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Bon Scott's Pre-AC/DC Bandmate Shares Vintage Letters From Late Singer, Reflects on His Legacy

December 23, 2014 1:10 PM EST Bon Scott died from alcohol poisoning on February 15, 1980, just as AC/DC was beginning work on 'Back In Black', the album that made them arguably the biggest metal act in the world in the Eighties.

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By Steve Baltin | December 23, 2014



Bon Scott died from alcohol poisoning on Feb. 15, 1980, just as AC/DC was beginning work on rock In Black, the album that made them arguably the biggest hard rock act in the world in the '80s. In the subsequent years, as songs like "You Shook Me All Night Long" and the title cut became ubiquitous anthems on classic rock radio, and AC/DC's stature exploded. More than that, the legend of Scott and his vocals on several AC/DC classics " Highway To Hell," "Whole Lotta Rosie" and "T.N.T." grew as well.

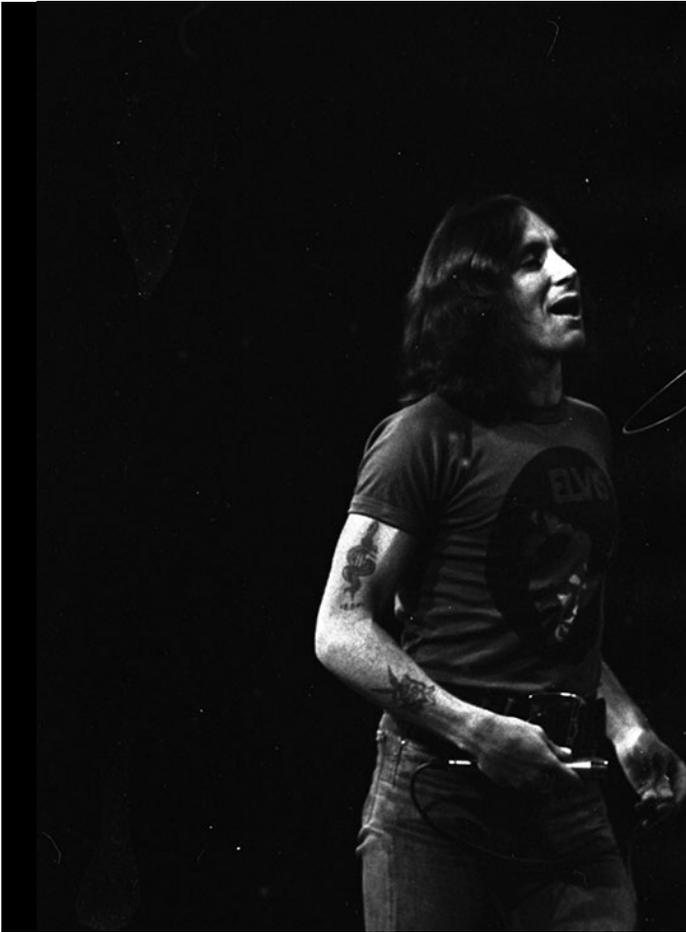
Angus Young Says AC/DC is Ready to Rock

In 2004, Classic Rock Magazine named Scott the greatest frontman of all time. It's a sentiment that's shared in Australia, according to Scott's longtime friend and bandmate in Mount Lofty Rangers, Peter Head.

"He's just the most popular singer ever to come out of Australia. I don't think America really appreciates how much he's held in high regard in Australia," Head tells Billboard.

That could change in 2015 thanks to a new documentary, Looking For Bon. Narrated by David O'Hara (who's appeared in The Tudors and The Departed), the film will explore Scott's life from 1970 to 1974. That will be followed by a biopic with a script written by late Australian music pioneer Vince Lovegrove (who shared vocals with Scott in the Valentines in the '60s) and Angela Anagnostopoulos, focusing on his years in AC/DC. Among those spearheading the two projects is executive producer Shemori BoShae (American Federale), who's put together a team that includes Michael Slifkin (Archstone), Naomi Krell (Kings Road Multimedia) and producer Damien Reilly, who will be overseeing the soundtrack.

"The purpose of the documentary is to chronicle what was a very creative period for Bon from 1970 to 1974 and give the viewer an insight into a very creative period of Bon's life and to enlighten all on just how great a singer he was before he joined ACDC," BoShae says.



A photo of Scott from his days singing with the Mount Lofty Rangers and sporting an Elvis shirt. "The Big E. was a hero to all of us," former bandmate Head says.



Scott performing with the Mount Lofty Rangers. "AC/DC were the perfect people to give him full reign with his sense of humor and his outrageousness," Head says of the singer moving on to perform with the hardrock group.

Billboard spoke with Head about how this period in Scott's life helped shape him for AC/DC.

