Perth bands were all the rage, man! Routes, routines and routes of popular music, explored through the End of Fashion.

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End of Fashion are a Platinum-selling, award-winning indie pop/rock band from Perth, Western Australia. The band’s originating members – Justin Burford and Rodney Aravena – started the group in the early 2000s. They have released two EPs and three albums to date, with the single “O Yeah”, from their 2005 debut self-titled album, winning an ARIA award for best video (ARIA, 2005, accessed 4/10/2012) as well as in the top ten of Triple J’s Hottest 100 countdown (Triple J, accessed 4/10/12).

This paper presents a case study on the band within the context of the roots, routines and routes of the creation, dissemination and marketing of popular music. It draws on an in-depth research interview undertaken with Burford and Aravena in May 2010. This interview forms part of a larger project which examines the national and at times international success and recognition achieved by Perth’s indie pop/rock musicians, along with the growth of the associated local industry between the years 1998 - 2009. The formation of End of Fashion, the group’s early performances, and the process of gaining an initial recording contract with EMI, reveal much about the roots, routines and routes evident in the creation and dissemination of popular music culture. Further it presents an interesting example of how these routes, roots and routines influence the way in which musicians’ careers are able to develop.

Following an overview of Perth’s indie pop/rock music industry and scene, this paper will briefly discuss the cyclical nature of music consumption trends and the notion of the music scene. It then presents a case study examining the experiences of Burford and Aravena as an Australian band within the global music scene.

An overview of the Perth indie pop/rock music industry and scene

Perth has a highly concentrated population, with 80% of state’s 2.2 million residents living in the metropolitan area (ABC, 2009). However, the city is geographically isolated, not only from the other major centres but, also within its own state. As Stratton noted in an analysis of the city’s position, Perth’s closest neighbouring capital city, Adelaide, is 2,712 kilometres away (2007: 115). Further, it is significantly isolated from the cities of Melbourne and Sydney, which are home to the national music and media industries.

In addition to its geographical isolation, Perth is home to a relatively small and highly concentrated music sector. Here it is common for musicians from numerous bands to collaborate and swap players, as well as for industry members to work across a variety of positions at any given time. The live music and record production sectors are largely situated within the metropolitan area, therefore ensuring that the local music industry has a small pool of influencers and spaces in which it operates. There is a need, however, for Perth musicians to develop
management and media relationships beyond their immediate landscape as Perth musicians need to engage with these larger, nationally focused industries.

**Music consumption trends and the notion of the music scene**

On a global scale, booms in the popularity of musical genres tied to specific local scenes have occurred in cities such as: Seattle with Grunge (Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden); Manchester with Madchester (Joy Division, Happy Mondays and Stone Roses) and; Liverpool with Merseybeat (The Beatles, Gerry and the Pacemakers and Cilla Black). In an Australian context, Brisbane saw a boom in national interest in alternative rock music in the early-mid 90s with bands such as Powderfinger, Regurgitator, Spiderbait, and Custard (Stafford, 2004). Further, and of specific interest here, Perth experienced a particular increase in interest from the mid-90s through to the mid-2000s. During this time acts such as Ammonia, Jebediah, Eskimo Joe, the Sleepy Jackson and, End of Fashion attracted a national, and at times, international following. Analyses of place-based music popularity, such as the one presented here, find particular use in the theory of the music scene.

Music scenes are vital to the production and consumption of music. As Johansson and Bell explain, music scenes “range from local, i.e. based on proximity, to non-local in which fans and performers of a genre are scattered geographically but are cohesive in their allegiance to the genre” (2002: 20). Bennett et al (2010) have reviewed the varying ways in which music scenes can be constructed finding that the definition is complex and can be positioned within both place and genre-based contexts, while Stratton points out, “any [place-based] music scene is informed by the cultural understanding of the local space in which that scene functions” (2008: 614). Further, music scenes are informed by the cultural understanding of the local space in which that scene functions. The use of these ideas surrounding the definition of music scenes provides a useful grounding to the roots, routines and routes of music creation and dissemination.

**The roots, routines and routes of music creation and dissemination**

The linking of music and roots is tied to the notion of authenticity (Connell and Gibson, 2002: 11). Further, as Cohen explained:

> Popular music and cities have always been closely connected... [cities are] key sites for the production, promotion and dissemination of popular music and for music-related consumption and entertainment. The city has thus been ingrained in popular music culture. (2007: 2)

Links are often made between musicians and their environments through media positioning, video clips and photos and “at a collective level with respect to whole communities of musicians” (Connell and Gibson, 2002: 92). Further, as Connell and Gibson point out:

> Journalists and others have invariably asked musicians what it is like to record in a particular place, what influences their home town may have had on their musical career and their songs, or how they feel about the ‘scene’ or ‘sound’ they are identified with. (2002: 91)

Connell and Gibson go on to argue that such media attention mythologises the local, as they explain: “assertions of local ‘sounds’ are never wholly created within places… mythology of ‘the
local’ [is] created from beyond” (2003: 112). The manner in which local music activity takes place incorporates the routines present in that local scene. For example, musicians can learn how to participate in local music activity from others and, in some cases unique supporting mechanisms will be adopted to assist in the development and sustaining of that particular industry and scene (Ballico, 2011). Doing so can contribute “to the creation, promotion and marketing of city scenes and sounds” which as Cohen (2007: 54) explains, is a common technique used by music industry and media corporations when looking for new acts to sign, and in marketing existing acts to audiences.

