

The Festival Records Story

by Brendan Hancock and Matthew J Schelle

Introduction

After decades at the top of the Music Industry in Australia, Festival Records (now Festival Mushroom Records, after a recent merger with the Mushroom label), are now celebrating their 50th anniversary. It's hard to believe that an independent label such as Festival, which had an inconspicuous beginning as a high risk-fast gain investment opportunity, has steered its way past numerous obstacles to become Australia's biggest ever independent record label. It was Festival Records which took the chances and as such, it was Festival Records which was responsible in launching the careers of countless Australian Artists such as Johnny O'Keefe, Col Joye, Dig Richards, Johnny Rebb, Olivia Newton-

John, Peter Allen and The Bee Gees. And it was also Festival Records, which was instrumental in shaping the Australian Rock and Roll scene.

With what was initially a simple investment from a group of old war buddies working together, the label went through ups and downs, but the company always bounced back, due to the combination of off-beat thinking and sheer luck.

Although the Festival Records story does go beyond the years of 1977, it's the early days that the real story, the real magic took place. From the people working behind the scenes to the artists themselves, the following will give you enough information to understand how and why the famous label became what it is today.



Festival's 'REX' label was created to house the best of the new young artist who had joined the Festival Records Family. The brain child of L. J Hooker. It produced hits from Noeline Batley, Dig Richards and the Rjays.



14th November 1953 saw the release of Festival's first record, "Meet Mr Callaghan" by Les Welch on a 78rpm.

Record Breaking

In the early days of Festival's record production, initially there was a lot of experimentation going on with both the shellac and vinyl micro-groove discs they were producing. Most of the experiments lead to breakages, The first vinyl discs had no sound due to too much heat being applied, and their first LP (with the green and gold festival label) could not be played because the gold metallic ink would spread all over the record making it glitter.

Part One Humble Beginnings 1951-1959

Shortly after WWII, a highly successful and decorated army commander named Paul Cullen decided to finish his part in the armed services. He sought to put his keen business ideas to use, and it wasn't long before he established one of Australia's first merchant banks: *Mainguard Ltd*.

Mainguard's duties were to set up businesses in a range of areas, but one of their most primary duties was financing a number of innovative but high risk ventures. These included an assortment of unusual and diverse operations ranging from whaling companies to rice farming. But just because they were believed to be big gain investments, it didn't necessarily mean that they always paid-off.

Cullen employed some of his former army buddies, John Dulhunty and Cyril Beavis, to work as project co-ordinators. Their main purpose was to find struggling companies that could be cheaply acquired and then turned around for a good profit.

After some time, it was John Dulhunty that saw the potential in a small machine business known as *Casper Precision Engineering*, located in Redfern, Sydney. Dulhunty knew that vinyl microgroove LP records were becoming popular abroad and he also knew that EMI, the primary record company in Australia at that time, showed no sign of adopting this new system.

Although this new venture showed the promise of being a 'sure thing', Dulhunty knew very little about the music industry, so he sought out the advice of popular Sydney bandleader and close friend, Les Welch. Welch advised him there was indeed a need for another, 'alternative' record company, in Australia at that time. With that, Dulhunty convinced the rest of the group that the enterprise could be a good earner and he recommended that they invest in two Johns ten inch record presses held in bond on the wharf.



The Festival records head office and factory (until 1967) at 223-229 Harris Street, Pyrmont.

Immediately, Mainguard invested in the machine shop and moved in the newly acquired presses. Les Welch was also given a permanent job at Casper and they started to produce tailor-made shellac discs for individual clients. By late 1951, John Dulhunty had left to go overseas to 'sniff-out' any potential copying, manufacture and distribution rights for use in Australia, which in turn, would become the foundation of the company's first lot of professional record catalogue. On his return, Dulhunty had a licence to release classical recordings from the well known and highly respected United States label *Westminster*, but also struck-gold with licenses from other labels such as *Remington*, *Regent*, *Savoy*, *Atlantic* and the non US labels *Vox* from England and *Metronome* in Sweden.

