

## Pornography, Ponytails and Superheroes

By Nicole Crowe

I was nine years old when my father took a job teaching graphic design to students at the TAFE on the mainland. He showed them how to design boxes for transporting bananas and mangoes and in return his students made him mix tapes of Men Without Hats and Mixmasters which he played at full volume in the car. The drives were always short. On Magnetic Island nobody has to spend more than fifteen minutes behind the wheel.

“What’s the name of the song playing now?” I would shout from the back seat and my father would reach into the glove box for the cassette’s plastic case.

“I think it’s Jive Bunny. No, wait, it’s Salty Pepper. Here, you take a look. I can’t read this damn kid’s handwriting.”

Music had never been a big deal for my parents like it was for the parents of the other kids in my class. In a drawer in our living room I once discovered a couple of Beatles albums beside my mother’s ELO record but, our record player having been thrown out years earlier, there was nothing to play them on.

“My dad plays jazz guitar,” a classmate told me one day. “He’s got a huge box of Bob Dylan records.” Another liked to boast that her mother had seen Jimmi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin live. I



didn’t know who any of these people were but worse still, neither did my parents. The parents of the other kids in my grade worked at the supermarket, the dive shop, or took the ferry every day to important government departments in Townsville. My parents drew pictures and filled the space under our house with crap they found on the beach.

“What have I told you about using that word?” my mother said. “And it’s not rubbish. We’re artists, Nicole. We collect *materials*.”

“But it’s not *normal*. The kids at school think we’re weird.”

“Oh, they’re just jealous.” That was her answer to everything. The boy who beat me at handball was just jealous. The girl who refused to let me cheat off her during a maths test was jealous.

My parents approached music in the same way they approached everything else in their lives. They ignored it until it happened to them. Rarely did they go down to the beach in search of anything in particular. They simply wandered up and down the shoreline, collecting everything from driftwood and seaweed to broken glass until their buckets were full.

“I’m going to use this in a collage,” my mother said after one trip. She held up the leg of a plastic doll. I would have given her one of my dolls to dismember but there was no “story” behind my dolls. Grandma had neglected to drown or set fire to any of them before wrapping them up in Christmas cellophane.

My father’s interest in music came about at the insistence of his students. Every couple of weeks he would bring home a fresh cassette and I would snatch the case, searching the hand-written song list for Bruce Springsteen, Al Green, Otis Redding, any of the names I’d heard the kids mention at school.

“Do your dads like Public Enemy?” I asked my classmates.

Alice McDonald rolled her eyes. “My dad listens to the Bee Gees.”

Alice McDonald was the most popular girl in my class and I worshipped her. Looking back,

there was nothing all that remarkable about Alice. She wasn’t good at sport. Her grades were average at best and she lived in a house much like the houses of everyone else in the grade. But she had this mountain of golden hair that fell in ringlets past her shoulders. Standing with her back to the sun she looked like an angel about to take flight. Alice’s togs never gave her tan lines, her skin was as smooth and milky as that of a Nordic baby. But the one thing that really set her above the other girls in our class was her older sister, Wendy. Wendy went to high school at what was then the mythical “town.” This was a place of sealed roads and traffic lights, fast food and “stranger danger.” There was only one primary school on Magnetic Island and no high school. The eighty or so kids of high school age took the ferry five days a week across to the mainland where they were then bussed out to the various high schools of Townsville. There they mixed with the wider world and brought back tales of vodka and kissing diseases, magical stories which their younger siblings brought back to the primary school. I had only met Wendy a handful of times but from what Alice told us she was the coolest person on the planet.

Instead of an older sister I had Clayton, my five-year-old brother incapable of taking himself to pre-school. “Mum said you have to hold my hand,” he’d complain, running to keep up with me.

“We’re only going ten minutes.”

“But Mum said.” He’d hold out his hand,

whining about cars and tree roots.

“Fine, but wipe that peanut butter on your shorts first. Little brothers are so stupid, you know that?”

I had no one to show me how to live, no one to give me the words “casual sex” and “acid” to use when asked about Led Zeppelin. Thanks to Wendy, Alice was the first to come to class wearing a padded headband. And then, several weeks later, she revolutionised our understanding of hairstyles entirely. It was a kind of double-ended ponytail. Sweep the hair up out of your face, pull out a long piece at the front to hang down between your eyes, then secure the whole thing with half a tub of hair gel and the biggest scrunchie you can find. Top it off with that padded headband and you had yourself a work of art.

“You’ve done it wrong,” Alice told me after my first attempt. “Get your mum to buy you more gel.”

