Freud in London

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James Freud

i am the voice left from drinking: the Models — from the 'burbs to 'Barbados' and beyond
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ONE DAY during school holidays in 1981, the year I turned sixteen, I ate spaghetti bolognese in a new brick house in Noble Park. My hosts were two delightful girls around my age, dressed in checked mohair jumpers and straight black trousers. Sonia and Letitia ran the Models fan club. Our subjects included whether I should grow a 'floppy fringe', like Models’ keyboard player Andrew Models fan club. Our subjects included whether I should grow a 'floppy fringe', like Models’ keyboard player Andrew Models’ Sean Kelly, on the television show Sounds. This was an event which many in the pro-Models camp found meaningful: Sean and James were friends again! Freud and Kelly had started their music careers in the late 1970s, in the Teenage Radio Stars. When Freud rejoined Kelly in the Models in 1983, his pop sensibility helped to take them to the top of the charts with the hit singles ‘Barbados’ — a line from that song gives this book its title — and ‘Out of Mind, Out of Sight’.

Previous Australian rock memoirs have revolved around 1960s stars (Billy Thorpe’s two memoirs; biographies by Jim Keays and Glenn Wheatley), while the 1970s are yet to be properly plundered. However, this is among the first aimed at a generation of Australian pop fans, as opposed to rock or ‘indie’ fans, now in their thirties. The prominent exception is Michael Hutchence, whose death four years ago sparked numerous biographies and tributes. Like his close friend Hutchence, Freud started in the 1970s and was still recording two decades later, but he was essentially a 1980s pop star, with all the pomp and excess that implies.

Freud (born Colin McGlinchey in 1959, raised in Blackburn) is a scattered talent, beholden to his musical enthusiasms, and — probably to this book’s detriment — difficult to pin down. The most amusing section of i am the voice left from drinking relates Freud’s trip to the UK in 1980, on the back of chart success with the song ‘Modern Girl’, to record an album with Gary Numan. The latter was an international star, cornering that year’s market for icy, alienated synthesiser pop — essentially by re-creating a wit-free version of the sounds and style of David Bowie’s mid-1970s albums. Freud, to his credit, resisted attempts to remould him in the Numan style — eventually. The description of the Numan set-up is hilarious: the white-faced, robotic Numan living in a caravan in the backyard of his parents’ house in Berkshire, more interested in producing horrendous farts than producing Freud’s ‘breakthrough’ album.

The overdue puncturing of the Numan façade aside, the book is sometimes unnecessarily sour. A key incident sees the Birthday Party’s bass player, Tracy Pew, throwing dog shit at Freud during a show at St Kilda’s Crystal Ballroom. Freud’s satisfaction here that his aggressor ‘was last seen lying dead in a bathtub’ (Pew died in 1985) will upset many of Pew’s friends; his suggestion that Pew’s death was ‘karma’ for the shit-throwing is genuinely tasteless. More importantly, the anecdote highlights one of the book’s major weaknesses. It appears in the context of Freud poking fun at himself and his own vain pretensions: wearing ‘Kings Road leathers’, affecting an English accent, berating his audience for being ‘a pathetic bunch of fuckwits’ and telling them to listen to him because ‘I’ve just been to London’. If any Australian musician deserved to have a turd thrown at him at that night, it was obviously Freud, but he certainly doesn’t reflect on it. Freud’s presentation of his younger self is problematic throughout because he is unwilling to unscramble the intricacies of his, or any mainstream musician’s, relationship with the public and peers. Once, clearly, he took himself far too seriously: now, he’s not serious enough.

Freud’s attitude to the Models is also hard to gauge. He joined the group primarily because of their avant-garde qualities, but makes much of the common rock star frustration: he emerged from the wreckage of a hit band with no money. While we need not be surprised that it soon stopped being about ‘art’, and started being about success and wealth, Freud doesn’t discuss this ideological transition at all. A disastrous solo album, followed by a stint as Kylie Minogue’s bass player, mark a commercial decline that Freud seems unable to explain except through characteristic rhetoric: lack of music industry ‘support’.

Freud has left the music business and alcoholism for a sober career in advertising. Several times he acknowledges his wife and children for providing the incentive: it’s that kind of a redemption tale. Whether Freud’s book provides any insight into the music industry of the 1970s and 1980s is another matter. As with many drink-and-drugs autobiographies, the reader is left wondering how Freud recalls specifics so well; calculated vagaries give the impression that he’s skirting some issues for fear of causing offence. Other details — there’s no mention of the pub band Kelly and Freud played in during the late 1990s, for instance — are rationalised away for the sake of dramatic impact.

Better books about Australian pop musicians remain to be written: conceivably, better books about James Freud himself. While this one has entertaining moments, an engaging if inconsistent style, and the added attraction of Freud’s own testimony, a proper assessment of the radical and exciting world of 1980s pop is still in its infancy.