Drumming for Peter Garrett

David Nichols

Rob Hirst

WILLIE’S BAR AND GRILL: A ROCK ‘N’ ROLL TOUR OF NORTH AMERICA IN THE AGE OF TERROR
Picador, $30pb, 251pp, 0 330 36412 X

I N OCTOBER 2001, as a member of a group called Huon, I set out on my fourth US tour drumming in an ‘indie’ rock band: a low-key, non-profit cross-nation trek performing shows in colleges, small bars, even a few suburban basements. It was an extraordinary time to travel across the States, particularly since much of it was spent in a hire car with only AM radio for entertainment. AM radio in the US is riddled with amphetamine-infused shock-jocks outdoing each other in ways to vituperate the puerile liberal élites. Apparently, these élites had just destroyed some skyscrapers in New York. More poignant was the way Osama bin Laden had so quickly become a player with the usual pumpkins and skeletons in Halloween festivities, his name inscribed in white gothic lettering on black cardboard coffins on suburban front lawns with an express wish that he ‘never rest in peace’.

While Huon didn’t see too many big hotels or packed halls, I can’t help feeling my ‘rock ‘n’ roll tour of North America in the age of terror’ experience was superior — in terms of intimate experience — to Rob Hirst’s.

For a quarter of a century, Hirst has been drummer and songwriter for Midnight Oil, seemingly content to play a backseat role to the arresting and exotic lead singer/frontman Peter Garrett. From the late 1970s to early this year, when they broke up, the Sydney group broke new ground in politically alert rock — from smart satirical social and political commentary often satirical — to vituperate the puerile liberal élites. Apparently, these élites had just destroyed some skyscrapers in New York. More poignant was the way Osama bin Laden had so quickly become a player with the usual pumpkins and skeletons in Halloween festivities, his name inscribed in white gothic lettering on black cardboard coffins on suburban front lawns with an express wish that he ‘never rest in peace’. While Huon didn’t see too many big hotels or packed halls, I can’t help feeling my ‘rock ‘n’ roll tour of North America in the age of terror’ experience was superior — in terms of intimate experience — to Rob Hirst’s.

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Hirst is honest with his readers about Midnight Oil’s commercial status. In Australia, they have been an iconic band: a low-key, non-profit cross-nation trek performing shows in colleges, small bars, even a few suburban basements. It was an extraordinary time to travel across the States, particularly since much of it was spent in a hire car with only AM radio for entertainment. AM radio in the US is riddled with amphetamine-infused shock-jocks outdoing each other in ways to vituperate the puerile liberal élites. Apparently, these élites had just destroyed some skyscrapers in New York. More poignant was the way Osama bin Laden had so quickly become a player with the usual pumpkins and skeletons in Halloween festivities, his name inscribed in white gothic lettering on black cardboard coffins on suburban front lawns with an express wish that he ‘never rest in peace’. While Huon didn’t see too many big hotels or packed halls, I can’t help feeling my ‘rock ‘n’ roll tour of North America in the age of terror’ experience was superior — in terms of intimate experience — to Rob Hirst’s.

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For all the book’s faults, Hirst does come through as conscientious, likeable and committed. He is genuinely fond of most of the people he works with. While their jokes and actions sometimes fall flat on the page, there is nevertheless a convincing portrayal of a rock tour — with its cross-cultural mix of performers and performers — and the reader’s generally not invited to see the inside the world of a rock tour. The reality of the touring a group like this does. Midnight Oil are, clearly, not the types to wrap themselves in cotton wool ‘on the road’ — even if their budget allowed it, which it probably doesn’t — but their tour is still, largely, a series of hotel rooms connected by views of the insides of a coach, and some performances. We’re not surprised, of course, that there’s not one iota of self-awareness in most rock tours — backstage practical joking — is tame. But when Hirst gets off on this far-reaching jaunt, he usually heads for a museum, and the reader’s generally not invited along, which is probably for the best. Hirst has little of the journalist in him: he’s an anonymous Australian musician filling in time in Chicago, or wherever, before he goes off to play another ripper of a gig with the band he’s played in since he was a kid.

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