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1969

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## Australian journalist rocks New York

*Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia*

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Very little video footage exists of Australian journalist and author Lillian Roxon. However, in one recording taken less than six months before her death in 1973 at the age of 41, Roxon gives viewers a taste of the wit that inspired a fellow journalist to comment of her, “Like Oscar Wilde, what she writes is but a pale imitation of what she says.” In this footage – an interview with Gary Hyde for the popular music television show *GTK* screened by the Australian national broadcaster – Hyde asks Roxon if it’s true that New York “deals mainly in fringe music,” rather than more mainstream sounds. Roxon smiles widely and concedes that Hyde’s impression of the New York music scene is accurate: “If you want good, solid stuff, you’ve always had to go to the Midwest ... But I think that’s what’s nice about New York, it is that it’s bizarre and it gives you a little glimpse into the future. You always know what’s going to happen from watching there. It’s fringe today but mainstream tomorrow.” It’s the sort of quotable statement we expect from someone who has been compared to Wilde. It also shows Roxon to be intimately familiar with the contours of the United States of America after more than a dozen years working as a journalist in New York. When asked about the difficulties involved in sustaining an engagement with Australia, though, Roxon’s response comes quickly, no time for a smile. She says, “Well, it’s difficult ... I want to try to come here more often to, you know, I think, support the –.” Here, Roxon stumbles and loses her train of thought. When she begins again, she embarks upon a new sentence instead of finishing the previous one.

Later in the same interview, Hyde asks Roxon if she feels qualified to judge current trends in rock music. Again, a radiant smile. Then Roxon responds by telling him that no-one is qualified: “You know, the nicest

thing about rock and roll is that it isn't a science ... A 14-year old kid is as qualified as I am, and I'm as qualified as he or she is." In this response, Roxon manages to come across as both wise and modest. Yet, moments later, when she predicts that the New York Dolls and Bette Midler will be the next big things in music, her sage-like qualities become more pronounced, at least for the viewer today with some musical nous and the benefit of hindsight.

It was this discerning judgement that helped Roxon rise to the top of her field. A regular column for *The Sunday News* made her the first female rock writer for the New York mainstream press; more enthusiastic claims made on her behalf have her as the world's first pop journalist, ahead of Tom Wolfe who normally receives the credit. She was also the first person to author a comprehensive book chronicling the ascendancy of rock music and to treat her subject matter seriously, recognising in rock music the seeds of a cultural revolution. The book *Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia* was published in 1969 and became an overnight success, but the journey to get there was anything but straightforward.

Roxon was born Lillian Ropschitz on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 1932 in Savona, Italy. The Ropschitz family had migrated to Italy from Poland several years earlier in the face of anti-Semitism. They migrated again in 1938, following the pact between Hitler and Mussolini, only this time to Britain. In 1940, they finally boarded a boat bound for Australia, where they settled in Brisbane and anglicised their name to Roxon.

Roxon was sure from the time she published her first article in *Woman* at the age of 14 that she wanted to be a journalist. In fact, her decision to enrol at the University of Sydney following her graduation from Brisbane State High School in 1949 was reached only because she could not find a job in the field straight out of school. At university Roxon became involved with the Sydney Push, a left-wing subculture that bonded around its shared rejection of conventional morality and any form of authoritarianism. Roxon quickly became a central figure in this scene, famous for her interest in transcending the restrictive social mores of the 1950s, especially those relating to sex and sexuality. Following her graduation in 1955, Roxon found herself in much the same situation as she had been in six years earlier: she was unable to find a journalism job, in spite of having further honed her skills as a regular contributor to the university student newspaper. She took a job in the advertising department of a Sydney department store and later as a publicist.