After the product had been sorted out, a new name for the record company was needed. After a brainstorming session, it was Dulhunty's wife, Judith that came up with the name '*Festival*'. On the 21 October 1952, *Festival Records Pty Ltd* was born. The newly formed company moved its office to 126 Phillips Street Sydney and Dulhunty, was selected to become Festival's first managing director.

March 1952 saw an old picture theatre in Gladesville leased, and ten

working presses installed on site. Record production started with seven at the old theatre, with another five at the Phillip Street office. The position of festival's first recording engineer was filled by a young electronics genius named *Robert Iredale*.

After getting the initial teething sorted out, Festival found it had to find acceptance from both the music publishers and more importantly the radio stations, the outlets which would widen their exposure. At that point in time, most Australian radio stations were unenthusiastic about playing Australian records on air. In an attempt to get around this hurdle, Festival set about to make Australian made covers of overseas hits. By seeking out cheap but talented local artists, Festival could cheaply push their way into the critical '*airplay*' doorway.

It was 14 November 1952, when Festival's own Les Welch recorded '*Meet Mr Callaghan*'. Festival's first official record, a 78rpm disc, was given the catalogue number FM-1019 instead of FM-1, so as to give out the image that Festival was a big gun in the business. This first record sold over 10,000 copies within weeks, so it wasn't surprising that Festival's next releases were also by Les Welch.

In 1953, Festival released a prestige-packed set of the total Westminster recordings of Piccini's

opera, '*Tosca*', and firmly set the standard that Festival were a force to be reckoned with. Its major release coincided also with a set of local 10-inch LPs, which included Welch's '*Tempos De Barrelhouse*'. Now realising that they were set to fall behind, recording giants EMI quickly announced that they were going to begin pressing their own LPs in Australia. Shortly after, ARC also joined that race, pressing 45rpm and 33¹/₃rpm microgroove recordings at



An early festival records catalogue.



Festival's '53/'54 Catalogue catered for a good amount of popular jazz, swing, show tunes and stage musicals.



An example of a typical early Festival Records Release.



Les Welch at the piano with a vocalist Larry Stellar. Welch was responsible for a lot of Festival's early hits. Which were mostly made up of cover versions of well known overseas numbers.



An employee working in the most often humid section of the manufacturing section of Festival Records.

an exponential rate. John Dulhunty realised that it wouldn't be long before the competition would catch up to Festival's gains and set about to return to the US in 1954 to secure a significant piece of the *Decca Records catalogue*. Due to his success with Decca, Festival now had the rights to produce records from artists such as *Louis Armstrong, Danny Kaye, Bing Crosby, Frankie Lee* and many more.

Because of such luck and skilful thinking from the likes of Dulhunty in acquiring the overseas catalogues, it was not surprising that in next to no time Festival Records had become the second largest manufacturer of records in Australia. Due to the increase and demands of manufacturing and sales, the company moved its office from Phillip Street to a converted warehouse at 223-229 Harris Street, Pyrmont. But even with the sales and success that Festival were having, they were still struggling financially, but they kept with it, in the hope that something would come along and push them through.

In the mid 1950's, another size, the 45rpm 7inch record was quickly being developed, with many gramophones being adapted to play them. And it was Festival Records, which, once again, saw the marketing potential early and began issuing

Old Time Rock

*Oddly enough it wasn't just the teenagers who responded to the new rockin' sound, brought on by **Rock around the Clock**, as it was there were more copies of 'Rock around the clock' sold then there were teenagers to buy them. Thousands of adults also saw the film **The Blackboard Jungle** and asked for the Bill Halley hit the very next morning. Even some people who didn't even have a record player bought the record first and then a player to play it.*

