

Screamfeeder's Kitten Licks

Author

Green, B, Rogers, I

Published

2024

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

Rights statement

This work is covered by copyright. You must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a specified licence, refer to the licence for details of permitted re-use. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please make a copyright takedown request using the form at <https://www.griffith.edu.au/copyright-matters>.

Downloaded from

<https://hdl.handle.net/10072/431562>

Link to published version

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/screamfeeders-kitten-licks-9781501393297/>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Kitten Licks

Ben Green and Ian Rogers



Series Editors: Jon Stratton, UniSA Creative, University of South Australia, and Jon Dale, University of Melbourne, Australia

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are
trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2024

Copyright © Ben Green and Ian Rogers, 2024

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on p.117 constitute an
extension of this copyright page.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording,
or any information storage or retrieval system, without
prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc does not have any control over, or
responsibility for, any third-party websites referred to or in this book.
All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of
going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience
caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but
can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

Whilst every effort has been made to locate copyright holders the
publishers would be grateful to hear from any person(s) not here
acknowledged.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-9328-0
 PB: 978-1-5013-9329-7
 ePDF: 978-1-5013-9331-0
 eBook: 978-1-5013-9330-3

Series: 33 1/3 Oceania

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

BEN

For Angus

IAN

For Kate, Ross, Marieca and Nicola.

Contents

- 1 Static from the Stars** 1
- 2 Madmen to Screamerfeeder** 11
- 3 Side A** 27
- 4 Side B** 41
- 5 This Is It** 61
- 6 Consistently Intermittent** 79
- 7 Some Mysterious Transaction** 91
- 8 If I Transmit Long Enough** 103

Cast of Characters 105

Selected Discography 108

Notes 110

List of References 115

Acknowledgements 117

Index 118

1 Static from the Stars

An Introduction

Australian music TV has always been a strange beast. Since *Six O'Clock Rock* in 1959, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) – the country's BBC or PBS – have provided popular music programming. A distinctively Australian approach began in the 1970s with *Countdown*, a haphazard, at-times chaotic viewing experience, hosted by the dazed and bumbling Molly Meldrum.¹ That energy continued with the durable late-night *rage*, a weekend 'host-less' or 'guest-programmed' clip show starting in the late 1980s. *rage* is a vast programme, more a national exhibition of the ABC vaults than any sort of peg for music marketing. Every video is played on *rage*, from the classic to the pornographic, DIY produced to high end. Yet even for the Australian viewership – an audience steeped in these eccentricities – the mid-90s incarnation of this energy, a show called *Recovery*, proved a wild ride. *Recovery's* host Dylan Lewis came off as aggressively unprofessional – Molly Meldrum squared: sly, ironic, disinterested, almost embarrassed by his role – and the show around him gave off a chaotic, gonzo energy: elaborate sets were destroyed, celebrity interviews were derailed and an impossibly broad assortment of musicians performed, everyone from Sonic Youth and Public Enemy through to the local band down the road. This all happened in real-time on a tax-payer-funded live broadcast every Saturday morning.

Very quickly, *Recovery* became emblematic of a specific moment in Australian music – the grunge-led 90s wherein

there was a changing of the guard in rock'n'roll. Polished was out. Grit was in. Noise was in. Loud-soft-loud was the songwriting template. In 1996, Brisbane rock three-piece Screamfeeder performed on the show. They encapsulated much of this. Screamfeeder were there to promote their album *Kitten Licks*, their fourth since forming in 1991.

As was customary on *Recovery* the band played two songs, starting with album opener 'Static'. To watch them on *Recovery* is to see a band tentatively taking steps into the limelight, emphasis on *tentatively*. 'Static' is restrained this morning, performed carefully, knowing full well what it is: a potential hit, in need of promotion. 'Static' opens on a descending lead line accompanied by a long, 5-second snare roll, before cutting to Tim Steward's coarse vocal:

*I'm going to build a radio
With static from the stars*

It's a song about a mythical radio station, based on a story Tim read in an American fanzine. Impressionistic from start to finish, 'Static' is hard to grasp. Partly an ode to the chance and magic of radio broadcasting (it will soon become the de facto anthem of the band's hometown community radio station 4ZZZ), it also shouts out to a very 90s trope: the valorisation of obscurity.

