

WHEN LENNY MET SYDNEY

A new book examines what really happened when Lenny Bruce hit Sydney in 1962 – and inspires an upcoming play that'll bring the pioneering satirist back to the stage. By **Michael Adams**

Like many in Generation X, my knowledge of Lenny Bruce began with his being the first “LB” name mentioned in REM’s 1987 apocalyptic hiptwister *It’s The End Of The World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)*. Shamefully, for a long time, all I knew beyond that was that Bruce was a comic pioneer who was persecuted for saying dirty words on stage before he died of a drug overdose. I didn’t get much more specific than that until a few months ago when I determined I ought to know more about the man who inspired the likes of Richard Pryor, George Carlin and Bill Hicks and who is the figure credited with creating the notion that a comedian can use his personal life, politics and philosophy as no-holds barred art, entertainment and social satire.

I got the basics from Wikipedia before seeing what I could find of Bruce in action on YouTube, beginning one night with a tame but soulful bit he did on Steve Allen in 1959 called “All Alone” and ending with the sombre 1972 documentary *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*, made six years after his death. A few weeks later, in a second-hand book-store, I stumbled upon a

beautiful six-CD box set from 2004 called *Let The Buyer Beware* that comprises hours of recordings of Bruce’s shows, interviews and even backstage tapes of him being hassled by the cops. A week later Bob Fosse’s terrific 1974 film *Lenny*, in which Dustin Hoffman gives one of his great but underrated performances, screened on television to provide another overview of the man and his times.

On www.archive.org I found you can listen to the 1959 album *The Sick Humor Of Lenny Bruce* legally for free. At iTunes, I forked out \$17.99 for his triumphant 1960 *The Carnegie Hall Concert* recording. Digging up a copy of his 1965 autobiography *How To Talk Dirty And Influence People* was to realise Bruce was at least as good on the page as he was on the stage.

Getting into Bruce takes work. His words always demanded audiences think before they laughed but half a century many of his references to personalities and events have dated. And some of what was shocking then is mild to the point of G-rated now. Regardless of whether you know who Cardinal Spellman is or are



Commander-in-Chief Dwight Eisenhower or parodying the timelessly crass commercialism of Holy Rollers because Bruce's words snap-snap-snap together like musical riffs that're both provocative and warm. But as you sink into his vibe – and there's no other word for it – his humour reclaims more of its original peculiar lustre. And as you learn about his life in those times – as you put yourself into his context – it dawns just how dangerous he must've appeared to the stuffed-shirt powers that were.

Bruce talked openly and smartly and compassionately about politics and religion and sex and dope and dykes and queers and minorities. He argued against organised hypocrisy in all its forms years before the counterculture lined up against The Man. Even when the Civil Rights Movement was still about its good works, Bruce had moved on to taking supposed white liberals' double-standards to task. He shocked audiences with a riff that overused the word "nigger" as a way of demonstrating it could be thus disarmed as an epithet. In this bit alone,

Damian Kringas says Bruce took Sydney in stride but was reportedly very upset by the Nazi implication made here.

bemused that discussing "come" could get you in hot water, simply *listening* to Bruce is a pleasure because what hooks you immediately is the man's vocal rhythm, which is part Jazz patois, part Yiddish patter, and all original hipster. It doesn't matter if he's role-playing the ancient history that is the manipulation of U.S. Vice-President Nixon by

he anticipated Richard Pryor and NWA by decades. Same goes for his attacks on the Catholic Church, which'd be echoed by Bill Hicks and others more than twenty years later. While other comedians have taken on the role of preacher, Bruce was happy to admit he was a huckster who was only able to ply his trade – like J. Edgar Hoover – because societal dysfunction existed. When the world was fixed, he'd no longer be needed.

Fat chance. Bruce was an artist truly ahead of his time, which is why so much of what he had to say remains relevant. It's also why he found himself on the brunt of so much malice from those in office.

down. Googling for more was to make the serendipitous discovery that local author Damian Kringas had just released a study of the period called *Lenny Bruce: 13 Days In Sydney*.

