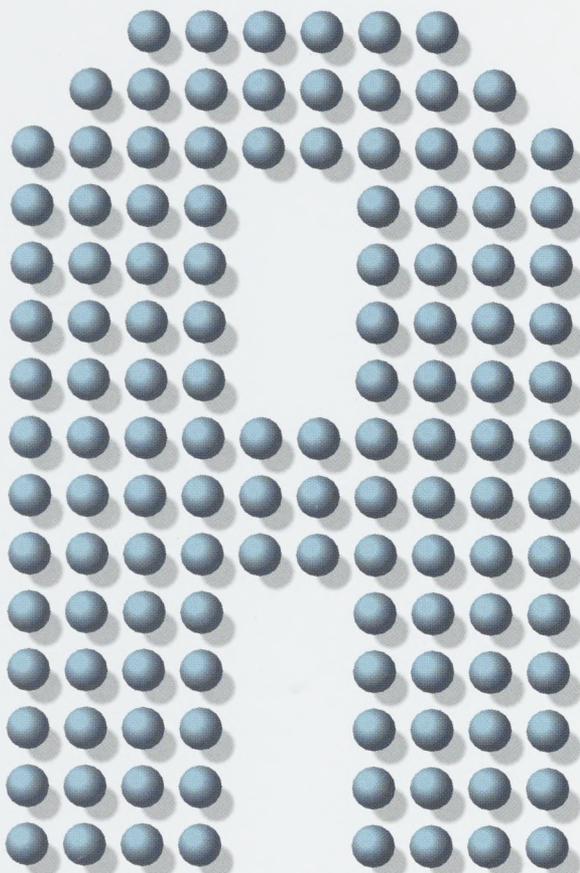


(((THE BEE GEES)))



G R E A T M E L O D Y

TRAVELS anywhere – through any age, over any beat, arranged in any genre. While memorable records can find sharp hooks in rhythm, production impact or even sheer noise, they can't enjoy the interpretations – and thus the endlessly multiplied lives – of a perfectly rounded tune. No group makes the point more conclusively than the Bee Gees, an act whose magic melodies have weathered thirty years of trends, morphed through a music school's worth of styles and forged five-hundred covers, all while stressing nothing so much as their hummable core. Their sure sense of craft not only gave the group more Number One singles on the U.S. charts than any band outside the Beatles, it also inspired artists as great and varied as Al Green, Nina Simone, Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin to try and make the Bee Gees' songs their own. ∞ A LISTENER'S AGE relegates the Bee Gees to one of two major artistic periods: as late-Sixties crafters of prim and willowy pop or the soulful kings of late-Seventies disco (a role they still haven't quite lived down twenty years later). But those are flimsy disco clothes to hang on the true body of their work: all

Bee Gees Fever!
Brothers Maurice,
Barry and Robin
Gibb, 1977





Robin Gibb

the songs they've written that you can't stop singing.

The three Bee Gee brothers – Barry, Robin and Maurice Gibb – showed a knack for well-grounded melodies at an early age. Born in England (Barry in Manchester and twins Robin and Maurice on the leafy Isle of Man) to a musical family (father Hugh did time as a bandleader and drummer, mother Barbara sang), the boys first played together professionally as preteens in the Fifties. After kicking off with the ill-fitting moniker the Rattlesnakes, the siblings fiddled with names like Wee Johnny Hays and the Bluecats, the Brothers Gibb and the BG's before settling on the one we all know. In 1958, the family immigrated to Australia, where the young brothers put out a passel of singles and two albums. Only on their thirteenth try did one of their songs top the Aussie charts, the perky "Spicks and Specks" in early '67.

Despite a swift family move back to England, their career path had been set. After arriving in the U.K., the group signed with the powerful Robert Stigwood at NEMS (the same management company that worked the Fab Four). Under his strong guidance, the group issued its first worldwide release in late '67, "New York Mining Disaster 1941." The single presaged the group's early style, matching an irresistibly quavering melody to over-the-top lyrics and arrangements. The tale of a dying miner who's coughing out a last plea to his wife, the song landed on the far side of melodrama – yet managed to bring it off through the sheer swoon of their delivery and the elegance of the tune. The hits that quickly followed – "To Love Somebody," "I Can't See Nobody," "Massachusetts," "Holiday" – went one step beyond such string-driven Beatles songs as "Eleanor Rigby" and "Yesterday." Essentially, the Bee Gees showed the world what the Beatles would have sounded like if they'd ditched their rock roots and went whole hog for exquisite pop.

