

"Australia's most evil and repugnant nightspot" **The FOCO Club... Personal Recollections** by Frank Neilsen, edited by Peter Gray

In the 1960s, the restless first wave of "baby-boomers" were just learning to spread their adult wings; to be able to vote, and, importantly for some, to drink in Queensland pubs. I was a 1946-model "boomer" from an average family, and had been brought up with the parental admonition to "*never discuss religion, politics or money*". Of course, sex should have been on the taboo list, but that particular word was never mentioned.

In 1964, I was privileged to start working as photographic assistant to Geoff Dauth at his Petrie Bight studio. Geoff was undoubtedly Brisbane's leading photographer, a world-class creative talent, an interesting bohemian character, and a great friend.

It can not be overstated how repressively conservative the status quo was in Brisbane during the 1960s. From many of the younger generation's point of view, Brisbane was a mind-numbing, cultural desert. Yet, despite everything, oases began to appear.

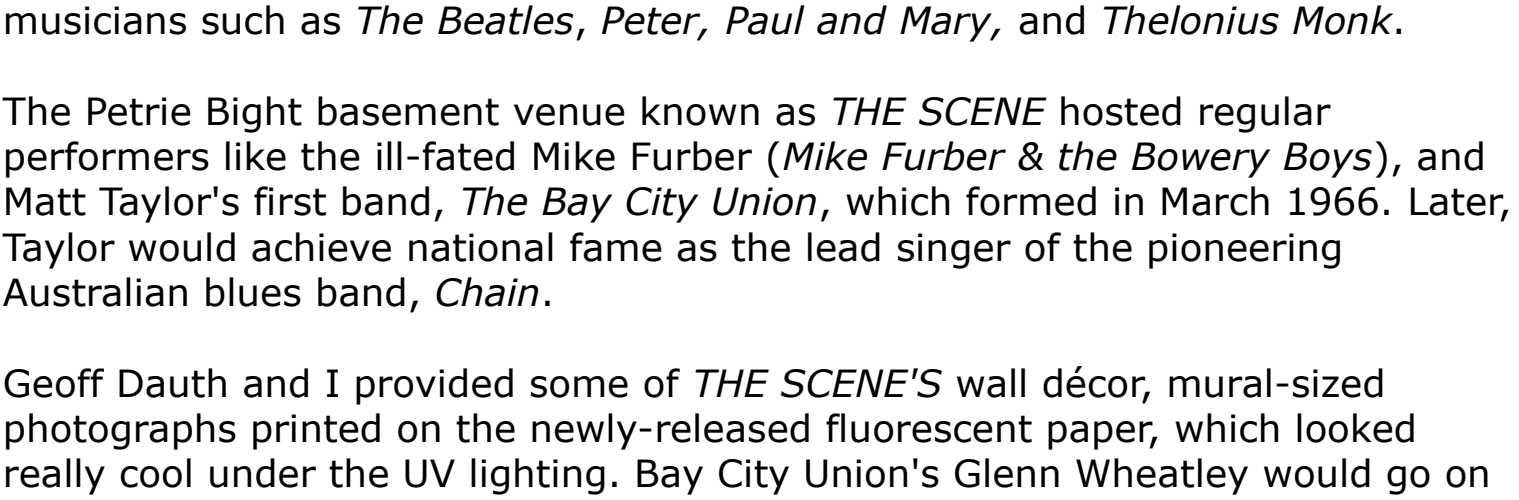
I fell into the habit of frequenting the hippest place in Brisbane, the Primitif Café, owned by Geoff's friend Peter Hackworth; in the basement of Queen Street's Piccadilly Arcade. It was here I met Larry Zetlin, who was then a student at the University of Queensland (UQ). In an era when the drinking age was 21, there were few places, apart from the ubiquitous milk bar, where young people could gather to listen to interesting music, enjoy a bite to eat, and simply 'hang out'. The Primitif served great food, and Peter's Swiss husband, Kurt, knew how to make a perfect coffee.

Larry Zetlin had recently returned from a trip to Melbourne where he had negotiated a new job as the Brisbane correspondent for *Go-Set*, Australia's first pop-music newspaper, published weekly from February 1966 to August 1974. Larry invited me to team up with him as their Brisbane-based "rock" photographer. That sounded pretty interesting to me, so I agreed to lend a hand as an extra-curricular activity, mainly for the fun of it as the pay was a pittance.



The cover of the first *Go-Set*

In early 1966, Larry and I started attending just about every gig in town, from way out in suburbia (including the reputedly dangerous Inala) to the inner city. We interviewed and photographed nearly every musician around the scene at the time, including overseas arrivals such as *The Yardbirds*.