[See AC/DC's Albums Ranked From Highest to Lowest Charting](#)

Are there moments where you grasp how big Bon Scott was, or is this just your friend you made music with?

It's really weird because he's one of thousands of people I interacted with, but in hindsight, it seems he's the most important musician I ever interacted with. When he joined AC/DC he had five or six years with them before he died and the rest of the world has only seen that. So they missed out on the Bon era, a lot of it, which is a bit of a pity because it's the favorite one for Australians and the favorite one for me, too.

Tell us about the Bon era.

The Bon Scott I knew enjoyed listening to jazz, people like Ray Charles, all the black singers he loved black music. And also the Band, Robbie Robertson and all those people. He had quite a wide variety of tastes, but when I first met him in Adelaide he was with a band called Fraternity and the sort of music they play you'd only call progressive rock. It was highly artistic, they wouldn't use Bon's lyrics what he describes as his poetry wasn't good enough for Fraternity. But his voice was fantastic, and the music he made with Fraternity a lot of people hadn't heard. It was far more musical than AC/DC, but AC/DC were more entertaining on a gut level. When Fraternity played with my band, I just threw together a band called the Mount Lofty Rangers for a short time, and to make it easy, we basically concentrated on country and country rock because about 240 different people went through the band. Bon actually sang lead maybe a dozen times. But it meant I was in a constant state of rehearsing a different group of people. It was different every day and we did a hell of a lot of rehearsing and put in a hell of a lot of time. But it was an intense time and very creative time and we got a few of Bon's songs realized that Fraternity wouldn't use and probably AC/DC wouldn't use, but we used with the Mount Lofty Rangers. And Bon actually wrote a couple of songs because he believed in the idea of the Mount Lofty Rangers, which was to basically get the best songwriters in Adelaide at the time and the best musicians and put them together and present something, which hadn't been done before.

What do you imagine Bon would have been doing musically had he lived?

I think he would have gone on to do a whole lot more. He did some outrageous things with AC/DC, like dressing up as a schoolgirl on stage, that served his sense of humor, which really came across. But he was a very serious singer as well and you don't see a lot of that. If he would've gone on to bigger and better things I'm sure he would've been making an album of the great American songbook by now or somewhere where he could really showcase his voice. He had a lot more soul in his voice and blues, just feel, which he got from listening to people like Ray Charles and Nina Simone.

What else would surprise people about Bon?

He used to read books quite prolifically. We were exposed to high art in the sense that Hamish Henry, who was our manager with both Fraternity and Headband, also ran an art gallery, so we were mixing with the top artists in Australia not only musicians, but also artists, writers and we felt like we were part of the vanguard of intellectuals with our musical input. It felt like more than just rock and roll in the pub, we were trying to push the envelope in original writing. And we mixed up jazz, country, rock and roll, everything into one new form, we thought at the time at least. And the '70s were just a special time in Australia at least, where there was a band on every corner in both Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney and they were all playing original music. You just don't get that anymore, you don't get that anywhere in the world. It was a very special time, and very prolific time.

Were you surprised by his transition into AC/DC?

No, I wasn't surprised at all, because up until then I'd watched Bon try really hard with his band Fraternity, they went to England for a year and starved. In Adelaide they were playing maybe once a week, but making very little money, probably making a hundred dollars a week at the time. And most of the time he had to do some sort of day work to survive. One of the last times I'd seen him he'd just spent a day working for 12 hours shoveling shit on the back of a truck and that was serious hard work. He worked very hard in all ways to try and survive as both a musician and a person. Eventually it paid off for Bon because he had at least five or six years with AC/DC where finally he got a bit of reward for his efforts. When AC/DC came along he knew this was his chance for the big time and he just grabbed it with both hands. I wasn't surprised at all because he was so frustrated by the end of that time that he had to find something and AC/DC were the perfect people to give him full reign with his sense of humor and his outrageousness. He just went for it and nobody would deny that he'd spent too long trying to be serious and getting nothing back in return. So AC/DC was perfect at the time and at the place.

Bon also loved to have a good time, though, right?

On his last day in Australia, Bon went to visit two women in the Melbourne maternity ward, they both had children and he accepted them both as being his children. On the day he went to visit the women they were unknown to each other, he kept it secret. But that there are at least two kids in Melbourne that are his sons. I'm sure there are gonna be others that pop up claiming to be his kids and they might be, who knows. He was pretty prolific in that department.

What do you hope people get from these film projects?

He just had something which no other Australian singer has ever had. I'm glad to see that people recognize him 40 years later. But I think Americans don't really recognize him yet and I hope this documentary and movie might show a bit more of him than has been realized in the past.

Do you remember the first time you realized how great his legacy had become?

It was a huge shock when I went to New York for the first time after not knowing that Bon had any effect on people outside of Australia. The very first time I went to New York I saw the Brooklyn Bridge and in huge letters was written, "Bon Scott Lives." I thought, "Wow, that's amazing." It was just amazing to me to see that his determination finally paid off.