Of all the pop emanating from the U.K. at the time, in fact, none could be considered more English in terms of refinement and frills. Aided by sixty-piece orchestras, the Bee Gees



Barry Gibb



Maurice Gibb



Baby Bee Gees: Top: Barry, Maurice, Robin (from left); at right: Robin, Barry, Maurice (front row, from left)



turned their songs into four-hanky epics, awash in glamour and kitsch. The group's close, aching three-part harmonies gave off enough quavers to set off the San Andreas Fault. In the process, they arose as the Camilles of pop, perpetually singing to the point of rapturous collapse. The approach reached operatic proportions in the 1968–69 smash "I Started a Joke," which ranks as one of the most emotionally deranged songs ever written. The group made an equal mark in elaborate album design with their "concept" double album *Odessa*, which came complete with a red crushed-velvet cover!

Yet, for all their flounce, the group's tunemaking could not have been more solidly rooted. Which explains why their hits appealed to so many gritty soul singers, from Otis Redding, who intended to record "To Love Somebody" before his untimely death, to Al Green, who covered "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart."

Despite that spectacular string of early hits, internal power struggles busted up the group – though not for long. After a quick split, the trio reunited in 1970 to cut the classics "Lonely Days" and "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart." Only as the Seventies picked up speed did Bee Gees hits slow. The nadir came in '74 when Atlantic wouldn't even release their album *A Kick in the Head Is Worth Eight in the Pants*. Instead, the label

matched them with producer Arif Mardin, who nudged them in the more soulful direction that would pave the way toward their resurrection. Their first Mardin-produced album, *Mr. Natural*, didn't provide the commercial breakthrough he had hoped for. But it set the style elaborated on their brilliant next album, 1975's meaty *Main Course*.

That album, again overseen by Mardin, finally closed the door on the group's Edwardian foofiness, bringing out their recessive soul gene. The consequence? Instant R&B classics like "Jive Talkin'," "Fanny (Be Tender With My Love)" and "Nights on Broadway." The falsettos on those tracks raised goosebumps, as did the hits on the followup LP, *Children of the World* (which housed the 1976 hits "You Should Be Dancing" and "Love So Right"). The disco inflections of "You Should Be Dancing" proved prophetic. It made the group a natural choice to score a new movie about the growing dance trend called disco: *Saturday Night Fever*.

What more can be said of the result? The double SNF album boasted three U.S. Number Ones ("How Deep Is Your Love," "Stayin' Alive" and "Night Fever"), and stood as the best-selling album in history until Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. It remains one of the biggest-selling soundtracks of all time (after *The Bodyguard* and *Purple Rain*), not to mention one of the most emotionally fulfilling albums of the pop era.

Miraculously, the group matched *Fever's* record of Number Ones with 1978's *Spirits Having Flown*, which included "Too



Much Heaven," "Tragedy" and "Love You Inside Out." With acclaim that pervasive, something had to give. And soon the group found itself not only a victim of overexposure but a scapegoat in a larger, more vicious backlash against the entire disco movement. Hopelessly tied to that genre, the Bee Gees couldn't get their music played in this country for years. By the mid-Eighties, the group stood about as good a chance of getting a fair public hearing in the United States as Saddam Hussein did of getting a ticker-tape parade down Fifth Avenue. Still, anyone who listened carefully to their disco-era songs could easily separate the group's craft and performance from the production and beat of the day. It's hard to imagine more portable melodies, more transcendent singing.

Luckily, the group fared better outside the States. Their 1987 smash "You Win Again" ranked with their best. And in '89 the song "One" even got them back into the American Top Ten. In the meantime, the brothers wrote such celebrated songs as "Heartbreaker" (for Dionne Warwick) and "Islands in the Stream" (for Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton).

Throughout all this the trio have managed to hang together. They've got a new album out this year, *Still Waters*. A full thirty years after their debut, the Bee Gees now rank among the most prolific melodists of the modern era — right up there with Lennon-McCartney, Holland-Dozier-Holland and Bacharach-David. In the process, the group has managed to keep alive a great notion: That a well-turned tune can seduce anyone, in any place, at any time. ◀



The Brothers Gibb: Maurice, Barry and Robin

(((DISTANT THUNDER)))



THE SOUND OF SIXTIES ROCK & ROLL IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

B Y K E N B A R N E S



"Australia is the toughest training ground in the world. Make it there and you'll make it anywhere."