Finally, in 1957, shortly before her twenty-fifth birthday, Roxon received her big break when she was hired to write for the tabloid magazine *Weekend*. The assignment suited her: it demanded the sort of salacious, gossipy

material, much of it having to do with sex, which would have made many women of her generation uncomfortable – but not Roxon. Still, Roxon was vexed by the restrictions placed on female journalists which meant they had to settle for reporting on lifestyle issues, whereas male journalists had their choice of politics, business and other more intellectually challenging matters. Ironically, it was this unwritten rule that led Roxon to write about music. Many years later, she would be dubbed “the mother of rock and roll journalism.” As a journalist for *Weekend* in the late 1950s, however, she had yet to discover her interest in the topic of music; this would happen when she moved to New York.

Two years after starting at *Weekend*, Roxon relocated to the USA. She struggled to find steady job prospects for several years following her emigration, though she was sustained by her connections to a variety of Australian publications. Finally, in 1963, more than four years after her arrival in the USA, she became the first full-time female journalist to be hired to *The Sydney Morning Herald’s* New York bureau, where she would work for the rest of her life.

Yet, Roxon’s reputation wasn’t built on the back of her contributions to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, but rather her connections to Max’s Kansas City, a New York City nightclub. The back room of Max’s Kansas City was a popular hangout for major players in the 1960s countercultural revolution, including the likes of Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, Brigid Berlin and William S. Burroughs. As for celebrities who performed live shows at Max’s Kansas City or stopped by when they were in town, the list is extensive: John Lennon, Yoko Ono, David Bowie, Aerosmith, Bob Marley, Jane Fonda, Janis Joplin, Robert Mapplethorpe, Iggy Pop, Alice Cooper. Roxon became a central figure in this milieu, and the contacts she made in the back room at Max’s Kansas City informed much of her writing, including *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia*.

However, some of her closest associates, including Australian journalist Derryn Hinch, were sceptical about the market demand for such a book. After all, rock journalism was still in its infancy when the encyclopaedia was published. *Crawdaddy!*, the generally agreed upon first American magazine of rock criticism, had launched in 1966; *Rolling Stone* hit newsstands in 1967; and *Creem* would make its debut the same year as Roxon’s book. The specialist music magazines of the USA and the underground press of the United Kingdom had proven that there was an interest in the serious treatment of rock music, but this proof came in the form of an inexpensive

and ephemeral magazine, a far cry from Roxon's proposed treatment of these same issues.

The encyclopaedia format is now an accepted and relatively stable form, but this was not the case with the rock-based version Roxon was writing. The entries in Roxon's encyclopaedia vary widely both in length, from a few sentences to a few pages, and in tone, from journalist objectivity to zany and more-than-a-little-biased impressions. While the entries are organised alphabetically, there is still an element of randomness to *Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia*, as the following description taken from the book's original front cover reveals: "Biographies – Discographies – Commentary – Analysis – Photographs – Miscellany – The only reference work available on rock and its roots. 1,202 rock stars in over 500 alphabetically arranged entries. Discographies with over 22,000 song titles, album tracks, singles, flip sides and release dates. The most complete rock book ever assembled." While most entries are built around a band or musical artist and include a list of band members, albums and singles, there is another type of alphabetised entry sprinkled throughout the book with subjects ranging from "Rock Managers" to "Producers", from "Head Music" to "Rhythm and Blues", and from "Memphis Sound" to "Nashville Sound."

Both prior to and following the publication of *Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia*, Roxon used her Max's Kansas City connections, as well as her journalistic clout, to promote Australian writers, artists and musicians. Famously, Roxon championed the work of Germaine Greer, resulting in Greer dedicating to Roxon her breakthrough book *The Female Eunuch* (1971), although the two also had a very public falling out. On another occasion, Roxon threw a party at Max's Kansas City for the members of the Australian Ballet. When it came to Australian musicians, however, Roxon was an even fiercer advocate. For example, she championed the work of the Easybeats and was instrumental in helping them break into the American music scene with their 1967 hit "Friday on My Mind". Yet, there exists little evidence to suggest that Roxon's Australianness had any great influence on how she saw herself and her place in the world. There was arguably no sense of self-consciousness in her inclusion of Australian bands and musical artists in her encyclopaedia. Of course, she paid more attention to Australian musicians than most American critics and rewarded them with newsprint, but this is not the same as constructing an identity based on her Australian heritage. Nonetheless, these sorts of interventions helped establish Roxon's reputation as one of Australia's great unofficial ambassadors to the USA.