That night I laboured at the mirror until my hair was as hard and shiny as a helmet.

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The problem with living on Magnetic Island, we all thought at the time, was that there was absolutely nothing to do. Even the weather was boring. June or July might get you into a pair of long pants but that was it as far as winter was concerned. The sun hung in a sky so unchanging that the possibility of a visiting cyclone was cause for excitement. There were only so many oysters you could chip off the rocks for no reason, only

so many times you could jump off the jetty before the novelty wore off. The only real thrill the place offered was during low tide when the cone shells were accessible. Even poking a deadly shellfish eventually became dull. The only thing that persisted was shame. The shame of not being interesting enough, good enough, cool enough, smart enough. The shame of growing up on a boring island with a weird family. Shame was the ideal motivator for bored children.

I would have done anything to fit in, to find a way to prove that I wasn’t weird like my parents, that I had more to offer than a peanut butter-smear brother who followed me around like a shadow. And then, one day while I was poking around on the shoreline, it happened. I’d crawled between two rocks and found myself in some kind of porn dungeon. Taped to the walls of this cave were dozens of pages torn from the kinds of magazines that the boys surreptitiously passed around in school. Some of the pages were rain damaged but not enough to destroy the integrity of the bare breasts and wide-open vaginas. Looking at this shrine to some itinerant bum’s wet dream I imagined what my school friends would say. This was no slap band, or double-ended pony tail, but I’d found it myself without the help of any big sister.

That night I barely slept, imagining the faces of my classmates when I told them about the porn cave. I’d break them up into groups of five or six and take them the long way there so they’d be confused and unable to find their way back.

“Does somebody live here?” Tom, the meanest boy in the class would ask.

“Yeah. His name’s Jerry. He’s my friend,” I would lie.

Tom would point a shaking finger at the bed roll in the corner. “What’s that?”

“That’s where he sleeps,” I’d say. “Sometimes he gives me vodka.” Casually plumping a mouldy pillow, I’d narrow my eyes at Tom. “But he told me he doesn’t like little boys so you better go before he gets back.” Tom would bolt out into the sun, the bright light a metaphor for my new life. No longer would I stalk the outer edges of the cool group with my finger up my nose, wondering if my hair was firm enough. No more would I fret over my mother’s ignorance of the history of popular music. This horrible discovery would be my ticket to a new life. They’d call me Indiana Jones. I would buy a big hat for myself and a saddle for Banjo, the family corgi. Because I alone had been the one capable of uncovering this remarkable den of iniquity. It would make me mysterious and dangerous, this cave of self-loathing and despair, and for this I would finally gain the respect I deserved.

“No way,” Tom said the next day at school.

“It’s true. It’s covered in naked women.”

“I know all the caves round there and I’ve never seen it.”

“I’ll show you after school.”

A crowd had gathered to watch this argument at the water fountain. Several kids had already signed up for an afternoon tour.

Alice, watching from the sidelines, took a bite of her sandwich. “How big is it?”

“I don’t know. You could fit maybe four kids in it. You can’t stand up though.”

She put down her lunch and spent a moment identifying with the plastic wrapping. “Maybe we could smoke pot in there.”

Tom’s mouth fell open and I knew I’d lost my audience. Everyone started talking at once. What did it look like, this “pot”? Did it smell as bad as everyone said? How much did she have? I found myself wondering about the benefits of crushing up and smoking terracotta plant pots but, fearing ridicule, kept my mouth shut.

It turned out that Alice didn’t actually have any pot. “Wendy told me she keeps it under her mattress. She’s saving it for a special occasion.” But the fact that Alice hadn’t laid eyes on it was irrelevant. She rolled a cylinder out of a piece of note paper, explaining that if it were a real joint, the pot would be inside. “And a joint is sometimes called a ‘spliff.’” My heart sank while the other kids listened intently to Alice expound the intricacies of pot.

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Although my parents had no real appetite for music, once my father started work at the TAFE he developed a taste for cool. Here were all these kids with an average age of twenty, laughing and goofing around like they’d never heard of mortgages or male pattern baldness. My father was in his early forties at the time and knew about both. He had two kids and a wife but was not so

old that he'd forgotten what it felt like to be young and carefree. His students had no time for authority and for this he loved them. "Look at this cartoon Jason drew for me today," he said one afternoon. "Just look at the way he's captured my moustache. And he's got the scar just right from where I had the accident with that bayonet. Attention to detail, that's what that is. This kid's going to go far."