—BARRY GIBB

Previous pages: The
hitmaking Easy-
beats, riding high
Down Under, 1967



WELL, MAYBE IF YOU'RE

A BEE GEE. The sad fact is, virtually no one else involved in the Australian and New Zealand rock scenes of the Sixties achieved international prominence – at least at the time. And even the Bee Gees accomplished the feat only after moving to England (and later America), leaving Australia behind. ∞ IT'S HARD TO BLAME THEM, considering the inherent challenges of Antipodean musical existence thirty years ago. Australia is nearly the size of the United States, with a population markedly smaller than the similarly vast Canada – and it's almost halfway across the world from its colonizer and chief cultural touchstone, England, and its secondary cultural influence, the more geographically similar USA. ∞ THE CONTINENT'S REMOTENESS and attachments to the mother country bred a cultural inferiority complex the size of the Outback – musicians for the most part slavishly imitated trends originating in Britain or, failing that, the States. And anyone who entertained ambi-

tions outside the region, or threatened to make a mark elsewhere, was subject to the "tall poppy syndrome," which ensured that any Australian artists who escaped the confines of the local scene would be cut down to size via press accusations of either forsaking the homeland and/or developing a swelled head.

Add to that a limited, tightly controlled regional radio and TV structure; meager opportunities for print coverage and concentrated power for the few publications (principally *Go-Set*) that did ply their trade; scarce, relatively primitive record-

ing facilities; punishing, USA-size hauls between big cities; and laughably low record royalty rates and gig fees that guaranteed the near-impossibility of making an actual living at the rock go-round, and it's a wonder a scene ever emerged. That goes double for New Zealand, with a mid-Sixties population of less than three million and proportionately fewer opportunities for exposure and the generation of subsistence-level income.

To gain national recognition, bands battled it out in huge competitions: In 1965's Battle of the Bands in Sydney Stadium, the Showmen beat out fifty-seven other varieties of rockers for the princely sum of approximately \$300 and an opening spot on a Dave Clark Five tour. By next year's Hoadley's Battle of the Sounds, the prize had tripled (meaning each member of the winning Twilights pocketed about \$150), and round-trip boat tickets to England were included. Oz/NZ rock existed in its own world: One telling indication of Oz/NZ's isolation (or cheekiness) was that there were local Sixties bands called the Byrds, the Velvet Underground and the Music Machine, all claiming no awareness of their American analogues. But the music that fermented in the teen clubs,

"bohemian villages" (a period Oz euphemism for hole-in-the-wall dives) and "discos" (which staged live shows) of Sydney, Melbourne, Perth,

Oz superstars the
Bee Gees: Maurice,
Barry and Robin
Gibb on TV



Right: Aussie garage band supreme, the Masters Apprentices, featuring vocalist Jim Keay, 1967

Adelaide, Brisbane, Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington was as remarkable in its range and as fierce in its intensity as any of the sounds springing up elsewhere in the fertile post-Beatles climate of 1963–67. Though few of the records penetrated Northern Hemispheres of musical consciousness, today scores of Anzac nuggets are considered classics by fans, collectors and scholars.

There were scattered, respectable rockabilly records in the Fifties and early Sixties from the likes of Johnny O’Keefe (“Real Wild Child,” covered by the Crickets’ Jerry Allison and later Iggy Pop), Johnny Rebb, Merv Benton and NZ’s Johnny Devlin. Australia first stood out in the international crowd, however, by generating an indigenous surf-music craze, being well equipped to do so by virtue of its ample supply of choice-wave locales and widespread “surfie” subculture. Preeminent Australian rock historian Glenn A. Baker recalls with horror the spectacle of the long-enduring Delltones singing Beach Boys imitations such as “Hangin’ Five” decked out in tuxedos. But the Atlantics were an instrumental surf combo to rival the West Coast’s best, and it would require profound depths of churlishness to resist Little Pattie’s Annette-like surf-bubblegum classic “He’s My Blond-Headed, Stompie Wompie, Real Gone Surfer Boy.”

Of course, the Beatles rocked Oz’s insular world as they did everywhere else in the galactic quadrant. Beat combos spontaneously generated, including such memorable groups as the Rajahs, who recorded Beatles soundalikes for a Sydney newspaper-sponsored record and whose lead singer, Nosmo King, wore a bowler hat while his band mates donned jeweled tur-



bans well before Sam the Sham saw his first Egyptian hieroglyphics. In the wake of the Beatles’ conquest, the Bee Gees – who were already regional TV celebrities and had written songs for other artists and recorded a few of their own, without success – were ticked off that the media accused them of copying the Mersey upstarts’ vocal sound. The Gibb brothers claimed that as childhood Mancunians they’d developed that same sound naturally and simultaneously.