Roxon's reputation was at a high point when she died in her New York apartment of complications related to her asthma. At the time, she was the author of a regular column in *Mademoiselle* magazine and host of her own radio spot syndicated across 250 stations. In the years between 1973 and the near-present, however, her reputation has, if not suffered, then simply waned. Yet, in 2002, Roxon's notoriety was revived by Robert Milliken's biography *Lillian Roxon: Mother of Rock* (republished in 2010 as *Mother of Rock: The Lillian Roxon Story*). Milliken's book subsequently inspired a documentary film, *Mother of Rock: Lillian Roxon*, which premiered at the Melbourne Film Festival in 2010 and was later shown on Australia's multilingual and multicultural television broadcaster, SBS.

The prospectus for a still-in-the-works documentary film titled *Not Fade Away: The Rise and Fall of Rock Journalism* perhaps provides a clue as to the reasons underlying this recent surge of interest in Roxon. The premise of the film is that, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, rock journalists constitute a dying breed. For those who believe the hype, Roxon represents the embodiment of a vanishing type. The recent popularity of Roxon as a subject can be understood as nostalgia for the Australian gatekeeper that is no longer necessary in a globalised world. The possibility of a single person exerting his or her influence on behalf of a given cause – in this case, the promotion of Australian artists – is a thing of the past. Now with all the multinational, multimedia conglomerates running the show, how can one person possibly make a difference in the fate of an Australian band or musician trying to make it big overseas? And since corporations, unlike people, regularly lack strong national affiliations, where does this leave the promotion of Australian artists?

Interestingly, the premise of *Not Fade Away* is shared by Milliken's biography of Roxon, with Milliken suggesting that Roxon came along at exactly the right moment to make it big as a rock journalist, since by the mid-1970s print journalism (and especially rock journalists who worked in this area) had declined in importance and influence. Where rock journalists had once been the sole interpreters of rock culture, Milliken asserts that in their place arose radio, television and, perhaps most importantly, the influence of the promotional arms of record companies as rock music became big business and people realised there was money to be made. We see evidence of this development in the revised and updated version of *Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia* that was edited by Ed Naha and published only five years after Roxon's death. Admittedly, on one level the release of a second edition is a testament to the success of Roxon's book and proves her early detractors

wrong. Yet, “A&R Men” replaces “Acid Rock” as the first entry in the new version, revealing the shift that saw increasing amounts of money being pumped into the promotion of rock acts and the consequent diminishment of the influence of the rock journalist. It is also notable that Roxon’s entry on her beloved Easybeats is missing in the second edition. The Easybeats apparently no longer merit inclusion in a rock music encyclopaedia. In a further example from the 1978 version of *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia*, Naha describes the Bee Gees in their early years as “the number-one band in Australia,” despite the fact that in the 1969 version of the book Roxon clearly states, “[The Bee Gees] grew up in the middle of a very busy and very competitive rock scene in Australia. But they were not ... Australia’s number one supergroup.”

Perhaps a third edition of *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia* awaits publication.

### Further reading

McGregor, Craig. *Up Against the Wall, America*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973.  
 Milliken, Robert. *Mother of Rock: The Lillian Roxon Story*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010.  
*Mother of Rock: Lillian Roxon*. Dir. Paul Clarke. SBS, 2011. Naha, Ed, ed. *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978. Roxon, Lillian. *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969. Sewall-Ruskin, Yvonne. *High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max’s Kansas City*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1998.