45rpm extended play (EP's) to once more edge out the competition from EMI. In July 1955, the first of many 45rpm 'singles' was released. This single was in the form of Les Welch's cover of the overseas hit, 'A Man Called Peter', with vocals supplied by a promising local talent named Darryl Stewart. The song itself was based on the life of a Scottish clergyman named Peter Marshall, chaplain of the US Senate. Due to Festival's limited funds, the song was recorded under extreme difficulties. There had not been enough money to hire a big band backing, so instead Darryl and the rest of the crew had to settle for one trumpet (with echo) and one organ. Due to the tight and simple



Les Welch, Pianist, Bandleader and singer. He was already well known before Festival asked him to join the company, who in turn became their first recording artist but also the company's Artist and Repertoire manager.



With the Help of Les Welch, Darryl Stewart's "A Man Called Peter" was not only Festival's first 45 rpm single it sold over 100 000 copies.



A cover of a Les Welch early recording. Although the company was in its infancy, fancy names like 'Manhattan' and optimistic catalogue numbers were used to give the impression of a larger established company.



The Film Blackboard jungle, and the song "Rock around the Clock" which was played over the credits. Have been responsible for not only bringing rock and roll to the attention of many. It also help give festival records it first real taste of success.

nature of the amount of instruments and money, the end product was simple but highly effective. The single was released in August of 1955 and sold over 100,000 copies throughout Australia.

In 1955, crowds of people visited their theatres around the April to June period. For all these people who went to their local cinemas, it can be said that they were there for only one film in general. The low budget, black and white American film had caused a controversial sensation back home, and it was barely a shock that the same would happen here. 'The Blackboard Jungle', starring the popular actor Glenn Ford, would be responsible for turning the lives of so many people in a completely different direction. The film, now lodged firmly in music folklore, is regarded as being the spearhead of the Rock and Roll scene both in the United States and in Australia. The sounds of *Bill Haley and his Comets* filled the theatres in Sydney with 'Rock Around The Clock', giving many people the opportunity to meet their potential with this new musical style. Festival's A & R (Artist and Repertoire) man Ken Taylor was at the premiere, and so was a young Johnnie Ray impersonator named *Johnny O'Keefe*. One decided to get in on the song and cash in on the

wave of potential marketing revenue, the other decided to create a rock and roll band.

Ken Taylor knew that this new rock sound would mimic the craze that had already taken over the U.S. He also realised that the Australian 'youngsters' would be ready to identify with rock personalities, and so he knew he had to give birth to Australia's own local rock artists, who each had the power to reach out and touch, but also make or break Festival. But Ken Taylor wasn't the only one at Festival Records who saw the promising profits from rock and roll, and most importantly the Bill Haley song 'Rock Around The Clock'. Les Welch was already looking into acquiring the distribution rights, and as luck would have it, EMI failed to recognise the potential of the song and chose not to take up their first option to release it. Welch and the Festival team quickly snatched up the rights and rushed the release of the record in August, 1955. The hunch paid off and the record became an immediate success. For weeks at a time, all the manufacturing staff were working around the clock to fill the overwhelming supply of orders, and not surprisingly, for that period, it was the only record the company was manufacturing.

The record, 'Rock Around The



Bill Haley and His comets in 1955.

Clock', went on to sell over 144,000 copies and secured its place in history by becoming the fastest selling single for any Australian record company. Not only that, but it also made some much needed money for Festival and also proved that the 45rpm single could be a great seller. It also revealed an, as of then, unexploited money generator in the form of 'the teenager'. The teenager was the perfect market, easily influenced by trends and because they had just been given a standard hourly wage increase, in some cases earning more money than their parents, they had more cash to burn than ever.

Ken Taylor soon realised that for Festival's continued success, he had to cater for the teenagers and the new commercial market that was forming around them. Taylor knew that it was finally the time to break through with this new sound and some newly needed talent. Although the rest of the company weren't as optimistic as he was, Taylor was quickly given the responsibility of tackling the market. Through this position and his newly found power to make or break careers, he was eventually seen as a god-like figure through the eyes of promising young artists.

