


chapter 8
**HIGH
VOLTAGE**

 AC/DC's debut album, *High Voltage*, was released on 17 February 1975 on the Albert label distributed through EMI, and was the first hard evidence that AC/DC were NTBFW (not to be fucked with).

The back cover was restrained enough, even slightly mysterious. There was just a series of photos of Malcolm, Angus and Bon and a contact address for their then fan club in Sans Souci in Sydney's south, not far from where Bon made his official Sydney debut with the band.

The artwork on the front was an entirely different thing. Again the brainchild of Albert's Chris Gilbey, it showed a cartoon dog pissing on an electrical substation and a pair of what were presumably crushed beer cans.

Chris Gilbey: 'I look at it now and think, how naff is that? But at the time it seemed quite, not revolutionary, but it was kind of confrontational. I had people saying to me, "You can't have a dog pissing on the front cover of an album! That's disgusting! You can't do things like that!"'

Commercial artist Paul Power was working at EMI in Sydney and put himself forward to handle the cover art with the assistance of fellow EMI artist, the late Paul Winter.

Paul Power: 'I recall a few people in higher positions who were giving me shit about my lack of taste in rendering such offensive album cover art. I nearly told the three nameless EMI honchos to get fucked. I was under a lot of pressure. I thought I'd nailed what the band was about. I was about to get fired, I could feel it, when who should turn up? Bon Scott! I guess he heard the fiasco in the hallway. He put his arm around me and said, "Isn't this great? You've really caught what the band is all about! I love it!"

'The three execs were gobsmacked! You could have heard a pin drop! Bon said to them, "I'm taking Paulie out for a beer. You don't mind, do you? I mean, artwork this fucking good should be rewarded, right?" The three execs mumbled, "Right." We waited until we were outside EMI and laughed our arses off. He saved my job and the *High Voltage* album cover.'

If the cover of *High Voltage* set AC/DC well apart from the clean-cut pack of the day, what was inside the album sleeve in tracks like *She's Got Balls* — the song about Bon's ex-wife — represented an even more brutal act of division.

'She's certainly got balls,' Bon told Sydney radio station 2SM in February, 'she got mine for a long time.'

Stick Around was another insight into Bon's love life at the time, his inability to hold onto a woman for more than one night and his failure to understand why.

'I got a good song out of it,' he told 2SM. 'They still leave. Now I sing it every night in bed.'

Show Business was a preview of what was to come from Bon about life on the road, while *Little Lover*, a song Malcolm had been toying with since he was about 14, was originally called *Front Row Fantasies* but was changed to protect the innocent. And the not so innocent. After all, Bon wrote the lyrics about Angus, 'the most prominent littlest lover that I know'.

Like *Baby, Please Don't Go, Love Song* — as it's called on the

album — dated back to Dave Evans' time with the band and was originally known as Fell In Love. Bon had rewritten the lyrics. George Young and Harry Vanda lit up when they first heard it, believing it could do what the 11-minute epic Evie had done for Stevie Wright.

'We're not entirely debauched,' Phil Rudd told 2SM about Love Song in a rare interview grab. 'We've got our soft spots, y'know.' 'Speak for yourself!' Bon fired back.

Interestingly, the single was called Love Song (Oh Jene) thanks to a spelling mistake. It was to have been Love Song (Oh Jean).

High Voltage was launched at the Hard Rock Café in Melbourne on 19 February. Admission was one dollar, or free with 'an AC/DC eyeshade', a sun visor-type fashion accessory inexplicably popular at the time.

By that stage, Bon had shaved his hair short, as a large portion of the band's audience in Melbourne were Sharps. He thought that if he couldn't beat them — well, not all of them at once, anyway — the next best thing was to adopt at least part of their look.

Not that he or anyone else in the band was scared. In fact, a fight one night at the Council Club Hotel between the band's road crew and the notorious Heidelberg Sharps ended in a clear victory to the AC/DC camp.

As far as friend John Swan was concerned, this tenacity, particularly of Malcolm and Angus, was very much in keeping with the old line that it's not the size of the dog that counts, but the size of the fight in the dog.

'The boys — Malcolm and Angus and Bon — would come off the stage because some idiot had fucking thrown a bottle or was abusing Bon, and we were at the side of the stage and they've gone straight off the stage into it. They're not the tallest guys in the world, they're not the best-built guys in the world, but I tell you what, don't fucking upset them. You wouldn't think there would be very much fight in them but ...'

Shortly after the album release, bass player Paul Matters joined the band, following the recommendation of George Young, who had seen him perform with Newcastle outfit Armageddon.