When bands from Perth started to gain national attention in mid-late 90s and the early 2000s, much was made of this success. Of particular interest was the fact that many of the musicians worked together on their recordings, collaborated between bands and albums, and went on tour together. Such networks had been formed through the relative isolation of Perth’s scene and the concentration of limited by vibrant musical outlets, allowing the musicians to be creating, performing and recording in the same rehearsal spaces, live venues and recording studios. Coupled with a network of likeminded people and longstanding friendships, this helped foster and support music activity in Perth and give it a particular energy.

Beyond the success of these local networks serving local audiences and creative communities, attention from east coast and other national music and media industries has been critical to marketing Perth music. For example, interest from national radio broadcaster triple j has been cited by many of my research participants as a way for Perth bands to make significant inroads into the national music market.

‘The next big Australian music export’: The case of End of Fashion

End of Fashion are an indie pop/rock band formed by vocalist Justin Burford and guitarist Rodney Aravena in Perth in the early 2000s. The group initially started out as a side project for the musicians’ main band, The Sleepy Jackson. Recalling End of Fashion’s early days, Aravena explains:

There was no pressure […] We liked [and] enjoyed playing the songs. We got to do different things and it became fun after a while but, after a while a little of buzz started happening […] We did [a] showcase and at the time we were still in the Sleepies so [our] record company, EMI, and our management put a kibosh on it and said ‘give it a rest for the time being, concentrate on what you’re doing’. (personal communication, May 12, 2010)

After a few years of playing in both bands, End of Fashion became the priority, with label interest quickly following. End of Fashion soon signed with EMI after attracting attention at a performance alongside another Perth group, Little Birdy. As Burford remembers, “It was an awesome show […] Anyone who was anyone had flown to see the Little Birdy show and we caned it, and people were just like ‘this is the band’” (2010, pers. comm., 12 May). Recalling the interest in Perth music evident at that performance he explains:

I remember at one point standing there with a jug of beer in my hand, drinking out straight from the jug and there was just like […] every major representation from every [label], just standing around, like in a semi-circle around me […] I was like ‘this is bizarre, this is so weird’ (ibid).
Around this time the national media, particularly triple j, was also showing interest in Perth music, including End of Fashion. As Burford continues

[An announcer] from triple j came and saw us play [one year] at the WAMi’s and went on air two days later [saying], ‘I’ve just seen this band from Perth that’s gonna be the biggest band in Australia in the next two years’ (ibid).

At the time the group signed their record deal there was interest not only in the music of Perth within the national market, but also an interest in Australian rock music at a global level.

When we got signed to EMI, we got signed on the premise that we were gonna be the next big Australian musical export. Off the back of Jet, off the back of The Vines. Next up was going to be End of Fashion (ibid).

While End of Fashion signed their deal with EMI Australia, Jet and The Vines both signed contracts with EMI US. Signing the band out of Australia was deliberate, as Burford (2010, pers. comm., 12 May) explains, “They wanted to prove – the people behind the scenes [in Australia] wanted to prove – that they could sign an Australian act [within Australia] and have it work overseas.”

As consequence of wanting to break End of Fashion internationally – and particularly in the United States – the advance offered as part of their record deal was “massive” according to Burford (2010, pers. comm., 12 May). To recover these costs, and for the band be considered a success in domestic terms, it was anticipated their debut record would achieve five times Platinum (350,000 units) in sales.

Despite such strong record label support and the high expectations locally, when compared to what can be offered to artists in the US, Aravena says (2010, pers. comm., 12 May) their budget was “paltry”. Further, as they were signed by EMI Australia they still needed to impress the executives at EMI in the US in order to be marketed to audiences there. To allow EMI to “hedge their bets” (Aravena, pers. comm.) in the case of the band achieving international success, they were signed to a global contact. This contract did not require the band to be marketed to audiences in other territories, but acted as a way for EMI Australia to protect their interests and maximise the potential to make a return on their investment.

With their sights firmly set on breaking into the US market, End Of Fashion recorded their 2005 debut self-titled release in Oxford, Mississippi, with producer Dennis Hering. This was done at the suggestion of Ron Laffite, the then head of A and R at EMI US. In meeting with Laffite in Sydney prior to heading to the States, Aravena recalls:

So basically, we’re in Sydney [and] EMI are like ‘you’ve got to come and meet Ron Laffite, you know, get in his face’ […] In comes this American dude, we sit down we start having dinner […] I started chatting to him and I was like, the way he was talking he was saying stuff like ‘oh I can’t put you guys in a scene in America’ which is like basically saying ‘I don’t know how to sell you’ […] I basically went to him ‘but [if] you’re not really here for us, what are you here for?’ and he goes ‘oh I’m here to see a band called Wolfmother’ and that’s when we first heard of Wolfmother […] We went and saw them play and went ‘right I get it’ […] There’s all these A and R guys and they were all like, drooling (12 May 2010).
As explained above, much of the initial international interest with End Of Fashion can be understood as part of a broader wave of interest in Australian music during this time (Wolfmother, The Vines). While sonically and ideologically there were distinct differences between the Perth band and their east coast counterparts that were causing such excitement for the US label representatives, it’s important to acknowledge here that the nuances between these were apparently initially not noticed by these record personnel looking at a broader market.

