

After *Fall*

The Reception

Like all albums, *Fall* was released into a culture where its worth was measured against a series of subcultural conventions with elastic and multiple authenticities looming large at the front of the highly subjective critical mind. It is important to examine how the album was received and perceived, although it should be reiterated that this represents only part of the interactive composition of meaning. This section will focus largely on the critical response to *Fall* and the demonstrable popular reaction in new media. The critical response was positive with an arc from ‘damning with faint praise’ at worst, to highly enthusiastic at best. It is significant to note that while I was concerned that a certain ‘sameness’ would limit the narrative of the album, that decision seemed to trouble some critics. In *Rave* magazine Claire Rosenberg noted that:

Mostly ... the band strike gold with their country and folk-inflected songs. Brass, fiddles and mandolin partner perfectly with The Swamp Dandies’ quirky melodies, and if the band keep to their country-folk path we can look forward to more tracks that inspire memories of holidays and good times.¹

1 Rosenberg, C. 2011. The Swamp Dandies’ *Fall*, *Rave Magazine*, from <http://www.ravemagazine.com.au/content/view/30937/181/> Retrieved April 26, 2012

The whole feeling of the album was praised; however, the inclusion 'Are You True?' was deemed to evoke inconsistent resonances of 'poodle rock' ('which unfortunately causes bad flashbacks to Bon Jovi')² creating a contradiction of 'Rock Pyrite' in comparison to the successful 'folk gold'.³

Similarly, in the *The Mag* 'Roots' review⁴ it was 'The Deal' with its dark sonic atmosphere that received the most positive review. This review was impressed with the band's application of its longevity 'combining the bands' ten-year experience with the 'look at me' exuberance of a first recording' but lukewarm about the general acoustic pop thrust saying that while 'Olivia (was) a bright infectious mandolin laced love song ... indicative of many tracks on the album ... *The Swamp Dandies* really shine on darker acoustic fair such as ... The deal'.⁵ This slight criticism clearly underlines the potential discord between the album's two outer markers. It seems a reasonable response from a more subcultural roots purist to be discomfited by the shameless exploitation of pop melodicism and harmony for its lack of edge and acoustic authenticity as understood by the magazine's subcultural conventions.

Yet while these reviews seemed to express a mild concern at the marriage of pop and acoustic earnestness, it seemed that for Jeff Jenkins the greatest strength of the album was the crucial darkness lurking beneath the pop smile:

Arnold still knows how to write a nifty tune. 'I still got fire left in my belly,' he sings in the sparkling Tumbling Down, a duet with Georgia Fields. Later, he declares 'he's leaping into life

2 *ibid.*

3 *ibid.*

4 Wilks, Daniel. 2011. 'Roots'. *The Mag*. Australia: JB Hi-Fi. 56.

5 *ibid.*

like he's crashing through a wave'. The mood is carefree, but the songs are deceptively dark. Arnold has crafted a classic.⁶

More diligent in his research than most, he also mentioned the academic link. 'This new album is part of Greg Arnold's PhD project ... But there's nothing academic or formulaic about the songs'.⁷ He has reiterated his enthusiasm for the deceptive darkness when including the album in his annual top ten.⁸ Critically, he understood the compositional intent and appreciated the narrative journey across the whole album.

In *Rhythms Magazine*⁹ Martin Jones noted that with 'Arnold's knack for Beatle-esque pop melody' and the 'old timey instrumentation ... it's not power pop, it's horse-power pop'. Similarly, he has noted the connection with Things of Stone and Wood while observing that there is more freedom and technical capacity 'to roam stylistically'¹⁰ on this album. Ultimately, he concludes that 'strings and horns are used in classic pop form and Bedgood's talents zip in and out all over which help overcome the odd compositionally predictable moment to render a nimble pop record'.¹¹ Jones also notes that 'Arnold lets rip with another epic female-name chorus' in 'Olivia'.¹² The song was also described as a 'veritable foot tapper'¹³ and as 'one of those beautiful little Beatles-esque simplistic 3 and a half minute

6 Jenkins, Jeff. 2011. Fall: The Swamp Dandies, *Stack Magazine*, (December). <http://www.stack.net.au/music-reviews/163/The-Swamp-Dandies/Fall> (accessed April 26, 2012)

7 *ibid.*

8 Jenkins, Jeff. 2011. Howzat! Albums of the year. *Living in the land of OZ*. <http://www.livinginthelandofoz.com/howzat-21dec2011.html> (accessed April 26, 2012).