Given that AC/DC's record company Albert's were based in Sydney and the city was yet to fall to the band's assaultive charms, a reception was held there for the release of *High Voltage*, followed by a string of proud homecoming nights at Chequers.

But when the album's first single, Love Song (Oh Jene) backed with Baby, Please Don't Go, was released on 3 March it was still Melbourne and Adelaide radio that registered the bulk of the attention — but for Baby, Please Don't Go rather than the more hearts-and-flowers, prog-rock-styled Love Song.

It peaked at number 10 on the national charts the following month, and it was on the back of this success that the band made their first television appearance outside of 'Countdown', playing Baby, Please Don't Go on a telethon appeal in Melbourne.

In early March, Matters was sacked after just a few weeks and George again filled in on bass. By that time a trip to the UK was in the planning stages and the band went back into Albert Studios to record a new single.

They had loved the title of their album for its imagery and its energy and felt that it represented everything AC/DC stood for, so they decided to take it one step further and write a song called High Voltage. Albert's Chris Gilbey didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Chris Gilbey: 'I remember after we'd started marketing the album and it was doing very well, George and Harry came in and played me this rough mix they had of a song called High Voltage. I said, "For Christ's sake, guys! We've got the album out called *High Voltage*, now you're bringing me a bloody song called High Voltage! It's too late to pull the album, add another track, there'll be a lot of disappointment blah blah blah." So I was thinking, well, what the hell are we going to do?'

Despite Gilbey's concerns, High Voltage would be released as a single. George played bass on the recording but, as good as he was, it wasn't a long-term solution, so auditions were held at Lansdowne Road.

The missing piece they were looking for arrived on 16 March. His name was Mark Evans. Having grown up in the no-nonsense

Melbourne suburb of Prahran, 18-year-old Evans' background was perfect.

Steve McGrath, a roadie with AC/DC, tipped him off that the band were looking for a guitar player. Evans knew of the group, having seen them on 'Countdown', and went down to meet them.

It was a Saturday and Evans was given a tape of the *High Voltage* album to listen to so he could prepare himself for his audition the following day, which, he discovered, was for a bass player not guitarist.

It didn't really matter. He had begun playing guitar when he was 14, before switching to bass at the age of 17. Even though he had little more than 18 months' bass-playing experience under his belt, it was a role he was comfortable with.

After his audition, Evans went to the Station Hotel and had a fight with a bouncer, which resulted in him being barred from the hotel. The following Tuesday night, when he went back to see AC/DC play, security not surprisingly enforced the ban from two nights earlier and wouldn't let him in. Bon, who Evans had never met before, went in to bat for him. What Evans didn't know when Malcolm told him AC/DC were playing at the Station that night was that he had already been chosen as the new bass player in what was his first serious band.

The timing of the gregarious Evans' arrival couldn't have been better for his own career or for grounding the band with a solid line-up. And with Evans on board, Malcolm, who, like George, had played bass from time to time over the past few months, could move permanently back to guitar. AC/DC were then able to present a unified front for their legendary 23 March appearance on 'Countdown' performing Baby, Please Don't Go.

The band ran through the song at rehearsals, then Bon disappeared right up until the taping of the show. At the last minute he emerged dressed as the planet's most disturbing schoolgirl. Hilariously funny as he looked — the perfect 69 opposite to Angus in his schoolboy suit — there was something strangely threatening and dangerous in Bon's manner and actions.

Sunday evening family television would never be the same again, and all to get a rise out of ‘Countdown’ host, Ian ‘Molly’ Meldrum.

Angus: ‘Bon came up with the idea. He thought, well, I’m going to shock! So he went out and got that schoolgirl thing. Bon thought, well, if we come along and be who we are, he [Meldrum] will just walk away [thinking], “Oh yeah, ho hum!” But when Bon showed up like that, he just went nuts!’

Billy Thorpe recognised a lot of what he used to do in some of Bon’s antics.

Billy Thorpe: ‘We used to have beer drinking competitions and wet T-shirt contests with jugs of beer and people pouring beers over their heads. It was all about alcohol. I used to get away with murder and Bon watched what worked, like we all did — like I stole it from [Johnny] O’Keefe. So I saw a lot of myself in Bon. Once again, I’m not saying that Bon Scott came out of Billy Thorpe, but I definitely was an influence on him, as were other people.’

Follow-up performances on ‘Countdown’ — which between November 1974 and December 1976 would see them appear on the show no fewer than 38 times, either in person or on video clip — were less outrageous but no less theatrical. It was all about making maximum television impact, so ‘Countdown’ appearances were quite deliberately made into events.

