being married. Nevertheless, on albums such as *Born Sandy Devotional* and *Calenture*, the theme of failed love as a source of excess and transgression serves as an implicit acknowledgement of the centrality of that relationship in the suburban social order. From its cover, a nostalgic image from a photograph taken in 1961 of Perth's southernmost coastal suburb of Mandurah — a small town whose local population is made up mostly of retirees and British immigrants, swollen by holidaymakers in the summer — *Born Sandy Devotional* projects itself as an album located in the Perth experience. The theme of the album, as McComb himself wrote, is 'unrequited love.'¹⁵ This thwarted love proves disastrous for the album's various narrative personae. As Wilson Neate observes on the *All Music Guide* website, *Born Sandy Devotional* 'is dark, its lyrics replete with death, psychological turmoil and despair.'¹⁶

In 'Lonely Stretch,' driving through the Western Australian bush serves as a metaphor for the emptiness and despair that comes from a failed relationship. At one point, the narrator sings: 'Sha La, Sha La La' — McComb giving us an echo of 1960s girl groups.¹⁷ 'Sha La, Sha La La' sounds like the backing chorus on The Shirelles' version of 'Baby It's You,' released in 1961; a version also appears on The Beatles' *Please, Please Me* album of 1963. Written by Burt Bacharach, Mack David and Luther Dixon, 'Baby It's You' is characteristic of the songs written by the Brill Building composers in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁸ These articulated the ideology of romantic love as it existed prior to any groundswell of disillusionment with suburbia in the United States. For a later era, disillusioned both with suburbia and the distractions offered by post-war consumerism, the songs of these girl groups offer a nostalgic fantasy of a time when true love was permanent and provided the foundation for married life in a utopian suburban existence. For McComb in the 1980s — as for Perth in the wake of the Cooke murders — both aspects of this fantasy were tarnished.

In early 1978, the band that David McComb and Alsy MacDonald formed was renamed The Triffids after the predatory, carnivorous plants in John Wyndham's novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), a book that had been incorporated into the Western Australian school

curriculum just a few years earlier. Wyndham's novel speculates on the ways in which middle-class English suburbanites behave when they are — suddenly, violently — no longer able to lead the life to which they have become accustomed. The book can be read as an acknowledgement of the instability that threatens the seeming certainties and solidity of suburban life. The carnivorous plants establish a motif combining aspects of science-fiction and Gothic writing; throughout *The Day of the Triffids*, the invaders' threat to suburban life remains paramount.

At a time when the utopian Perth idyll had been disrupted by the Cooke murders, the very name 'The Triffids' underscores the threat of strangeness and violent excess attending that disruption (though of course the name was not necessarily chosen self-consciously with such an effect in mind). In an unrecorded juvenile lyric, 'Take Me to Your Leader,' McComb envisions a spaceship visiting Perth:

You think I'm a fool? Listen what I say:
I was walking home from school,
It was a Wednesday.
A spaceship came down from the sky
It landed on the ground, that's no lie
Take me to your leader, tell her we
Need her, we've all got the fever now

In the next verse we are told that 'little green men' emerge from the spaceship. This highly conventional image drawn from the kind of pre-WWII science fiction that Wyndham had mimicked becomes a vehicle for the latent threat of disturbance to mundane, suburban experience.

Perth's Gothic anxieties are clearly exposed in another early McComb song, 'Nervous Side of Town,' released on The Triffids' 5th cassette, recorded in 1980. 'Nervous Side of Town' couples an almost jaunty, sing-along tune with lyrics suggestive of a darker, more problematic aspect of cultural life. The lyrics themselves, especially in the second verse, suggest the personal suburban neurosis that Jonathan Richman mined in his first album, *The Modern Lovers* (1976). 'Nervous Side of Town' starts as a suburban love song — 'If I took a turn at the next traffic lights/I could be at your door by the end of the night/

The effort required is less than small/To lift the receiver and place a call' — but the song's chorus effectively transports the listener to a territory much less safe, 'To the nervous side of town/Where you jump at every little sound/And you wear a nervous frown/And you sink helplessly into the ground.'

We are never told *why* the narrator's girlfriend is nervous. Hers remains a nameless, incipiently Gothic anxiety (McComb uses the same sense of nameless horror in 'Hanging Shed', on *Treeless Plain*).¹⁹ The girl's anxiety in 'Nervous Side of Town' is so great that she collapses, not just onto the ground but into it. We might read this together with the unnamed horror in 'Hanging Shed', as a resonance of deep-seated anxieties among Perth residents. Indeed, apropos of 'Nervous Side of Town', it was younger women that Cooke mainly attacked.

In later songs, McComb's acknowledgement of suburbia as a disturbing place to live gives way to an engagement with a more conventional theme, that of failed love. Occasionally, both themes intertwine as in 'Hometown Farewell Kiss' on *Calenture*. As the narrator's home town burns in an excessive, Gothic conflagration, McComb sings 'Erase my name from your lips as we kiss.' For those who know Perth the fire imagery conjures up the long hot summer weather when, without rain which falls mostly in winter, bushfires are a constant hazard in the districts around the city. At the same time, the image of a burning city carries Old Testament connotations of God's fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for their evil practices. Elsewhere I have discussed the influence of McComb's Presbyterian upbringing on his lyrics.²⁰ Here, certainly, there is a moral subtext. It would seem that the failure of the marital order on which suburbia is built was for McComb, a moral failure interpreted first through his religious upbringing and then through the Perth mythology of the loss of the utopian idyll. Indeed, in 'Hometown Farewell Kiss' McComb revisits 'The Nervous Side of Town' with more malevolent motives: 'Now I drive familiar smoky streets/I know this town, I know where to turn. All the while I kept a roadmap in my head/I just came back to see the people and their houses burn.'

Elsewhere on *Calenture*, as Michael Sutton suggests, McComb's lyrics 'detail ... the anger of romantic rejection with unflinching

bitterness'; even the up-beat 'Trick of the Light' articulates 'the tortured confessions of a man obsessed with his ex-lover.'²¹ In McComb's lyrics the male characters are lost, stranded. Their lives lack purpose when they are not in a relationship.

What we can see in these songs of unrequited love and despairing male self-destruction is the consequence of men adrift without the moral anchor provided by the love of a woman. As I have argued, in suburbia this romantic love leads to the marriage that underpins, and gives meaning to, the utopian suburban life. McComb grew up in Perth when the people of that city were recovering from the crimes of Eric Edgar Cooke which were construed in the excessive and transgressive categories of Gothic horror. McComb's lyrics express this horror and, like the stories of Peter Cowan, seek its origin in the failure of the love relationship that underpins the marital order of the nuclear family on which suburban society is built. In general terms this is the structure of what has become known as 'suburban Gothic' — the horror that lurks beneath the banal and benign surface of middle-class, suburban life. McComb's lyrics start by acknowledging that a horror lurks beneath the utopian fantasy of suburban life, and move on to explore this in terms of what happens for men when romantic love fails. Writing in the genre of the love song that is so typical of popular music, McComb's lyrics can be read as a metaphor for the experience of a lost utopia that continues to haunt the cultural life of Perth.