Larry Zetlin (far right) with the Yardbirds (photo: Frank Neilsen January 1967) Left-to-right: Chris Dreja (bass), Keith Relf (vocals), Jimmy Page (guitar), Jim McCarty (drums), and Larry Zetlin (*Go-Set*).

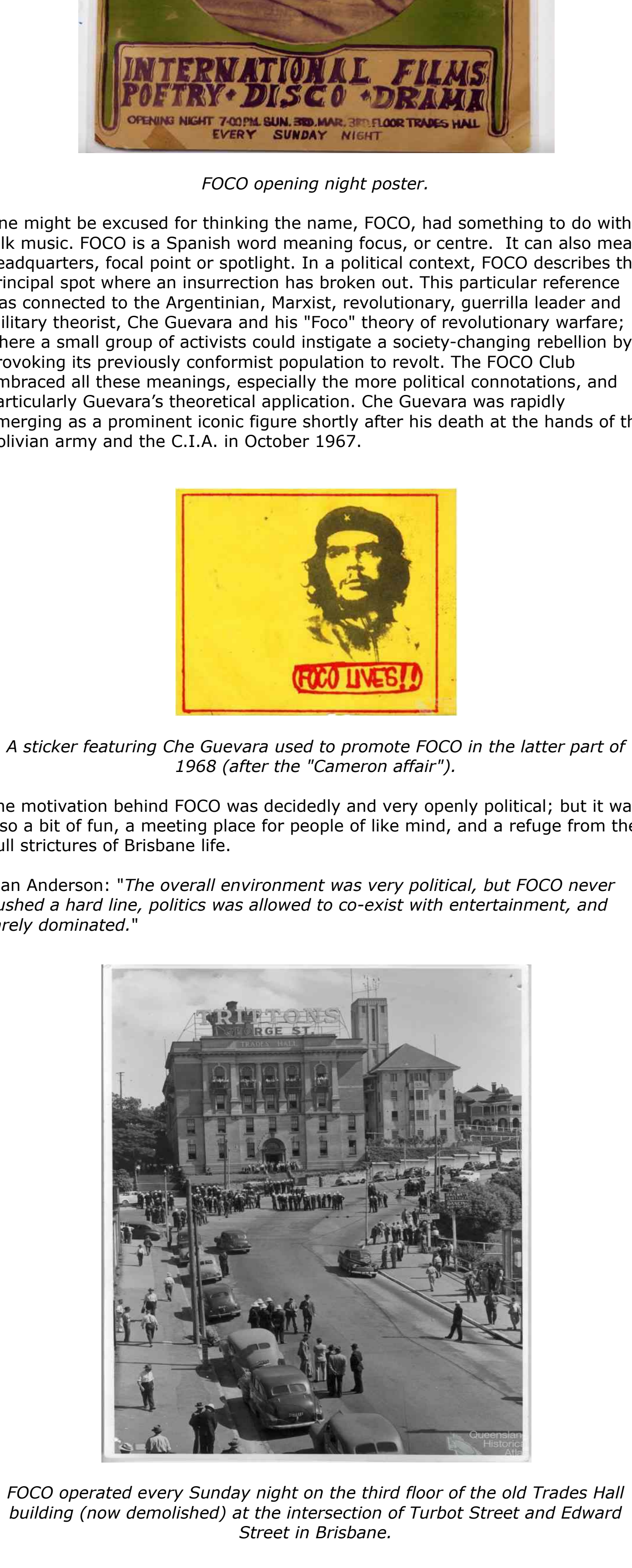
We covered the very popular, though entirely conservative "Battle of the Bands" events at Festival Hall, and were regularly ejected by its eccentric manager, Bert Potts, for daring to photograph uniformed police in action, hurling fans off the stage. The fans would scream their lungs out for performers such as Normie Rowe and Johnny Young. Festival Hall had also featured famous musicians such as *The Beatles*, *Peter, Paul and Mary*, and *Thelonus Monk*.

The Petrie Bight basement venue known as *THE SCENE* hosted regular performers like the ill-fated Mike Furber (*Mike Furber & the Bowery Boys*), and Matt Taylor's first band, *The Bay City Union*, which formed in March 1966. Later, Taylor would achieve national fame as the lead singer of the pioneering Australian blues band, *Chain*.

Geoff Dauth and I provided some of *THE SCENE*'S wall décor, mural-sized photographs printed on the newly-released fluorescent paper, which looked really cool under the UV lighting. Bay City Union's Glenn Wheatley would go on to join *The Master's Apprentices* when music took a more psychedelic turn. There were also some pretty wild gigs at the old Cloudland up on the hill. Another hip venue was the *Red Orb*, which presented music of the rhythm and blues genre, featuring *Thursday's Children*.