While his schoolboy outfit was the most favoured for live work, for one appearance on the show Angus was transformed into Super Angus, for another a pilot in a home-made plane. Most memorable — apart from Bon’s schoolgirl get-up — was Angus dressed in an impossibly hot gorilla suit in a cage, being dragged along by Bon dressed as Tarzan.

‘Countdown’ producer and director Paul Drane recalls:

‘Before the show started we got Angus into the gorilla suit and in this cage, which we elevated up above the audience into the lighting grid before the audience came in. He’s suspended up there inside this gorilla suit — which would not have been all that comfortable, I shouldn’t imagine — with his guitar, and being really, really quiet. The other guys are somewhere on the studio set.

‘So the audience came in and they didn’t even know Angus was there. And we dropped him down into the crowd after the intros — so he’d probably been up there for nearly half an hour — and they just went absolutely berserk. It was just incredible.’

At that time, theatrics weren’t confined to the band’s ‘Countdown’ appearances. Michael Browning virtually had an in-house carpenter at the Hard Rock Café, who was able to knock together almost any idea that sprang into their minds.

One week it was a huge spider web made of rope and Angus would do a Spiderman routine, or Bon would come out as a spider in a suit with multiple arms and legs. On another occasion, there was a telephone booth on stage in which ‘Clark’ Ang was meant to transform himself into Super Ang. Bon put a stop to that and locked Angus in, or perhaps the door simply stuck and Angus couldn’t get out.

All these ideas fitted comfortably with the very era Angus’ schoolboy suit came from.

‘Just being in high school [was the inspiration for these theatrics] and, believe it or not, watching Bugs Bunny, Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote,’ he told Ben Wener in *Orange County Register* on 13 April 2001. ‘They’re blowing the hell out of each other, you know?’

The power of their live shows, coupled with the spectacle of what they presented on ‘Countdown’, was having the desired effect. On 20 April, the band played a show at the Myer Music Bowl in Melbourne billed as the Australian Concert for Bangladesh, organised by Freedom From Hunger, with Daddy Cool at the top of the 11-band bill and AC/DC in sixth place after Hush.

Bon arrived again dressed as a schoolgirl, seemingly unconcerned that his makeup would run in the rain that tumbled down that day. Though the attendance was affected by the poor weather, most waited until after AC/DC played before leaving.

In Sydney, they appeared at the Hordern Pavilion for Channel Nine’s new program, ‘Polaroid In Concert’, which gave the band their first national TV exposure as a blistering live act, as opposed to ‘Countdown’ where they performed to a backing track with live vocals. This was the real deal.

Their balls-out attitude, a general low tolerance for bullshit and a seeming delight in outraging the establishment led to an interesting observation in *RAM* magazine on 19 April. Probably for the first time they were labelled a punk band in an article headed up: 'AC/DC: Australia has punk rock bands too, y'know.' Australian *Rolling Stone* also got involved in the name calling, referring to AC/DC as 'Melbourne's biggest punk band'.

But despite the fact that, at the time, they were playing 'Heavy Metal Nites' at the Hard Rock Café, in a very broad sense the punk tag fitted. AC/DC were street punks, just as Elvis, the early Stones, Pretty Things, The Who, The Small Faces and The Kinks had been, and had no problem calling a fucking spade a fucking spade.

What was strange was the timing of the *RAM* and *Rolling Stone* declarations. The Sex Pistols wouldn't play their first show for another seven months and The Clash didn't appear publicly until August 1976.

Angus' hellish stage demeanour certainly did little to quell thoughts that AC/DC really were out to pillage and destroy the lives of decent folks. At the end of the week, his school suits were a public health risk, thanks to a combination of sweating a large portion of his body weight into the clothes, cigarette smoke and generous smears of snot. He was continually amazed that the girls at the front of their shows were quite happy, even honoured, to be showered in his saliva, sweat and mucus.

And there was certainly nothing polite and refined about AC/DC's blistering live set at the time, which was drawn largely from the *High Voltage* album with various covers by Chuck Berry, the Stones and even Elvis Presley hip-shakers like Heartbreak Hotel.

While Angus' schoolboy character was becoming more established, Bon still opted to dress up or sometimes down for special occasions, as was the case at a show at Melbourne's Festival Hall with Split Enz and hugely popular headliners, Skyhooks.

Bon wasn't about to be overshadowed, so he dressed as Tarzan in an almost painfully small loincloth and swung on a rope between the PA stacks. It worked perfectly at rehearsals but Bon's physics sums didn't add up at showtime.