The plan of attack was simple: local people, local talent and musical

numbers that would rock the growing teenage market. It became the case that if Taylor failed, Festival's demise would be inevitable. And then, as if by fate, he found Johnny O'Keefe, or rather, Johnny O'Keefe found him.

On a typical morning at Festival Records during the 'sign up' search, Ken Taylor sat down to read his Sydney Morning Herald newspaper to discover that the hunt for Festival's first Australian rock artist had finished without him. In the press, Johnny O'Keefe's name stood alone as being the artist. Intrigued by this, Taylor called JO'K to congratulate him on his success. During the conversation, Taylor invited the performer around for an audition at his new office at Harris Street, Pyrmont. After being given an interview and a standard audition, Taylor, amazed at both Johnny's talent and audacity, signed him up as Festival's first Australian rock artist: this time for real.

After Johnny O'Keefe's signing, news quickly got out that Festival were looking for a team of artists to be attached to their label. Soon enough, Festival were flooded by a wave of rock wannabes, each one a clone of some other rebellious role model that they had seen or heard about. Of the many that tried to stake a claim at Festival, few had what it took to be

The Contract

It seems the story of Johnny O'Keefe's recording contract with festival records has become rock and roll folklore. As Ken Taylor states in his book 'Rock Generation' it was the company secretary who broke the news to him with when he showed him the morning's Sydney Morning Herald.

"I see you have booked your first rock artists," the secretary said.

"Oh I have? tell me more," replied Taylor.

"Someone called Johnny O'Keefe has announced in the press that he has been signed by us."

Ken Taylor then asked his secretary to get this Johnny O'Keefe on the phone.

"Congratulations," he said, not trying to hide his sarcasm.

"On what!" O'Keefe replied.

"I understand you have been signed by Festival Records?"

There was a pregnant pause, and then O'Keefe cautiously said,

"Who's speaking?"

"Ken Taylor, the general sales manager and artists and repertoire manager of Festival Records."

Another pregnant pause and then: "Well, am I?"

Ken Taylor responded, "I don't know - what do you do?"

"I sing."

"Can you prove it?"

O'Keefe regained his composure and asked "Will you give me an opportunity?"

"Yes, come and see me."

*So O'Keefe took up Taylor's challenge and proved to him that he could indeed sing. Although Taylor wasn't too overly impressed with O'Keefe's voice. He was impressed with his confidence, and sheer determination. O'Keefe got his recording contract and with suggestion and blessing from the then touring Bill Haley, Recorded and released in July of 1957 (*You Hit The Wrong Note*) Billy Goat with *I'm Still Alive (The Chicken Song)* as its flip side. Despite constant plugging at dances and socials, the single received limited airplay and sold around 2300 copies.*



An early publicity shot of a very young J.O'K. His sheer tenacity and ego got him signed to Festival Records as their very first Rock Artist signed to the label.



Ken Taylor, Festival's A&R man for many years, also considered by many as 'GOD' due to his ability to make or break a career.



The beautiful Judy Stone, who's single '4,003 221 Tears from Now' was a huge success for both her and Festival.



Ken Taylor with Noeleen Batley and Brenda Lee (right).

stars. Then, quite unexpectedly, a group of former country and western style artists who had evolved into flashy rockers, took the lead in the prospective sign-up stakes. The Joy Boys, formerly known as the K.J.Quintet, led by singer Colin Jacobson with brothers Kevin and Keith in tow and young drummer Johnnie Bogie and saxophonist Laurie Irwin, grabbed Taylor's attention. Intrigued by their potential, Taylor took five girls from his office out to a concert at Manly to see if his feelings were right. The girls, all unbiased, smart and not the type easily impressed, acted as secret judges. Despite their placid nature, they were won over in minutes. The very next day The Joy Boys were signed.

