

Permed Days

David Nichols

Anthony Griffis
AIR GUITAR

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THE RECENT FILM *Garage Days* begins with budding rock star Freddy (Kick Gurry) enlivening sex with his girlfriend Tanya (Pia Miranda) with fantasies of singing an AC/DC number to adoring hordes. Anthony Griffis has a similar fantasy and repeats it often throughout *Air Guitar*. The Rolling Stones come to him cap in hand, asking if he will replace Mick Jagger, who's sick, or doing something else: Griffis fills Jagger's shoes with aplomb, the crowds adore him as much as they adored the old singer, and he gets to sing 'Let's Spend the Night Together' et al. with 'Keef' by his side and Charlie pounding away nonchalantly behind him. Griffis sets up the scenario and follows it to its climax almost pornographically.

Born in Taree in the late 1960s, Griffis tells us he was seized at a young age by an obsession with popular music — primarily the Stones, and then, later, other bluesy rock outfits — which compelled him to jump up and down on his bed brandishing a tennis racquet (as a replacement for a guitar; therefore, not technically *air guitar*) while his favourite group pumped it out through the tinny speakers of his cassette player. Griffis does not miss an opportunity to poke fun at his younger self: his naïveté, his lack of rock 'n' roll knowledge, his egotistical desire to strut his stuff in front of an audience. Nor does he miss the chance to show us the ways in which his aspirations contrast starkly with a pallid, semi-rural early-1980s adolescence.

One of the primary weaknesses of Griffis's humour emerges here. He seems to believe it is inherently funny to simply *name* aspects of the pop culture of the early 1980s — long permed hair on men, for instance, or the group Kajagoogoo. Another band, Mother Goose, which regretted releasing a comedy record ('Baked Beans') in 1977 almost as soon as it came out, cop their one-millionth serve as Griffis joins the legion of armchair critics. Deriding a long-gone youth culture is surely the stealing-candy-from-a-baby school of social commentary, and few readers will delight in these evocations, particularly since they are frequently over-explained or diluted for the uninitiated. Worse still, Griffis devotes considerable space to waxing nostalgic about what he used to watch on television as a child — the section on *Live*

Aid being the nadir. True, the book itself is about an unrealised fantasy of fame, popularity and rock 'n' roll mateship, but does this justify third-hand reports of rock milestones as experienced by a lonely boy through a Taree telly?

As self-indulgent as they may be, reminiscences of passive viewing do set the scene for Griffis's forays into rock as an active participant. From his late teens, he has performed in public not as an instrumentalist (all that time posing with the racquet was wasted) but as a singer in a variety of cover bands in regional New South Wales. The bands, as he describes them, are filled with men too old or too young or too unimaginative to do anything worthwhile. They play versions of familiar rock songs (Angels, AC/DC, Midnight Oil, The Who and, of course, The Stones) for drunken punters at RSLs.

The covers-band aesthetic is described in great, even loving detail, but there is one element missing, presumably because it would have been quite an impediment to wringing the hilarity from the situation: we are never told whether Griffis is actually any good as a vocalist. The fact that his bands got bookings in what must have been a tough circuit suggests that his main conceit — that he's terrible, 'daggy', a 'lounge-room rockstar' — is probably the biggest fiction in this fictionalised autobiography, and the reader senses that Griffis, or more likely an enthusiastic editor, has overstated the awfulness, or hopelessness, of the situation for laughs. More importantly, Griffis as a central character is inconsistent: it is not convincingly outlined why, if singing rock 'n' roll was an eternal obsessional dream of his, he did not venture to the big smoke to follow his ambition. He looks on Sydney rock bands in awe — they write their own songs, apart from anything else — but is unable to make the logical leap.

Griffis's persistent self-portrait as an egotistical dunderhead is further complicated and undermined when he finds it necessary to mention that, while rockin' the RSL, he was simultaneously pursuing a career in journalism — in print and then television. It is not rock 'n' roll but a job as writer/presenter on *Beyond 2000* that finally takes him to Sydney, by which time he is in the right place but the wrong industry.

Thus the twin prongs of the book thwart each other. Griffis's sense of humour compels him to populate this world with people reduced to cliché — the women, in particular, are horribly cardboard. This negates any chance of dramatic development in the narrative. To Griffis's credit, he does not invite his readers to see his failure to make the grade as a rock star as tragic. But *Air Guitar* stays in first gear because of Griffis's staunch refusal to analyse, contemplate or otherwise develop the premise, beyond the level of self-deprecating humour.