He had a number of these portraits pinned to the wall above his desk. In one his nose was exaggerated to gigantic proportions. Another had him in a Hawaiian shirt and sandals but the one I liked best focused on my father's hair, which was combed like a bar code across his scalp. Looking at these drawings I realised these students knew practically everything there was to know about my father. They were smart. If they could look at his nose and turn the mass of hairs into art, who knew what else they were capable of? It occurred to me then that my father's students almost certainly knew about more than pop bands and joints. Although I'd never met any of them I decided that my father's students would be my teachers, my big brothers and sisters. And through their grotesque pen and ink cartoons of my father I searched for life lessons. I was trying to figure out a way to capitalise on this when one day after work, my father came home with a show bag. On a normal day after work, he went under the house to chain-smoke and stare at the family collection of "materials." Unless he had a joke to share my brother and I were usually ignored, but

on this day it was different.

"But the show's not in town," I said.

"This is from my work." He gave the bag to my brother who thrust his hand inside but came up empty.

"Where are the lollies?"

"There aren't any lollies. This is a superhero show bag."

There was indeed a cartoon picture of a superhero on the side of the bag. He wore a tight red suit and looked like a cross between Spiderman and the Phantom, only his skin was dark and he had distinctly Aboriginal features. He wore a thick gold belt with a buckle sporting the letter "C," and above his head was the word "Condoman."

"Where's mine?" I said.

"This one's only for boys."

I had never heard of Condoman. He had no cartoons on TV, none of the kids at school had ever mentioned him. I had never seen a Condoman action figure.

"What does Condom-man do?" I asked.

"It's Con-*dob*-man. He, um, protects you from disease."

Inside the bag was a comic book filled with Condoman's slogans, "Don't be shame, be game" and "Protect yourself!" Condoman surprised people at BBQs, fishing trips, school discos and gyms. He shot little square packets, Spiderman style, from the underside of his wrist. The bag contained a few other things including a pen and a fabric patch, the kind that backpackers like to

collect and sew onto their canvass tote bags. This patch was triangular in shape and instead of showing a Canadian maple leaf it bore Condoman's face as well as his name in large letters. "Can you put the patch on my hat?" my brother asked our mother.

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

My mother gave my father a look that begged him to stop making her life difficult.

Clayton turned his little five-year-old face to our father. "Why can't I have Condom-man on my hat?"

"It'll be fine," my father said, turning to mum. "It's Con-*dob*-man, remember? There's nothing wrong with that."

"I want Condom-man on my hat," I said.

"I told you, Con-*dob*-man's for boys. And anyway, there's only one in the bag."

Condoman was a totally new superhero. The boys in my class loved superheroes. I would bring this comic book to school and the boys would love me for it. Then the girls would love me because the boys did. I grabbed the bag and searched for something I could call my own. What I found was one of the small square packages Condoman could be found dispensing from his wrist. "If Clayton gets the patch then I get the balloon."

"Balloons?" My father came at me like I held a live grenade in my hands. "I thought I took them all out. They're—ah—not for children."

"I'm taking the comic book to show and tell

tomorrow," my brother announced, keeping a close eye on our mother as she sewed the patch onto the flap of his hat.

The next morning on the way to school Clayton didn't have to run to catch up with me. He didn't have to nag me to hold his hand. "At lunchtime, meet me under the gum tree by the front gate," I told him. "I need to show that book to the kids in my class."

He touched his hat gravely and nodded. Condoman was bigger than the both of us. It was our duty to share him with the world.

All morning I stared at the clock on my classroom wall and was first out the door when the bell rang. I ran to the tree and waited. Ten minutes passed and my brother was nowhere to be seen. In the playground I found his teacher and asked if she knew where he was.

"Your mother came to collect him."

"Is he sick?"

"No."

"Was he bad?"

"You'll—have to speak to your parents about it."

I couldn't understand why my brother had been sent home for a comic book and a patch on his hat. I wasted no time in confronting my parents about the matter.

"Why'd Clayton get sent home from school?"

"I don't know," my mother said, fishing in her sewing box for the un-picker.

I got a similar response from my father: "Why don't you go watch TV?"

I stole the comic book from the kitchen bin and took it into my room. Study it as I might, I couldn't figure out how a character with balloons in his wrist could be inappropriate for children. Hearing the quiet voices of my parents in the kitchen I got the feeling that, Led Zeppelin-ignorance or not, they knew more than they were willing to admit.

Years later I looked up Condoman and learned that he had been an invention of the state health department. The programme was targeted at Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander teens and had been developed primarily to help stop the spread of AIDS. Information packs in the form of show bags had been compiled and given out at high schools, universities and TAFE campuses across the region—including the one my father taught at.

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Image: "[Condoms](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [robertelyov](#)