Almost immediately Johnny O'Keefe warned Ken Taylor that differences between Col Jacobson and himself, both personality and artistry wise, would cause rivalry between the two. The two men were polar opposites: Col was a relaxed, straightforward kind of guy whereas Johnny was outgoing and dynamic, which would lead to his eventual nickname, 'The Wild One'. It would be these differences, which would present Festival with a unique platform, where they could sell the singers to different types of consumers. Col's gentle nature would give Festival the edge in the more conservative market whereas Johnny's attitudes appealed more to the kids who were only out to have a good time. But despite Taylor's plans to build up a set of unique artists for Festival, some insiders were criticising his ideas, believing that it would be hard for the company to promote so many artists at one time. There was also a feeling that the stars might detract from one another. Despite all this, Taylor pressed on, with grander things in mind. Taylor was going to make each performer an individual task, each with their own distinctiveness.

Dig Richards, the third performer to be signed to Festival, was another kettle of fish. His appeal seemed to have more to do with his simple and partially withdrawn nature than anything else. It was his James Dean-esque looks which helped him get his foot in the door at festival and it was his unfinished composition with his

Talent

In his book Rock Generation, Ken Taylor described the basic characteristics found and the sort of wildlife that would be attracted to an open audition or 'talent quest', of which he held at his festival office on the night of the first Friday of every month. Many young hopefuls would come with their guitars, drums, gimmicks, sheet music and other instruments to prove to Ken Taylor, Mr Make or Break, aka GOD, that they were indeed the next Elvis, Frank Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald. Most of whom turned up to these 'talent' quests, where most of the time void of such a thing. A lot of these very same people were absolutely certain that had the goods to be the next music star and in some cases were convinced that they were indeed better than the O'Keefe's, the Joyes, The Devlins and Batley's. So when 'GOD' through his finger down and calmly but frank, gentle, but honest, told them that their voices, their talent or even their whole act sucked. These self disclose 'stars' found it impossible to accept.

Although bribery was believed to be the key to win ole' Ken Taylor over, It was soon realised that the man could not be persuaded, and would never change his mind over any person who seemed void of talent. Although it wasn't uncommon for young and ambitious Marilyn Monroe mimicked looking girls to seductively sway into Ken's Office and offer an alternative form of persuasion. Ken being the decent man he was, made sure these girls would finish their 'act', which sometimes lead to his amazement to a complete striptease. Ken admitted these girls were talented, but not musically. And needless-to-say they never got a recording contract from Festival Records.

brother entitled, 'I Wanna Love You', that sealed the deal.

Now that he had enough artists onboard, Taylor instigated another search, this time for the right songs for the artists to use. During this time, many public appearances were set up for Festival's fledging children. These included picture signings and record shop appearances. At times, Taylor arranged for the press to 'accidentally' be informed of where and when



The Gentleman of Rock, Col Joye signing Autographs for fans in 1961. Joye was the second Rock and Roll artist to be signed by Ken Taylor of Festival Records.



Three Legends of Australasian rock and Roll. The wild one Johnny O'Keefe, with Johnny Devlin and Dig Richards in 1964

an artist would be out and about. It wasn't unusual for Col Jacobson, who by now had changed his name to Col Joye, to be mobbed simply when walking down the street. Although on a few occasions the artist themselves were rumoured to have paid fans to 'go crazy', Ken Taylor disapproved of such unnecessary actions. Indeed, Festival and Taylor himself, knew what they were doing.

Due to the success of the previous year, Festival branched out even further and obtained the remaining catalogue from the Decca and Vocalion labels. In doing so, Festival Records now had artists such as Jackie Wilson and Buddy Holly to add to their growing overseas catalogue collection. Now that the company had expanded completely into their new Harris Street address, with a new recording studio and laboratory, a new factory manager named Gordon Marshall set about building more brand new microgroove presses. And with every new record made on the presses, a ceremonial christening was given, with a nice bottle of bubbly.