Although the Beatles and other British Invaders visited Down Under (greeted by historic hysterics), such stopovers were few. Australia needed idols of its own. In a Sydney-area hostel a group of Dutch and British emigrants formed a band as an alternative to their principal form of

Below: Loved Ones’ Gerry Humphrey’s vocals ranged from guttural growls to unearthly shrieks



Right: Australian band the Valentines, with future AC/DC lead singer, the late Bon Scott

recreation – suffering beatings by hostile locals. Finding an actual professional drummer, who'd been in 1964 Liverpool hitmakers the Mojos and who christened them the Easybeats after an unrecorded Liverpool band, the group swiftly rose from boiling potato peels for soup and a residency at the Beatle Village to the pinnacle of Australian stardom. Teen riots at concerts and the chart success of raveups such as "Wedding Ring," "Women (Make You Feel Alright)" and "Sorry" created a nationwide affliction dubbed Easyfever.

Everyone wanted a piece of the Easybeats (literally, in their more fanatical fans' case) or of the action they and their compatriots generated. The group scene metastasized in a fashion similar to the U.S. garage-rock explosion of 1964–67, but more closely following the British model. Teen idols Billy Thorpe and Normie Rowe aspired to be fresh-scrubbed heartthrobs like Cliff Richard, but their records rocked much harder. Bands vied to be first to hear and master the latest British hits (the Twilights had British relatives send them records and then played the songs live the following week). Others, in their quest to emulate the Brits, covered the most obscure releases imaginable.

Below: Aussie heartthrobs, Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, mid-Sixties

Mike Furber and the Bowry Boys' cover of the Mockingbirds' "You Stole My Love" outstripped the Yardbirdesque original, while their version of the Montanas' version of



the Addrissi Brothers' "That's When Happiness Began" was another sonic blast. The Vince Maloney Sect's cover of the Birds' cover of Marvin Gaye's "No Good Without You Baby" was a stunner. (Maloney would later serve as the Bee Gees' guitarist after inexplicably changing his name's spelling to "Melouney.")

Right: The Twilights, with songwriter Terry Britten and future Little River Band singer Glenn Shorrock

Despite even greater isolation, New Zealand bands, their producers and A&R reps were equally skilled at ferreting out hopelessly obscure British (and American) songs and turning them into local hits and lasting







Australian duo, Olivia Newton-John (left) and partner Pat Carroll, circa 1966

period classics. The La De Das transported U.S. studio duo the Changin' Times' Sonny Bono-esque protest tune "How Is the Air up There?" to a blistering, fuzztone-logic-dimension; Larry's Rebels converted a New Orleans obscurity, "I Feel Good" by Benny "Fortune Teller" Spellman, into a garage-rock chart-topper; the Avengers nailed Episode Six's cover of the Del Satins' voodoo-lounge gem "Love Hate Revenge"; Simple Image exposed the gossamer pop of the Ballroom's "Spinning Spinning" to its widest worldwide audience.

Imitation was the most widespread form of flattery in New Zealand Sixties music. Chants R&B and the Pleazers emulated the Yardbirds and Pretty Things' brand of R&B savagery. The Underdogs had a credible Animals sound; Ray Columbus was the versatile Cliff Richard type; Dinah Lee and Allison Durbin were the NZ equivalents of Lulu and Dusty Springfield, respectively. But, like their Australian co-conspirators, the NZ acts frequently equalled and occasionally bettered their rockin' role models: The Blue Stars' "Social End Product" is regarded as one of the nastiest garage-rock nuggets ever minted; Chants R&B's "I'm Your Witchdoctor" outsnares the John Mayall original; Columbus's Merseybeat-styled "She's a Mod" was turned into a bizarre generation-gap rap version thirty years later.

Musical quality aside, however, New Zealand was just too small to provide much of a living, and ambitious musicians hit the high seas or skies: The La De Das, the Librettos, Dave Miller, and Chants R&B leader Mike Rudd relocated to Australia; Columbus to San Jose, California; the Four Fours to

prog-rock cultdom in the U.K. as the Human Instinct; and Chris Parry (drummer of the Fourmyula, whose "Nature" is one of the era's most gorgeous flower-pop artifacts) likewise to England, where he discovered the Cure and still runs their label, Fiction.

England was the destination of choice for ambitious Aussies as well, especially after two acts went to London and conquered the world. Having attained every conceivable goal in Australia (three hit albums, chart-topping singles, mass hysteria, ten dollars a week spending money), the Easybeats ventured to England in late '66. There, they hooked up with Who and Kinks producer Shel Talmy and crafted the pop dazzlement "Friday on My Mind," a hit in the U.K., America and elsewhere. They continued in that vein, recording some of the most sophisticated pop music of the era ("Lisa," "Heaven and Hell," "Falling Off the Edge of the World"), and although their followups met with scattered success, when they returned to Australia (to produce, among other acts, guitarist George Young's little brothers Angus and Malcolm's band, AC/DC), they could hold their heads high.