9 Jones, Martin. 2012. CD Reviews. General releases. *Rhythms Magazine*. February. Issue 235. 65.

10 *ibid.*

11 *ibid.*

12 *ibid.*

13 Homebrew. November 2011. Australia: CRN. Syndicated radio show.

songs Greg seems to throw out so easily'.¹⁴ It briefly appeared at number seven on the AIRIT 'Great Southern Chart'.¹⁵

While the use of a female name in the chorus was also mentioned in high profile interviews by both Robbie Buck¹⁶ and Lindy Burns¹⁷ it was not the lyrical resonance from the big hit 'Happy Birthday Helen' that gave the song a surprising modern viral (or at least cyber sniffle) life, it was Rachael Lucas' film clip.¹⁸ Utilising mimed performances by the band (with new drummer Monique Zucco), the clip tells a story (refashioned out of the story of the song's actual literary biographical inception) of a bachelor whose sad world is haunted by a ghost of the many classic personae of 'Our Livvie'. The clip had been popular anyway but it gained a significant boost when it received Olivia Newton John's imprimatur via the official website and 'Facebook'.¹⁹ She has described the clip as 'sweet ... and hilarious' and the song as 'catchy' and also, clearly understanding the 'crush' spirit of the song, reiterated her enthusiasm by 'tweeting': 'Awww thanks Swamp Dandies!! Sooo flattered! Hilarious! Catchy too!'²⁰ She also chose to promote the clip and song in her promotional appearances for the film *A Few Best Men*²¹ which included the mainstream Channel Ten show *The Circle*.²² As a consequence, her many followers in the cyber realm started visiting the clip and leaving comments, creating a genuine response in the press

14 Lost Songs.com.uk: *Songs they never play on the radio* Things of Stone and Wood <http://www.lostsongs.co.uk/#/things-of-stone-and-wood/4547483873> (accessed April 4, 2013).

15 November 8, 2011.

16 Buck, Robbie. 2011. 2BL (ABC Local Radio) Interview of author, December 2, 2011.

17 Burns, Lindy. 2011. 774 (ABC Local Radio) Interview of author, November 4, 2011.

18 Lucas, Rachael (director). 2011. Olivia (promotional video clip). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfiP977tNBc> (accessed April 23, 2012).

19 Newton-John, Olivia. 2012. <http://www.facebook.com/olivianewtonjohn?ref=ts>, (accessed January 10, 2012).

20 Newton-John, Olivia. 2012 at <http://twitter.com/#!/olivianj> (accessed January 11, 2012).

21 Elliot, Stephan (director). 2012. *A few best men*. Australia: Icon Film Distribution. (feature Film).

22 2012. at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkiPM9Yjyso>. Accessed May 14, 2015.

with feature articles in *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*²³ and 'Industrial Strength'.²⁴

The responses in the comments section beneath the clip include international quotes such as: 'SOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO Great. . . Congrats from Lima, Peru!!'²⁵ 'I loved the music plus homage to Olivia. I cried to see this clip'²⁶ and 'Absolutamente GENIAL!'²⁷ Additionally, it was felt that this was an 'Homage to Olivia at its best . . . simple fun nostalgic quirky ... luv it'.²⁸ It was 'a delicious treat'²⁹ and jimster23 'Love(d) the song, the retrospect ... and of course ... Olivia!' With no 'dislikes' (as at February 15, 2013) and a surprise personal invitation from Newton John to perform at the launch of her Cancer and Wellness Centre it seems we had been understood in the new medium.

The response to the clip and the song were fleeting and did not result in a significant change in fortunes for the album; however, it demonstrated that the public as represented by Olivia Newton John fans seemed remarkably unconcerned with the marriage of organic acoustic instrumentation with pure pop melodicism, they just joyously consumed the clip for free in a very pop cultural manner. They interactively composed new meaning for the material after being invited to do so via their subcultural scene allegiance to Olivia Newton John. They responded without deep consideration to 'Olivia' in a manner

23 Dwyer, Michael. 2012. Song for Livvie chimes with comeback. *The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald*. January 16, 2012 <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/song—for-livvie-chimes-with-comeback-20120115-1q191.html> (accessed April 30, 2012).

24 Eliezer, Christie. 2012. Industrial strength. *The Music Network*. <http://www.themusicnetwork.com/music-news/industrial-strength/2012/01/18/industrial—strength-january-18/> (accessed April 30, 2012).

25 victorvilleperu 2011

26 giselle4695, 2011. Translated from Portuguese.

27 6vst4v0 2011

28 weezieolivia 2011.