*I'm going to call it nothing because you don't need to be known
My signal will get lost in all the white noise floating by
It drifts above the cities invisible in the sky*

Singing this on national TV is no joke for the band's Tim Steward, though. His voice is a melodic punk voice – more Bob Mould than Kurt Cobain, to cite the moment, with an accent floating in the mid-Atlantic centre of the genre – and getting it right involves a degree of standing still and hitting the cues.

The camera zooms in around his head (his cropped sandy hair), wherein the whole country can count five ear-rings in his right lobe. It's a look.

Stage left is Kellie Lloyd on bass guitar. Kellie isn't moving a great deal either, but the camera finds her often: she's wearing the classic 90s combo of long-sleeve tee under short-sleeve tee and her hair is long and dreadlocked. To the unaccustomed viewer, this no doubt reads as some sort of exotic tropical Queensland hippiedom – a very hazy, bong-water-tinged vision of the Australian north – but in reality, it's Swervedriver cosplay. Kellie would later describe her look as the bizarro Adam Franklin, 'the white girl version', and if it ever looked awkward, it doesn't now. Somehow, it looks exactly like Brisbane in the middle of the 1990s.

Behind both of them is the band's new drummer, Dean Shwreb. Dean is inarguably the star of this performance. There's a lot of him on-screen and the details presented are curious. Firstly, he's really working at it – hitting like he's still in his previous band: the sludgy metal outfit Hateman – but he's dressed in an orange vee-necked sweater, like a member of Belle and Sebastian. He has one of those professional drum kits that sit within a steel frame.

And yet the performance collides into a cohesive outpouring. 'Static' goes over well and the footage taken is good enough and clear enough to be edited into the official film clip for the song. Watching it now, twenty-five years later on YouTube, it typifies the mood of 1996 in Brisbane. Here was a rock three-piece, singing a song about isolation and obscurity to the nation. It's no lost signal, though. It was a message beamed into hundreds of thousands of households and it said as much about the state of the Australian music industry as anything else. Things were changing. A band like

Screamfeeder could be going places. There was an undeniable energy to it. A hopeful spark. And yet, and yet ...

Screamfeeder played another track from *Kitten Licks* that day, a song called 'Bridge Over Nothing'. It's the second song on the album and it's as bracing as 'Static', providing *Kitten Licks* with a vital one-two punch. Yet 'Bridge Over Nothing' has an altogether darker tone. It's chaotic where 'Static' is controlled. It is hectic, noisy and bittersweet. Dean's blasting drum work is pure Keith Moon – all snare and cymbals – and the opening pattern is held for impossibly long measures: throughout the introduction, verse and half the chorus. In the din, Tim's voice is stretched, bringing out all the strange and necessary punk elongations required to stay in time and tune. The verse lyrics are dictates, a list of notes-to-self:

Don't talk about what you thought about alone ...

Don't think about what you heard was true before ...

Don't be scared by laws that keep you in your lanes ...

Don't be cornered by the corners in your mind ...

But then something remarkable happens in the chorus of 'Bridge Over Nothing' and the impact of it is caught full-force on the *Recovery* broadcast. The band enter the chorus. Dean shifts the drumming, slowly finding a straighter rhythm, and then Kellie steps up. Up until this point, Kellie has been primarily tasked with holding the song together. Her bass line is like a rope through the middle of the thing, but halfway into the chorus – *halfway* – she starts to sing:

Bridge going nowhere over nothing.

Bridge going nowhere over nothing.