About the same time, the Bee Gees, who'd achieved almost none of those pinnacles (except perhaps the per diem) but had written prolifically for other artists, scored their first Australian hit with their thirteenth single, "Spicks and Specks," and promptly decamped to England, where "Spicks" then became a minor hit. Their next record, "New York Mining Disaster 1941," was a worldwide hit, an album misleadingly titled *Bee Gees' First* (fourth would have been more accurate) followed suit, and a phenomenal career was launched.

The Easys and the Gibbs were the exceptions, however. Culturally speaking, Britons tend to rank Australians on the evolution ladder somewhere slightly above the paramecium, so it was hardly a news flash that most of the prisoners' descendants who made the trek to the mother country (usually amid maximum local fanfare) returned bowed and bedraggled. Normie Rowe fizzled. So did the Twilights, next to the Easybeats the country's most accomplished band. (Glenn Baker relates that they snagged a British copy of *Sgt. Pepper* and played it live in its entirety – something the Beatles never did – two months prior to its Australian release until the Beatles' label asked them to desist.) International success came eventually to two of their members, Glenn Shorrock, as lead vocalist for Little River Band, and Terry Britten, as writer of Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do With It." The teenaged Olivia Newton-John, who'd been in a duo with another female singer named Pat Carroll, recorded in the U.K. a few years before her American superstardom. Newton-John's Seventies hitmaking contemporary, Helen Reddy, was also Australian. Other Seventies stars with Australian Sixties roots included

Rick Springfield (with Wickedy Wak and later teen-idols-turned-heavy-rockers Zoot); one-hit wonder Samantha Sang (then known as Cheryl Gray) and AC/DC's Bon Scott (with the Valentines, whose sometime stage attire consisted of the nattiest pink and purple costumes imaginable outside an Easter pageant). Chastened by the widely reported failures of their contemporaries, most Aussie musicians restricted their activities to the small pond at home.

Still, if very few of Australia's Sixties rockers had an international impact, their music certainly merits belated recognition. Among the deserving not previously cited would be:

- ◊ the Loved Ones, whose singer, Gerry Humphreys, ranged from guttural Van Morrisonic growls to unearthly shrieks on the mind-boggling "Everlovin' Man" and "The Loved One";
- ◊ the Masters Apprentices, whose "Undecided" would be one of the world's top five garage rockers had it a guitar solo worthy of its awe-inspiring riff crunching and Jim Keay's snarl;
- ◊ the Groop, whose "Woman You're Breaking Me" is something of a psych-pop classic;
- ◊ the duo Bobby and Laurie, for their "I Belong With You";
- ◊ the wild, punkish Missing Links;
- ◊ inconsistent but rockin' teen-faves Tonys Barber and Worsley;
- ◊ MPD Ltd. (memorable for the punchy "Little Miss Sad" and an EP cover where they're on camels in front of the Pyramids);
- ◊ the cleanly sharp-suited Executives, whose version of obscure American duo the James Boys' "Bad Reputation" is a delight;

◊ the Allusions and their haunting pop-rock hit "The Dancer";

◊ Steve and the Board, led by Steve Kipner, whose dad ran the record label (the roster of which also included the Bee Gees) but who still, all nepotistic considerations aside, came up with a fine Pretty Things cover ("Rosalyn"), a titularly tortured original ("I Call My Baby Hinges 'Cause She's Something to Adore") and (much later) "Physical" for Olivia Newton-John;

◊ Lynne Randell, the Lulu of Australia, who toured with the Monkees in America;

◊ the solid, much-adored Ray Brown and the Whispers;

◊ early Bee Gees patrons Ronnie Burns and Johnny Young;

◊ and memorable nugget creators Running Jumping Standing Still, the Throb, the Black Diamonds, the Purple Hearts, the Pink Finks, the Id, Somebody's Image and countless more Down Underground favorites.

The rock world, even America and the U.K., was a much smaller place thirty-plus years ago, and even more so in the constricted hothouses of Australia and New Zealand. It's probably no accident that the Bee Gees' fourth Australian single (July 1964) was called "Claustrophobia." But the fierce scramble for a share of a small pie produced world-class music that deserves much greater global retrospective recognition. Listeners chancing upon "Friday on My Mind" or "To Love Somebody" should know there's a lot more where those came from. ◊

Ray Columbus and the Invaders went for the Cliff Richard sound and look