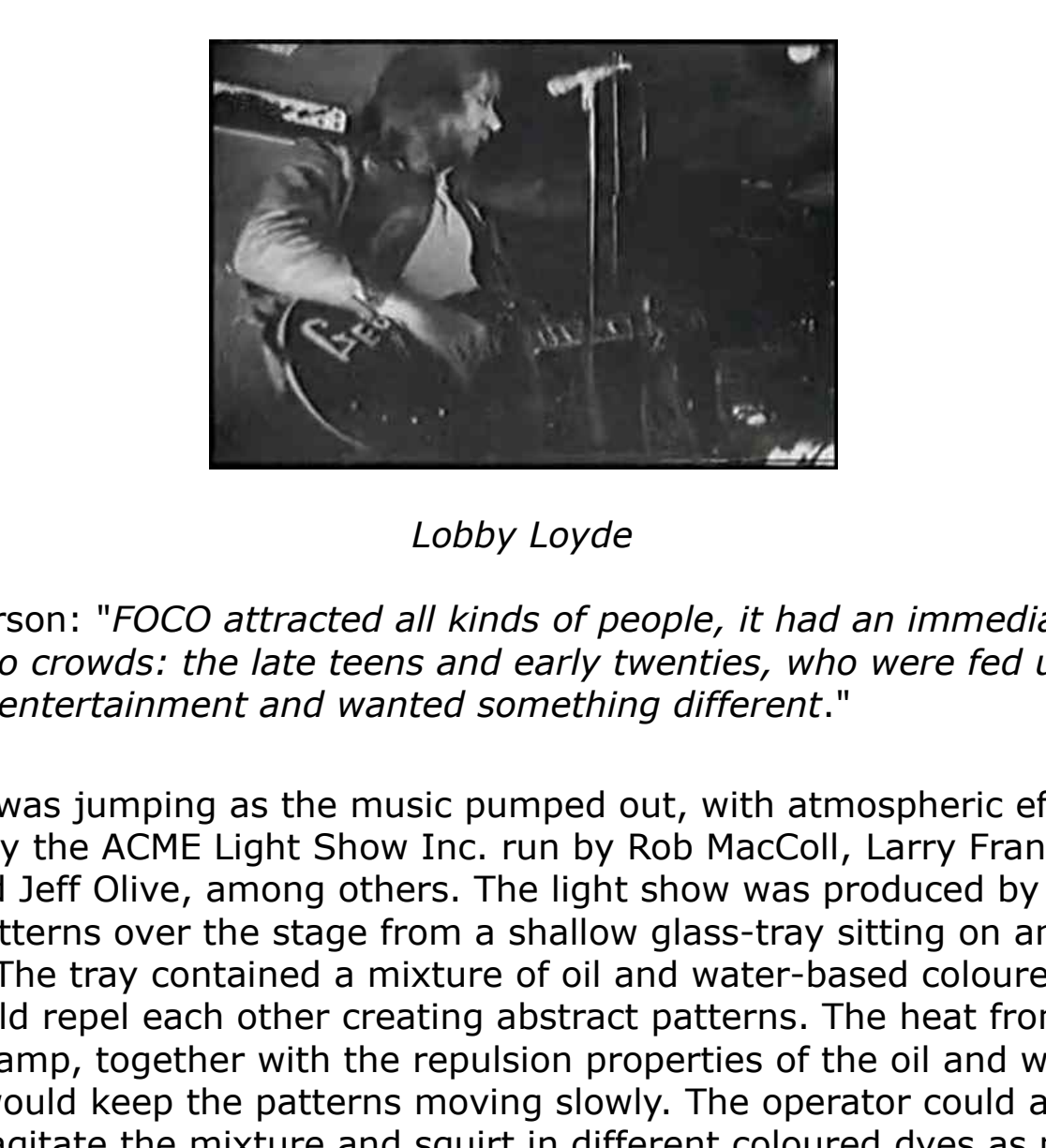


Brisbane also had a thriving folk music scene, based mainly at The Folk Centre in Anne Street which provided a trouble-free, friendly environment where people could go for a sing-along with resident band, *The Wayfarers*, or listen to influential bohemians such as Margaret Kitamura and Don Henderson. Shayna Bracegirdle and Margaret Roadknight were favourites of the "folkies". Brisbane City Hall was a regular venue for major overseas performers such as *Josh White*, *Odetta*, *Judy Collins*, and *Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee*.