Kringas's initial interest in Bruce stemmed from his own writing efforts. When he was working on his novel *Leon The Fish* – which was published in 2000 – he wanted to include a Bruce quote, which led him to investigate clearance rights with the comedian's estate. Later, another of Kringas's writing projects referenced *The Defiant Ones*, the 1958 Stanley Kramer movie in which prisoners played by Tony Curtis and

Lenny Bruce's 1962 visit has been the subject of much myth-making.

Repeated arrests on obscenity and drugs charges in the United States drove him to bankruptcy and despondency and death. Though in a more minor capacity, British and Australian puritans also had a hand in hounding him from the spotlight and ensuring that his reputation as a "sick comedian" travelled much further than his actual message.

I first learned that Bruce's story briefly intersected with Sydney from James Cockington's 2005 book *Banned: Tales From The Bizarre History Of Australian Obscenity*, which had been sitting on my bookshelf for years, waiting to give up the brief outline of what went

Sidney Poitier are shackled together. "I was reading about it and how Lenny did this interpretation of that film on stage with this black trumpet player. They were chained together as they came on and there was all this homoerotic, gay marriage stuff he threw in."

Kringas vaguely knew that Bruce had come to Australia – "It was like, 'Fuck, that's right, he came out here and he got hammered!'" – but his interest was renewed in 2008 when the Spanish artist Dora Garcia staged a Bienale of Sydney show called *Just because everything is different it does not mean that anything has changed*. Garcia's premise was that Bruce, appearing in Sydney on September

6, 1962, had delivered only one sentence of his show – ‘What a fucking wonderful audience!’ – before he was promptly arrested and asked to leave the country, never to return. “Garcia has imagined the performance that never took place and... ‘lets’ Lenny Bruce finally speak in Sydney,” was how the Bienale promo material described her work.

“I was thinking, well, that’s a great story,” says Kringas. “I wonder if that really happened. And of course it didn’t. But it started off just rekindling interest and then I moved into trying to work out what really happened.”

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What did happen in 1962 was that music promoter Lee Gordon – who’d made his name and fortune by touring the likes of Frank Sinatra, Little Richard and Louis Armstrong in the 1950s – had fallen on financial hard times when a bid to bring Elvis out to Australia failed. Bizarrely, he thought bringing Lenny Bruce to Sydney might rejuvenate his finances. Bizarre because the comic didn’t have much of a fanbase in Australia and many of those who knew him knew his press reputation rather than his routines, which didn’t rate much in the way of record sales or radio play. Gordon hoped to capitalise on overseas controversy and thus devised an unusual ad campaign (see opposite).

Bruce was booked for a two-week stint, two shows a night, at a Sydney nightclub called Aaron’s Hotel, which was decked out to resemble a New York dive. Lenny took a hit of heroin and took to the tiny stage for the first show at 9pm. It’s there accounts of his time in Australia begin to vary.

“Depending on who you talk to Bruce either freely performed his material to acclaim or left his audience in a state of stunned disbelief,” Kringas writes. If there are two schools of thought on what went down at that show, the 11pm gig is a positively *Rashomon* event, with each

audience member Kringas interviewed recalling the event very differently.

What emerges most consistently is that Bruce was riffing through his routine – likely beginning with his rumination on dirty words that begins “I’m going to piss on you” – but failing to connect with the audience, due in part to his focus on American topics and a poor sound mix. The spark in this powder keg was Barbara Wyndon, a then-popular local actress, who stood up and complained with words to the effect of, “Come on, Lenny, give us something we can laugh at.”

To which Bruce made a reply along the lines of, “Fuck you, lady.”

A walkout ensued which included Bob Rogers, then a high-profile radio DJ.