Scott was both an eclectic music fan who loved jazz, country and more, as well as a hardworking musician. "When AC/DC came along he knew this was his chance for the big time and he just grabbed it with both hands," Head says.



"This was taken by artist/photographer Vytas Serelis at the wedding of Bon and Irene in the Adelaide hills," Head recalls.

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Dear Allison.

It is with a light heart (and an even lighter head) that I write you this letter. I'm sitting in the back yard of Bruce's house bathed in glorious sunshine + nursing my swollen head. Or is it swollen. Anyway, my pony was a success and we virtually took off the critics award for the musical group on the show. He didn't go too well with the crowd however as all they were interested in was blues + rock-n-roll, both of which there was plenty of. Our classical numbers just didn't rate except with the fan Melburn etc. I went to a party after work finished + he + others of his crew spent hours telling me how much they loved us. It might be an idea, seeing as he is now pinned, to drop him a line + maybe offer him honorary membership or something. Philip Trayer, the head of P.O. Set was also most impressed so he also may be good for further brainwashing. Also Sally Auerch in Perth (P.O. Set). If we can get all these people to start writing about us it makes our job easier when we get to their respective cities. I'll be in Melbourne next week and Sydney in about three weeks. I don't know the exact dates but I'll let you know this time so we can have a "board meeting".

As there aren't many "hip" places to play in this fair city we had to well out, so to speak - except work in a couple of hotel discos where we get to play to a pack of drunken schoolies who also only want to hear R+B. We also have to be neatly dressed, which, in their opinion, is collar + tie, shoes, socks etc. I had to go out last night + borrow from a friend. The items just mentioned. I came home and put them on and completely freaked when I saw myself in the mirror so as far concerned they can stink it + take me as I come. I'm afraid that for the rest of us return concerning conservative anything. I'll only go as far as wearing a crease in my jeans.

I seem to have run out of gab. I'm afraid life here is rather

I seem to have run out of gab. I'm afraid life here is somewhat slow, dull + uninteresting. So drop me a line full of scandal + backbiting, which Sydney is so famous for, + brighten my life up a little. If there is any thing you need: Money etc. please let me know + I'll send it right away. By the way will probably have a sixth member when we get back to Sydney. He is from Sydney + his name is John Ayers. He plays harmonica, recorder + sax and has played with us on both festivals + quite often at 4000 hours. You'll really dig him. I hope that you'll be able to come along and see us play in Sydney. Give my regards to Shelly + your family.

Sincere regards

Bon.

Dear folks,
Have a good one + spare us a moment's silence as well be freezing over here in this northern wasteland.

We just completed a successful tour of Germany although a lot of jobs were cancelled due to lack of advance publicity. Still the jobs we played were great. We start a more extensive tour next week (Germany again)

Oh for a bit of sunshine + a keg of any Aussie beer. See ya, Bon.

To Alison, Shelly, Family + friends.

With warm and friendly wishes

for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

FRATERNITY

"It's interesting, must've been about '73 '74," Head says of this letter. "He talks about Fraternity playing at 'Headquarters.' Hamish Henry, our mutual manager, established four live venues in each corner of Adelaide, and called Headquarters north, south, east, and west. And Fraternity take a week to set up not one, but three PA systems in tandem, so that the audience heard it loud and clear like had never, ever been done before in the history of Adelaide."

People who work there as well as patrons told us we were considered as the best band they'd had there for ages + both times we've been booked back. We start a five week tour of the German club circuit next month and in January we've been booked into a Play Joint Club in Cannes for the annual fall film festival. So that should be entertaining to say the least. There's also a chance, we've been told, of playing in Switzerland from Christmas to New Year in one of the leading ski chalets. There's been nothing confirmed as far as our recording is concerned but I feel will be putting down an LP as soon as possible. I've written about a dozen new tracks so far and a couple have single tendencies. Something else of news is that we've done away with the organ altogether + John B. is now playing piano full time + Sam is playing slide guitar with Mick still on lead g. The reasons for this are: 1. The organ tended to clutter up the sound, distracting from the other instruments, and we're going for a cleaner, punchier sound. 2. The money we get for the organ + Leslie we've been able to update our P.A. system to the standards required by overseas levels. Our P.A. was ok for small indoor venues such as "Brazzarts" but useless for the concert halls you have to play in over here. 3. The songs were writing now really suit the two guitar piano set up rather than the old one. The band sounds pretty good at the moment and I promise, by the time we get back to Australia it should be incredible. A band has just got such higher standards to compete with over here that it really is

"Both Bon and I worked hard for years in our various bands, and sometimes together, but eventually we had to give up and say, 'There's gotta be another way,'" Head recalls. "And along came AC/DC for him."