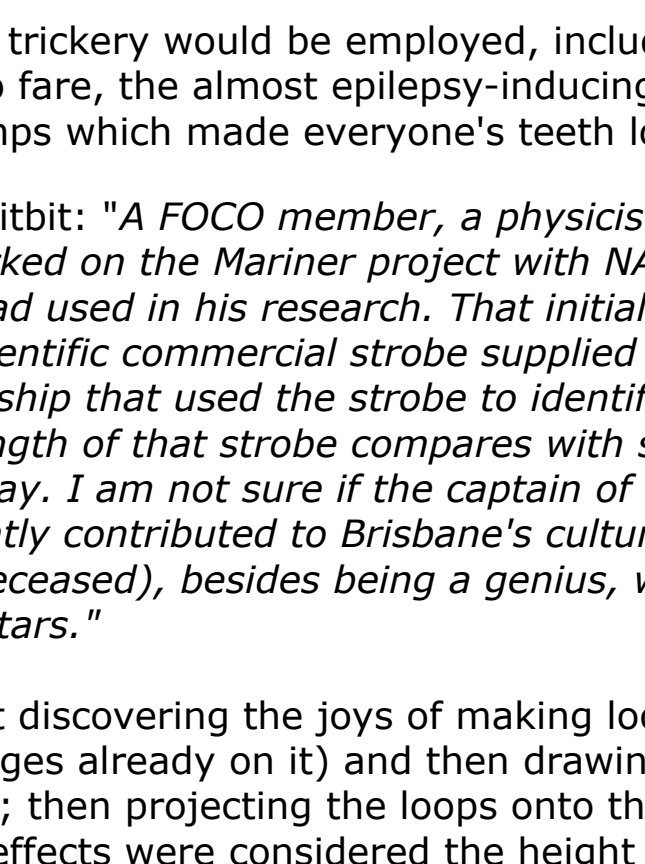
The Wayfarers at the Folk Centre in Brisbane.

Then, on Sunday, 3 March 1968, the FOCO Club opened, turning everything on its head. FOCO was an all-encompassing cultural event incorporating music, poetry, political discussion, film, literature and theatrical performance.



FOCO opening night poster.

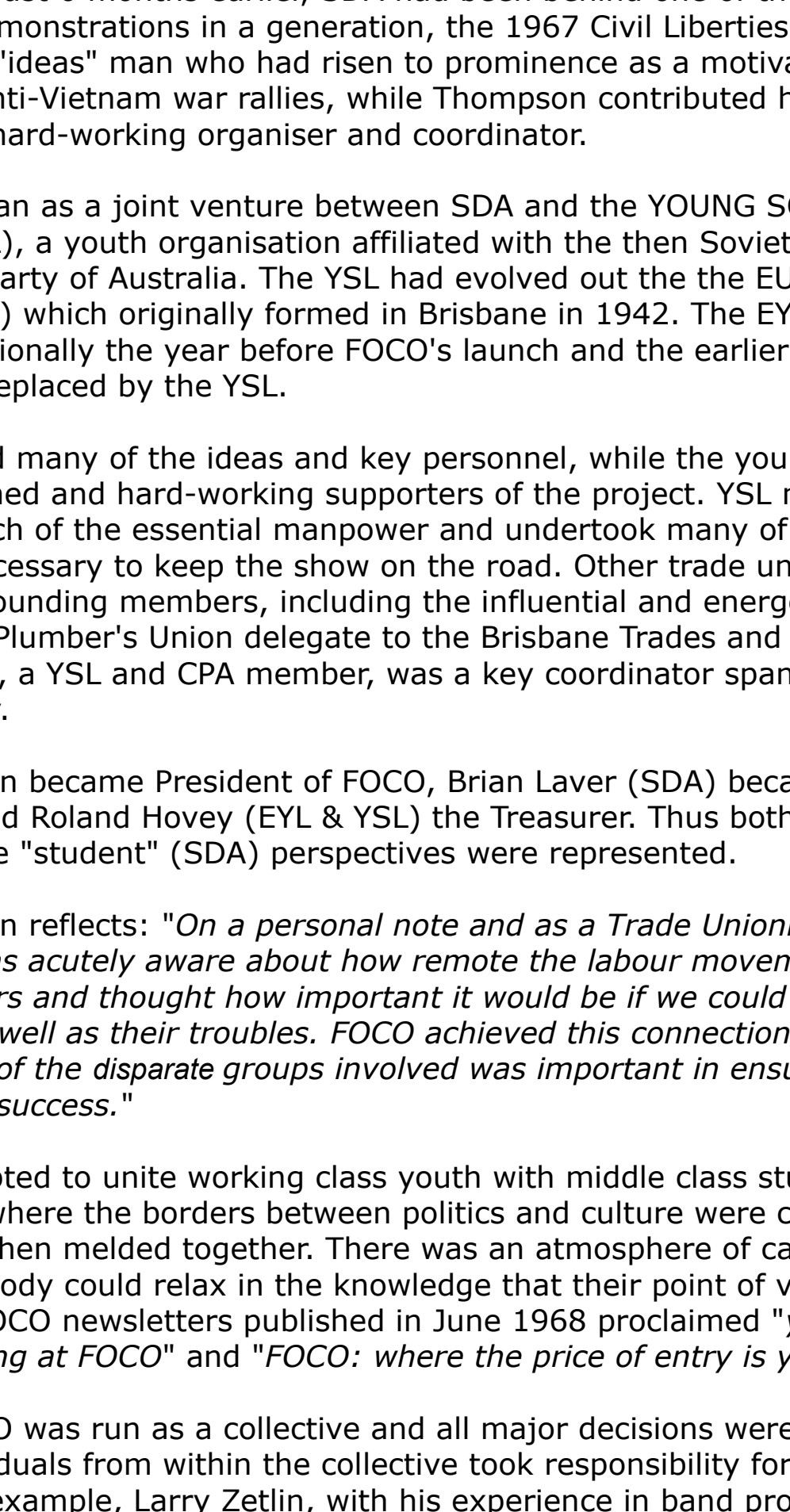
One might be excused for thinking the name, FOCO, had something to do with folk music. FOCO is a Spanish word meaning focus, or centre. It can also mean headquarters, focal point or spotlight. In a political context, FOCO describes the principal spot where an insurrection has broken out. This particular reference was connected to the Argentinian, Marxist, revolutionary, guerrilla leader and military theorist, Che Guevara and his "Foco" theory of revolutionary warfare; where a small group of activists could instigate a society-changing rebellion by replacing its previously conformist population to revolt. The FOCO Club embraced all these meanings, especially the more political connotations, and particularly Guevara's theoretical application. Che Guevara was rapidly emerging as a prominent iconic figure shortly after his death at the hands of the Bolivian army and the C.I.A. in October 1967.