During their interview both Burford and Aravena spoke quite openly about what they experienced and how they felt about the hopes EMI Australia had for them. They expressed an understanding of how with the benefit of hindsight, and having gained a more general level of maturity, now look back on this time in their lives. However, they recall how, at the time, they had some reservations about the way the international and local record company was trying to group their Perth sound in with a broader (east coast) identity. As Burford remembers:

> John O’Donnell, who was the managing director of EMI [Australia] at the time, was really honest with us sort of saying ‘I’m going to make you guys as big as The Vines, I’m gonna make you guys as big as Jet worldwide’ - and we used to say to each other out of those meetings ‘we’re not Jet, Jet are pretty derivative [of an older sound]’.

While the band had some apprehensions, Aravena says, “Thing is, you’re gonna hedge your bets ‘cause he may’ve been right.” Indeed, while Melbourne based band Jet were derivative of a 1960s rock sound particularly, their success internationally was undeniable.

EMI Australia continued to remain optimistic about their plans for End of Fashion, despite Laffite’s lack of confidence in their marketability within the US. As Aravena explains, “It’s not that EMI [Australia] wasn’t in good faith. They worked their asses off […] They tried too, [only] to finally realise that like Australian [bands], in the world scene, are midgets” (2010, pers. comm., 12 May). He also recalls the pressure placed on them:

> Once we went there and placated the Americans – as far as we thought we had to EMI Australia’s best interest – when it came down to it […] basically from what I understood, it was basically down to us and this band Yellowcard… [And to compare] You’re talking about a band from Perth? Where? To a band that’s in their hometown you know? It’s easy for them, they can go down and put a showcase […] It was just easier for them. That and the thing that Yellowcard I think was Laffite’s baby. Like he discovered them and that’s, like I didn’t realise how important that was in the music industry (ibid)

Aravena’s comments here, and in particular his reference to American band Yellowcard, are particular telling given how this international model was being applied to the Perth band. While Yellowcard were apparently favoured because of their proximity to the American audience and industry, End of Fashion were twice removed; not only isolated as Australians, but isolated as Australians from Perth, as opposed to Sydney or Melbourne bands which had at least managed to make some impact there.

Back home in Australia, the band toured relentlessly and gained significant attention. Despite such achievements domestically, Burford says they still disappointed:

> It’s really quite amazing […] We sold Platinum, they wanted us to sell five times Platinum. So, in the scheme of things, and by the end of that first record, we were actually considered failures… [Because] they’d put the bar so high. (2010, pers. comm., 12 May)
Additionally, due to the group being marketed as ‘next big thing’ Burford felt that it caused some misconceptions on the part of domestic audiences. He says:

They said ‘we’re gonna give you this and this, we’re gonna give you guys a career’ who would turn that down? [...] You know what I mean? We were also far more naïve back then than what we are now, like we wouldn’t make that same mistake again [...] and it’s not EMI’s fault [...] however we were the first band they tried to do this with (ibid).

The lack of interest from the US also restricted how the band could develop within the global music industry beyond the US. EMI Australia was unsupportive of the group actively connecting with audiences in other territories such as Canada, France, Germany, Japan and Spain, all of which had shown interest. As Burford (2010, pers. comm., 12 May) recalls, “Someone back here went ‘Ah, it’s not America, it’s not worth it’.” Despite being “pissed off” about this, however, the group remained under contract with EMI, albeit a renegotiated one. Aravena explains this modified contract was sought as the label failed to fulfill a clause off the first record (2010, pers. comm., 12 May).

In 2008, three years after their debut album, the group released the follow up Book of Ties. This time they recorded the album in Perth with local producer Andy Lawson and Brisbane-based Magoo. Come mid 2010 the split from EMI, with their third record, 2012’s Holiday Trip of a Lifetime also recorded locally with Lawson as well as another local producer Dave Parkin. The record was released independently on the label Hello Cleveland with distribution provided by Universal Music Australia.

Conclusion

The early – mid 2000s has been identified as being a time in which the Australian music industry would particularly look to sign Perth acts. The ways in which such interest and band signings have occurred greatly influence the routes through which the music reaches new audiences beyond the city. This is because the way in which artists are ‘discovered’, as well as the particular time at which their signing occurs, can form just as crucial part of the story used to market music to audiences as the motivations for signing the band help determine how successful a band is expected to be. An interesting example of this can be found in the experiences of End of Fashion, a band which attracted national interest at a time when there was a particular focus on Perth music. Their experiences provide an interesting case study in how the dissemination of popular music can influence how this music reaches new audiences as well as how the careers of musicians develop.

REFERENCES