This happens exactly as Dean finds time, as Tim pushes his voice further and it is – and always has been, ever since – a type

of indie-rock miracle, travelling from abject chaos to locked-in rock catharsis in an instant. The song's unlikely yet economical structure, along with its breathless, precise execution, could only be the product of countless hours playing together. It's muscle memory and on *Recovery* the band flex. They're not poised or careful with 'Bridge Over Nothing'. They flail around. Tim jumps in the air. Kellie whirls in circles. The track pours out of them. This happens because it *is* them. They're on national television, on this crazy TV show, playing over the closing credits as the set is destroyed around them, but everything their hometown knows about their live show is on full display because 'Bridge Over Nothing' is so comfortable, so Screamer. They transcend their context with *this*, not 'Static', and the contrast between these two songs provides a telling moment. It was there for everyone to see.

...

On *Kitten Licks*, 'Static' and 'Bridge Over Nothing' overlap, tied together by a strand of feedback. A few minutes later, the second song's final chord rings out over the distinctive opening beat of 'Dart', another single and possibly Screamer's best-known and loved song. In fact, all of the tracks, barring a side break, are smooshed together with no silence between them ('I don't like gaps on records,' says Tim). It's one of the album's charms, a kind of meta-hook, adding to its qualities of dynamism and abundance ('The songs are so strong and they just keep coming,' says fan and musician Kate Cooper). It also parallels the story of *Kitten Licks*. Not only as the fourth album in five years from a restless, relentless working band, written in a collective hot streak, recorded and mixed in a flash ('The way the songs overlap, that was just done on the fly as well,' says Tim). But also as an album of incongruous contiguities, *Kitten*

Licks is not so much a crossover as an intersection, representing in various ways a meeting point, a high-water mark, and a transition – for Screamfeeder and for the worlds around them. That is the story told in this book.

The story, like most, takes *place*. Screamfeeder have been a Brisbane band since that label was a novelty. With *Kitten Licks* they were one of the 'big four' that drew eyes and ears to the once provincial, but increasingly worldly Queensland capital, along with Custard, Powderfinger and Regurgitator. Leading up to that point, as a mural at Fortitude Valley railway station now recalls, 'Screamfeeder set a precedent in being content to remain at home,' instead of making the usual move to Sydney, Melbourne or London to build on early successes.² *Kitten Licks* is a product of shared rehearsal rooms and crowded music venues in grimy but lively Fortitude Valley. This was the early phase of the inner city suburb's transition, from seedy hub of illegal casinos and brothels (and the corrupt police who profited from them for decades before Queensland's late 1980s political seachange), to gentrified nightlife and entertainment precinct. The album is equally a product of the band members' domestic lives and creative solitude in humid sharehouses and flats, dotted across the still-cheap, leafy inner west just a few steep hills or sharp riverbends away. However, Brisbane wasn't always home.

Screamfeeder have a regional Queensland backstory (some *Kitten Licks* press still calls them a Townsville band), and Tim's musical identity was taking shape even earlier in 1980s punk London. This helps explain something about their sound: Tim's accent and the music itself blend pop, punk and grunge, remaining untethered to any one place and summoning instead the made-up, mediated cosmos of modern music (static from the stars). Kellie Lloyd is both an insider and

outsider: at home in Brisbane's music scene (when Tim arrives), but not from there either, a woman in a male-dominated world, and endlessly restless as a person. All this might explain why the band is so at home on the road. Screamfeeder spent the 1990s touring – before *Kitten Licks*, driving nearly 1,000 kilometres to Sydney every other month – and then after *Kitten Licks*, expanding to coastal and inland regional towns like the ones they all grew up in ('A lot of driving, a lot of flying,' says Dean). When asked in interviews about the rising 'Brisbane scene,' the band members would point out that they were hardly there, feeling more kinship with the artists they saw all the time on tour. This family of bands – including Melbourne's Spiderbait, Geelong's Magic Dirt, Sydney's You Am I and several of Screamfeeder's Brisbane peers – came, with the aid of national youth media and festivals, to represent a 'homegrown' Australian alternative to both US grunge and UK Britpop. Meanwhile, there were Screamfeeder's ill-fated ambitions in the United States, which began before *Kitten Licks* but loomed again in the wake of its Australian success, indelibly shaping the band's mid-career arc.