Gentlemen,

After having brought 471 American entertainers to this country, most of whom were virtually devoid of talent, regardless of the fact that many were commercial successes, I now deviate with Lenny Bruce.

Advertising this entertainer who prefers to be called a philosopher—in the general press would result in, I am sure, 95% wasted coverage. This notice is directed to the free-thinkers of our community, the greatest concentration of whom, historically, exist in university circles—and among readers of publications such as this.

Mr. Bruce is "performing" at Aaron's Hotel, 56 Pitt Street, City, near Bridge Street, twice nightly at 9 and 11 for a limited engagement.

I apologise for ending on a note of crass commercialism, but if you will come along, and tell your friends about your experience, it will save me from painfully resorting to horrible, unaesthetic ads. in the general Press with Lenny's picture in the middle of an exploding star with some equally distasteful copy about importing from America the dean of all "sick" comedians or some other such junk—thereby attracting an audience interested only in the shock value of the performance and not in Mr. Bruce's message.

Yours for a brave new era in show business,
Lee Gordon

P.S. Quote from "London Observer Weekend Review," Sunday, April 29th, 1962—"If 'Beyond the Fringe' is a pin-prick, Mr. Bruce is a Bloodbath."



Lenny Bruce on stage at Aaron's; inset: Lee Gordon, legendary promoter.

While there was no arrest, the second half of Kringas's book chronicles the day-by-day fallout that followed. Aaron's management cancelled the remainder of the engagement, vice cops were said to be investigating complaints and threatened to monitor any other performances. The *Daily Mirror* ran a photo of Bruce that looked like he was giving a Nazi salute under the front-page headline "Sick Jokes Made Audience Ill." Other tabloids and

the broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald* were hardly less scandalised.

Richard Neville, who'd later fight his own censorship battles as the editor of *Oz* magazine, was then a Sydney University student organiser and he tried to get Bruce two shows on campus – only to have them banned by the higher powers of higher education. The ABC over-reacted, too, cancelling a planned 24-minute interview on the *People* program.

Shunned, Bruce holed up in his hotel room, did drugs, clashed with Gordon and made the acquaintance of a few locals and journalists, some of whom Kringas was able to track down. Bruce finally did get to do a third show, at the Wintergarden Theatre in Rose Bay, where a significant proportion of the small audience appeared to be cops. Though the comedian gave a “subdued performance”, he began the show by mocking the whole Aaron’s brouhaha – a move that presages the much more bitter anti-censorship tirades for which he’d become known.

A few days later, Bruce flew out of Australia of his own volition – though

experience Lenny had in Britain [*where he was subjected to a body cavity search at the airport, deported and banned from re-entry*] with what happened in Australia.”

While the basics were in the public record, Kringas provides context and anecdotal accounts that give perspective and colour to the controversy. Kringas’s journey began with Gordon, who was largely simpatico with Bruce – and beholden to similar demons that likely contributed to his early death in 1963.

“As soon as I started researching Lee Gordon it all made sense,” says Kringas. “That’s why Lenny came out – it was on Gordon’s promise. Otherwise it

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under Vice Squad pressure – and into an even more hostile United States where the next few months would see him repeatedly arrested – travesties of justice that led to his early check out, broke and broken, on the end of a morphine spike.

Kringas has done valuable work in sorting fact from fiction to shed new light on the narrative and details of Bruce’s visit. “The funny thing was it was all there,” he says. “None of it was hidden. I don’t know where all that stuff about him getting arrested and thrown out came from. I think people just get on a story and then run with it. I think also that people have confused the

seemed pretty strange. Like, why would Bruce come *here*? And Lee Gordon was completely out of control, that’s where all the drugs came from.”

Kringas interviewed numerous Aaron’s and Wintergarden punters, including Aussie counterculture luminaries Richard Neville and Albie Thoms, entertainers Noelene Brown and Col Joye, reporter Denis O’Brien, who obtained a kind-sorta interview with the drug-fucked Bruce, and singer Tina Date, who befriended him and took him to Taronga Park Zoo. What emerges isn’t a definitive account – because no-one got close to Bruce here – but rather a multifaceted recollection of his time in Sydney.