29 gooty64 2011

that would be approved by Barker and Taylor as an appropriate reaction to a 'simple thing of beauty'.³⁰

What *Fall* Means to Me

What does it mean? I could not escape a plea from the heart

You know what it means to me

She said don't walk away I'm down on my knees

Please don't be mean to me.³¹

There is an implication that the form of an album such as *Fall* (inextricably linked to a product for broadcast and sale) is defined by the relationship with the audience or market. Its meaning is determined by how it is received. I would contend that all popular recordings should also be examined from the artists' perspective as if the work was meant for them alone. The significance of Csikszentmihalyi's 'person'³² as creator, consumer and critic should be considered. While the art is almost inevitably made with the intent of broadcast, it does not necessarily follow that the aesthetic decisions were informed by the desire for it.

As discussed earlier, the history of popular music production is closely linked with commerce. Industrial success has afforded a few fortunate artists greater access to expensive resources to pursue increasingly elaborate productions. As Ed Cherney has suggested, we 'hopefully make something where ... commerce and art meet ...at the same intersection'.³³ It is tempting to

30 Barker, Hugh and Yuval Taylor. 2007 *Faking it: The quest for authenticity in popular music*. London: Faber and Faber. 160.

31 Finn, Neil. 1985. Mean to Me. Recorded by Crowded House USA: Capitol CP 1778. (Vinyl Single).

32 Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi. 1997. *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: Harper Perennial. 29.

33 Massey, H. 2000. *Behind the glass: Top Record producers tell how they craft the hits..* San Francisco: Backbeat Books. Cited at 9.

make our assessment of the worth of any popular music artefact utilising the word in the genre's title: popularity. This worth would be rendered quantifiable by sales alone. This test would instantly remove the majority of recordings from the discussion. Reiterating an earlier observation, most records are not hits. It is crucial in this particular analysis, and I would contend in the analysis of nearly all recorded popular music, that 'popular' should be used as a descriptor of style not commercial viability. It is very important to note what the album is not about. It is not, and was never about 'the money money money, the Cha-Ching Cha-Ching ... the Ba-Bling Ba-Bling'.³⁴ No aesthetic decisions in the composition of *Fall* were motivated by any hopes for material gain. This observation is not a surprising descent into comical subcultural rant ('it used to be about the music man!'). It is a reiteration of the central aesthetically serious intent of the pop musical pursuit and my own long-established artistic values ('the day a band starts thinking about demographics and markets is the day that band should give up').³⁵ The project was undertaken in the full understanding that it would, like the majority of other recordings, be a financial folly. 'Demographic' and 'drive time' imperatives were never mentioned in the journals. Any perceived catchiness was present due to the love of catchiness itself, not the love of any financial or status benefits that catchiness might afford its author.

It is important to reiterate that the autobiography reveals considerable 'Supergrass style' anxiety at the time of Things of Stone and Wood's pop success and that *Fall* explicitly documents this conflict ('Until You Fall'). The album not only deals with

34 Cornish, Jessica, Lucasz Gottwald, Claude Kelly and Bobby Ray Simmons Jr. 2011. Price tag. Recorded by Jessie J. USA: Lava Records. 2765826 (CD Single).

35 Dwyer, Michael. 1995(b). Things of art & business. *Rolling Stone* (Australia) May. Author cited at 22.

some of the lingering emotional issues, it also takes a position. It is celebratory of pop. To achieve the type of 'soul baring'³⁶ required for serious introspective art it is essential that album pulls back the curtain and reveals, not only the true complexity of a character, but the uncomplicated love of pop music as part of the authentic expression of self. Barker and Taylor argue that there is an increasing trend towards using 'how successfully the artists expressed themselves'³⁷ as a criterion for the assessment of rock, and they fear that while this criterion has led to some great work it has also been responsible for some 'truly self-obsessed music'.³⁸ It could be contended that the love of pop and the 'authentic recesses of the artists' mental processes'³⁹ are in no way mutually exclusive.

Fall represents myself and my collaborative recordists in acoustic pop form. It is literally autobiographical as demonstrated by 'Fall Into My Hands' 'Tomorrow', 'Follow the Sun', and 'Until You Fall'. It is also how I imagine the world. It is fiction as demonstrated by 'You're Not Coming Home'. Yet that fiction often springs from a true biographical incident as demonstrated by 'Olivia', 'Are You True?', 'Tumbling Down', 'Everybody Stands in Line' and 'The Deal'. All of these stories and their recorded forms, independently and together, broadcast my character. They represent the coincidence of biographical, cultural and subcultural influences that have informed my character. These literary stories have been augmented with additional melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and sonic compositional material. This material also represents the major influences of my life, specifically the musical

36 Barker, Hugh and Yuval Taylor. 2007 *Faking it: The quest for authenticity in popular music*. London: Faber and Faber. 191.

