Live! Queensland band culture exhibition, State Library of Queensland, May–November 2013

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Exhibition Review

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This was the kind of exhibition that left a lasting impression. It moved you to tears, left you silently grinning and had you grooving to the music of Queensland’s bands all within the blink of an eye. It opened up an engaging and exciting space for visitors to learn about the state’s musical soundtrack, and reflect on the tremendous role that band musicians have played in shaping our history.
I don’t use the word ‘engaging’ lightly. There really was something of interest for everyone in this exhibition. The very spirit of community engagement that has underpinned so much of Brisbane’s band history was certainly very present in the way this exhibition was curated. I visited it on multiple occasions: one time to meander through the exhibition spaces; on another occasion to participate in ‘A Night in the JOL’ about Queensland’s band history; and yet another time with my two-year-old twins, who revelled in trying on some of the band outfits in the children’s section. Each time, I took away a new insight, and a deeper appreciation of how significant these musicians and bands have been in influencing and sharing Queensland’s social, cultural and political stories.

The exhibition ran for six months (May–November 2013), and featured live performances, exhibitions, talks, workshops and film, showcasing Queensland’s bands from the 1850s to the present day. The exhibition spanned many different genres, from traditional brass bands to the jazz era and grunge, among others. It not only featured the bands themselves, but also the stories of the fans and venues through photographs, memorabilia, digital stories and displays.

The Deadly Brothers exhibition also celebrated Murri men who have played pivotal roles in Queensland’s music history from rock to electronic music and opera. The Sunday sessions featured an impressive line-up of free performances, and workshops in songwriting, music business and video editing offered budding musicians the opportunity to develop their skills. The program also featured free films, Tea and Music sessions and the Music Box, a multi-faceted pop-up venue. In each of these spaces and events, evocative threads of cultural connection, social rebellion, and the impact of venues and new technologies were cleverly woven through. This made for an illuminating social commentary about arts and culture in Queensland more broadly.

The magnitude of this exhibition and the array of spaces and associated events sometimes felt overwhelming, but when you stepped back for a moment it was the small things – the intimacy of the faces, stories, memorabilia and sounds – that stood out as the most memorable. Like many visitors, I suspect, I recognised a number of the faces and the soundtracks, having conducted some of the musicians and bands featured in Live! As I looked at their photographs and memorabilia, I was moved to tears by the sensitive and respectful way their lives in music were captured and celebrated in this exhibition. It wasn’t just about showcasing our state’s high-profile music stars, but also acknowledging those uncelebrated heroes who have been playing band music in the community for so many years.

Bravo to the State Library of Queensland team for curating this exhibition and telling the stories of Queensland’s band history with such care and creativity.

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