This story, like most, also happens upon a time: essentially, in Australia's dream of the Nineties. As we will see, 1996 is a critical year, with new festivals (including an all-Australian line-up for the Homebake festival) and media (including *Recovery* and the national expansion of the ABC's youth radio network Triple J) capturing, and to some extent creating, a trans-local Australian music scene with an expanding, all-ages audience. This coincides with the increasing merger of the country's independent and major record label networks, sending members of Screamfeeder's musical family to the top of the charts. *Kitten Licks*, with fully independent distribution, would not climb as high as some, but its release in August is right on

the tip of a cresting wave, capturing this generational energy just before it breaks. It was certainly a breakthrough for the band, who rode the wave all the way to the strange shores of a new century. 'Everything was happening, and it wasn't happening to us 'cause we were creating it, but ... it just did become this thing that was happening to us,' says Kellie.

Last, and far from least, this story has lessons. In making *Kitten Licks*, *Screamfeeder* – in their fifth (or arguably ninth) year, on their fourth album, with a brand-new drummer – learnt how to be the band they've been for decades to follow, personally and creatively. Writing this book has brought lessons for us too. We thought this would be a story about what could have been and almost was: *Kitten Licks* as a missed smash hit and an underrated classic (which, for many, is part of its appeal). In short, we anticipated a story about surviving a type of commercial/cultural failure, with all the attendant troubles, and *Screamfeeder* as resilient subjects of fate and circumstance. A tragedy, of sorts. But what we documented in our interviews and research presents a very different narrative, one focused on sustainability, friendship and survival. It turns out to be a tale of what was chosen and how far it leads: *Kitten Licks* as a testament to the potential of independent music-making, with *Screamfeeder* as stalwart pursuers of artistic control and personal longevity. This, in turn, finally explains the respect and influence the band enjoy among multiple generations of musicians and fans, and the ubiquitous love for this album. *Screamfeeder* and *Kitten Licks* show what is possible, how to do it – and how to keep on doing it.

In this book, the story of *Kitten Licks* is told by the people who lived it, and who still do. The band members, the record producer, peers and fans, journalists, and more, in their own words, then and now (for context about the people quoted,

see the *Cast of Characters* at the end of the book). We began these conversations during a period of reflection, just after the thirtieth anniversary of the band and the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Kitten Licks*. Screamfeeder played the album in full, in a double-header with Regurgitator performing *Tu-Plang*, and sold stacks of a new vinyl in the process. A documentary film about Screamfeeder is in production, and the band themselves have published a photo memoir called *End of This Summer* (2022), alongside an album-by-album podcast series titled *The Ending Goes Forever* (2022). And they're not the only ones revisiting their legacy. Screamfeeder are once again sharing luridly coloured bills with Custard, Magic Dirt, Spiderbait, Tumbleweed and You Am I, for nostalgia-fests attended by many of the same punters who saw them three decades ago. Who said don't look back? But as we wrote this book, Screamfeeder also released their eighth album, *Five Rooms*. They launched it at a national run of shows with support from Adalita (of Magic Dirt) – just six months on from the 'Screamfeeder – Since 1991' thirtieth anniversary tour, where their epic sets of crowd-pleasing deep cuts were supported by up-and-comers like Brisbane's Mouse. Tim and Kellie also played as solo artists and with other bands, including Tim's We All Want To, and Kellie's Majestic Horses and Deafcult. They are semi-professional musicians, with creative day jobs. We found them at a unique moment in time, one where the band appeared actively interested in both their past and their future.