37 *ibid.*

38 *ibid.*

39 *ibid.*

influences. Significantly, the marriage of direct acoustic organic instrumentation and pop melodicism (which could seem to be contradictory and definitely troubled some critical perception) is an absolutely authentic representation of my musical self. Had I compromised this honest artistic desire in the pursuit of some perceived (and highly contestable) subculturally ethnocentric notion of authenticity it would have actually compromised the true personal artistic authenticity of the work. Without the artistic will to personalise, *Fall* would have been no more than fad following and artless generic re-representation.

Similarly, the album represents the subscene of which I am a part: the band The Swamp Dandies. When listening to the album now, it is impossible for me to extricate the music from the process of making the music. The scene is held together by personal relationships. ‘This machine is made of people’.⁴⁰ Consequently, the album is also a representation of all of the participants’ characters and all of their influences. It represents the coincidence of a group in a creative moment. It is a purposeful and chaotic union of multiple biographies and subcultural alliances that form a new elastic scene of their own. The project brought all of those influences together for a productive purpose. In addition, the making of *Fall* was fun. As noted in the preface, in this context, the presence of fun does not represent a corruption of the seriousness of artistic intent.

It was also emotionally significant in the life of this band as the drummer moved to Japan at the album’s conclusion. In the journals it is noted that, after the final Hammond overdub: ‘We finished with this and it left us with a really nice feeling ... texts back and forth afterwards ... lovin’ ourselves sick’⁴¹The

40 Wild Pumpkins At Midnight. 1989. *This Machine Is Made of People*. Australia: Mighty Boy. MBWP 2001. (Vinyl L.P.).

41 Author July 16, 2010.

album has seemed to successfully represent Keith Sawyer's notion of 'group flow'.⁴² We were a group happily 'performing at the top level of its ability'⁴³ Simon Frith has argued that 'any attempts to draw a clear distinction between authentic and inauthentic popular songs, using musicological or sociological criteria, are pointless' (2001, 106).⁴⁴ It could, however, be argued in this context that an album's authenticity should not be measured against a series of highly contestable, subjective and ethnocentric scene determinants. It could be measured against the honesty with which the art has been created. *Fall* is a true representation of myself, even if that truth has been imagined, on occasion, into a new fictional form. To reiterate the 'Listener-causal' theory⁴⁵ there is an additional layer of emotional projection when I listen to the album, I can hear the 'love' in the grooves. I hear the band as people, I recall the event, and I hear my family life. My motivation was to make what I believed was a great album and I drew from a well of personal experiences and musical skills to pursue this. The album is a succinct sonic narrative collating the collision of my present life, my future hopes and my memories. While it may be too pop for the folkies, too folky for the indie-hipsters and even too short for the prog-rockers, it is just right for me. Its broader cultural footprint has been light at best, but the journals reveal that *Fall* does pass three aesthetic 'Polonius' tests. It possesses 'brevity', which 'is the soul of wit'⁴⁶ and there has been 'method' in the

42 Sawyer, Keith. 2007. *Group genius: The creative power of collaboration*. New York: Basic Books (2007, 71 cited in Morrow 2012, 3)

43 Morrow, G. 2012. Creative conflict in a Nashville studio: A case of boy and bear. In *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 6, Conference Papers, June 2012 from <http://arpjournal.com/content/issue-6/> (accessed September 19, 2012). 3.

44 Simon Frith 2001. Pop Music. In *The Cambridge companion to pop and rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street. 93–108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 106.

45 Addis, Laird. 1999. *Of mind and music*. London: Cornell University Press. 12.

46 Shakespeare *Hamlet* Act 2, scene 2

creative ‘madness’⁴⁷ Most importantly, as documented in the journals, I have to my ‘own self’ been ‘true’.⁴⁸

Time to sign off now. I have (a) record, I think it’s beautiful. I think it has delivered a great journey across a short period of time and I think it has my highest song writing and recording peaks within the journey. Good luck out there little album called Fall . . . remember . . . no matter what happens . . . your father loves you.⁴⁹

47 Shakespeare *Hamlet* Act 2, scene 2

48 Shakespeare *Hamlet* Act 1, scene 3

49 Author September 11, 2010.