As for the controversy, Kringas says it's important not to let our supposedly modern liberated perspective distort what happened nearly 50 years ago.

"Where Lenny came unstuck was that he said 'Fuck you' to Barbara Wyndon. That's really the issue. It wasn't just saying 'fuck'. It was the context. It's 1962. It's a woman. You're in a public place with mixed company. Today the same thing might happen if a comedian went on a riff about a couple in the audience and then went after the girl. This is now. It's interesting how it's still relevant and we haven't just become totally open."

Part of his reason for writing the book, Kringas says, was also to redeem

Kringas's work looks set to find a wider audience in expanded and reimagined fashion, with Sydney playwright Benito Di Fonzo, who recently had a success with his Bob Dylan stage spoof *The Chronic Ills Of Robert Zimmerman*, presently crafting a stage adaptation in a style he calls "fonzo journalistic surrealisation".

Di Fonzo is following the form of the book but departing from the known for the imagined in order to comment more widely on Bruce's life, conservative Australia and the universal theme of the power of words up against censorship.

"I've got two Lenny Bruces narrating it at the moment," he explains. "We've got

Playwright Benito Di Fonzo draws a parallel between Bruce and Julian Assange.

Australia's reputation, even if just a little. "There were a lot of people who defended him and when you think about Bob Rogers, you've got to remember he probably only went there because of Lee Gordon and felt obliged. And he really didn't slag Bruce off that much. He just said it wasn't for him and walked out."

Lenny Bruce: 13 Days In Sydney is a labour of love for Kringas, who self-published through Lulu and is distributing through a few bookshops and his own publishing house, Independence Jones. "I'm in it for beer money, pretty much," he says with a laugh. "Not that I get much beer out of it."

Lenny as he was in 1962 and then a dug-up version we call Lenny 2011. So there's 'Word Lenny' and 'Worm Lenny' who're there to set the record straight as to the 10 different versions of what happened that night."

To get Bruce's voice, Fonzo has been listening to his live albums and re-reading Bruce's autobiography and the routines contained in *The Essential Lenny Bruce*. What's also helped immeasurably is a rare bootleg recording of Bruce's show at the Wintergarden discovered by Kringas and shared with Fonzo and WordyMofO. The sound quality of this tape is terrible but Bruce is audible as he good-naturedly riffs

on his experience at Aaron's before doing some of his more familiar material.

Fonzo's play will focus on Aaron's, using the show as a framing device, and include Sydney characters who interacted with Bruce – along with the ghosts of celebrities past and future.

"In the second act I use the gig as a framing device and then inside of that I have all the other things that happened – the arguments with Lee Gordon, Tina Date, the girl he hung out with. Chief Inspector Ferguson becomes this sort of nemesis. I've also created a Shakespearean comic character out of the 'Shoeshine Guy.' Damian spoke to a guy who ran a shoeshine stand in Kings Cross, so he comes in and out of the second act as a Shakespearean Fool character, and he's also more representative of Australia in a way." Fonzo laughs. "Charles Darwin appears at one point, as does Robin Williams and Jerry Seinfeld because they've all made comments on Australia at some stage."

For Fonzo, even though Lenny Bruce's experience in Sydney is nearly half a century in the past, the themes of the play are as relevant as ever.

"It's a way of making people look at censorship," he says. "Lenny got into trouble back then for speaking his mind. But today someone who was criticising



Damian Kringas's book is available at:
www.independencejones.com

our role in Afghanistan and Iraq would have to suck more cocks than there are in Canberra to get on TV. And I think it's interesting especially now in light of what's happening with Julian Assange – an Australian being denounced by his own country. The stuff that Lenny Bruce was talking about is still just as relevant today. The power of words for both the good and the negative." ●