Whilst Festival were expanding and showing signs of being a major success in the record business, based primarily on the good fortune from 'Rock Around The Clock', Main-guard's other businesses and investments were having a major battle with dealing with debt, let alone making any profits. Because of this, shareholders watched as Mainguard declined quickly until it ceased to trade as a merchant bank in 1958.

In May of 1958, the L J Hooker investment corporation, who were interested in Mainguard's real estate assets, took over the floundering company with a controlling share. Shortly after in August, Mainguard became non-existent on the stock exchange and L J Hooker personally took over the management of Festival Records. During this time, L J Hooker consolidated its gains in the industry by buying a music publishing business called Crown Music Publishing and by also setting up a subsidiary to Festival named Rex Records Pty Ltd, which was to be specifically used for Festival's top local artists.

To Be Continued...



Next Issue

The Festival Records Story Part Two

The business side of record making comes into play when Rupert Murdoch, in the process of building his media empire, takes control of a vulnerable Festival records, which harks a new era in the company's history, when the wholesome values and spontaneous magic of the 50's makes way for the drug induced, sex filled 1960's.

We will also have a look at the artists that help shape not only Festival Records, but Australian Rock and Roll as well. We will look into some of the most popular labels, such as Lee Gordon's, 'Leedon' and 'Lee Gordon' labels, more on 'REX' as well as some other classic tales from life inside the walls of Festival Studios.

Also Check out the official ARRAS web site, for a multimedia version of this article, which will feature colour photos, downloadable artworks, and music. www.tararas.cjb.net



A Nice shot of Col Joye, The Gentleman of Rock and Roll.

Division

Not long after the Sydney real estate Investment Company L J Hooker took over Festival Records, A&R man Key Taylor was also given the double duty of Sales Manager. Taylor soon realised using the famous L J Hooker name would be a great benefit to the company, and made his first job as sales manager revamping of the company's stationary, letterheads, business cards and most importantly the record labels to include the words 'A Division of L J Hooker Investment Corporation' to be placed just under the now famous festival logo. This he thought would be a great way to capitalise on the well-known L J Hooker name, and in turn help the struggling Festival Records to be noticed and taking even more seriously. In his own words Taylor thought the use of the L J Hooker name with the Festival logo, 'implied that we would stand solid and straightforward through all shades of fortune.' But instead Hooker himself found out about Taylor's executive

decision and was furious. Mainly because L J Hooker took the Record company on as an investment and because of his lack of knowledge in running a record business he was already looking into ways to sell the company and still make a profit.

An urgent meeting was held, with Ken Taylor the centre of attention.

Then Hooker, businessman erupted.

"By what authority, have you publicly associated Festival Records with the L J Hooker Investment Corporation?"

"Well we are associated, aren't we?" replied a cool, calm and collected Taylor.

"That's beside the point," yelled Hooker, "Who gave you the authority to do this?" and then came Taylor at his persuasive best...

"Nobody...But Festival Records is an Australian Company – about to sell Australian performers to Australia. The L J Hooker Company is an Australian Company selling Australia to Australians. It is my conviction that

some of the parent company's prestige and glory will rub off on to Festival Records. That was my plan. It will give us the edge I need to make an impact for Festival. And it's my belief that in a very short time the glory of Festival records will be rubbing off on L J Hooker."

There was a pause, silence, Hooker looked at the bald man with the pencil thing moustache and and smiled.

"Mr Taylor, go ahead. And if you have any problems from any source or from anybody, speak to me personally. Push it as far and as fast as you can!"

It wasn't long after that L J Hooker created the 'REX' label that was designed for the elite of Festival's new local talent. Some of the artist featured on the label included **Dig Richards and the RJays and Noeline Batley** who's single **Barefoot Boy** reached No. 5 in most states of Australia during 1960, making it one of the labels successes. Unfortunately the label was phased out by 1961.