

## KINGS CROSS REVISITED: THE OTHER SIDE

by John Clare\*

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*[This piece was written in May, 2017.]*

I might well have preferred Paris, Hampstead, Fitzroy, Lizard Island, Kyoto, Penang, etc for revisitation, but I have not had the dough for some time. And I can ride my bike to the Cross in no time. I have not forgotten that noble youth from the suburbs who often travelled in to the Cross to win praiseful praise in a burst of violent glory. So often savage and violent humiliation awaited him.

Then again I recall that often on a sunny morning, at a breakfast table along the strip where chaos, lust, evil intent and the sale of bodies had ruled the night before, it could feel balmy and even wholesome. Poisonous gasses had evaporated in the morning light or rolled down William Street toward the city. Famous artists, musicians and even poets leaned back complacently in an aura of peace while discoursing freely. Poet Kenneth Slessor (who led a double life working for Frank Packer) declared that the lights of the Cross were more beautiful than Ayers Rock (Uluru). I doubt that he had been to the latter.



*The poet Kenneth Slessor declared that the lights of the Cross were more beautiful than Ayers Rock...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN NEWS & INFORMATION BUREAU*

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I lived in several parts of Kings Cross, including Victoria Street during the battle between a developer and his bouncers recruited from the Macleay Street establishments and the politicians, the Builders Labourers Federation (yes it was one of the Green Bans), squatters and one last legal tenant in Mick Fowler - a merchant seaman and traditional jazz musician. In fact trad jazz and on one occasion at least



*Mick Fowler: a merchant seaman and traditional jazz musician...PHOTO COURTESY GREEN LEFT*

modern jazz musicians played in demonstrations against the development. I lived in an attic flat on the other side of the street from which I could look down through the plane trees at events opposite. Most of us got death threats. I had begun writing about it, for a pornographic publication of all unlikely things. Yes, we are still in Kings Cross where stranger things have happened.



*Juanita Nielsen, pictured in 1974: she was not, as some believed, a leading light in the struggle...PHOTO CREDIT NIGEL McNEIL*

Up the street from my flat Juanita Nielsen ran her advertorial publication. She was not, as some believed, a leading light in the struggle. In fact she showed no sympathy until it was practically over. She took local restaurateurs to dinner, or they took her,

and then she ran enthusiastic articles and charged them for it. She was in fact against the squatters and other riff raff - until she had an affair with Jack Munday, Secretary of the BLF. We should note that she knew everyone in Kings Cross business and politics, and for mysterious reasons suddenly announced that she was going to expose them all in her magazine. She was murdered as you probably know, and this was organised by an ex detective. This was about the worst police force we'd had since the Rum Corps.



*John Clare (on his haunches, arms folded) with other protesters, including Jack Munday (in front with hand in his pocket), Secretary of the BLF... PHOTO COURTESY REBECCA CLARE*

Before this the ABC had asked me to write and narrate a program for a particular Sunday night spot which would be called "My Kings Cross". Among many interviews, including one with the well-known Hungarian tobacconist, and some with the bikies who hung about a strip club where a fellow called Half A Moe spruiked ("Come on



*Juanita Nielsen waged a campaign against the destruction of Victoria St, Potts Point in her newspaper NOW...*

you filthy perverts; get in here and look at a chick in the raw with a fat in your claw!"), There was also the one with Juanita Nielsen in which she spoke voluminously and flat out. This stopped them in their tracks at the ABC. "Who is this woman? Look, you should do all the commentary". I told them that she knew much more about the Cross and its politics than I did, but it reached a sticking point and I took back the Nagra tape recorder they had lent me, and also returned the commission I had been paid. The poet Ron Blair declared that this was the only time anyone had given an ABC commission back.

Before that I had lived round the corner and some way down Elizabeth Bay Road. Most nights I walked up to Macleay Street and along a bit to stand beside the open door of a night club where they imported guitar and vocal trios with such names as Trio Los Panchos and Trio Los Paraguayos.

I loved the atmospheric and poignant sound of their voices and the pang of their guitars. After a while I would go on to the end of Macleay Street and turn around into Brougham Street where El Rocco stood. Both Bruce Johnson and I have written a little differently about this piece of Sydney history, which still operates, but with several kinds of music.



*Among the superb musicians who played at El Rocco and went to America for extended periods were bassists Lyn Christie (left) and Bruce Cale (below)...*





*Two more who played there and went to America were Mike Nock (above) and Bryce Rohde (below)... PHOTO CREDITS AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM (NOCK) & FRANK BURKE (ROHDE)*



Among the superb musicians who played there and went to America for extended periods - or forever - were bassists Lyn Christie and Bruce Cale, and pianists Mike Nock and Bryce Rohde. Incidentally the place had no espresso machine but instant coffee! Clearly the music was the only attraction. Duffel coats were rare. They were featured by beatniks who were more into folk music. For myself the music opened pathways into the thinking of the outsiders and a musical realisation in the light of modernism. Down there I heard Kandinsky angling and weaving. Curiously, many of the imagined outsiders were more integrated with society than I was. I had left home at 14 and experienced hunger and curious adventures along the Hume Highway. Clubs like El Rocco were my secure suburbia.

People have told me that I would not know the Cross now, but I rode there this morning and had breakfast beside Macleay Street, and all the buildings looked the same.