A sticker featuring Che Guevara used to promote FOCO in the latter part of 1968 (after the "Cameron affair").

The motivation behind FOCO was decidedly and very openly political; but it was also a bit of fun, a meeting place for people of like mind, and a refuge from the dull strictures of Brisbane life.

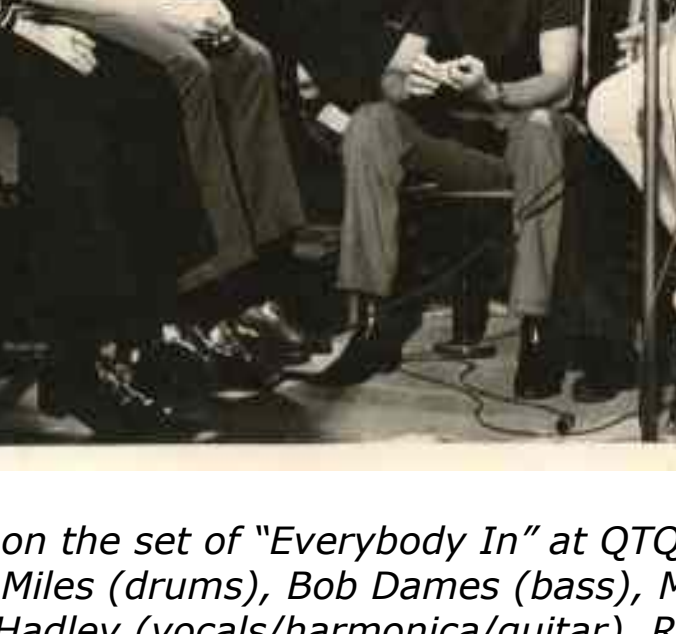
Alan Anderson: "*The overall environment was very political, but FOCO never pushed a hard line, politics was allowed to co-exist with entertainment, and rarely dominated.*"



FOCO operated every Sunday night on the third floor of the old Trades Hall building (now demolished) at the intersection of Turbot Street and Edward Street in Brisbane.

I attended on that first evening at the Trades Hall, and my initial impression was that the bare wooden floors and the lack of decor within the building made the whole thing seem quite spartan, almost forbidding. There were many separate events happening, which members were encouraged to explore. Each area was partitioned off by fabric-covered boards, which needed to be removed and stored after each FOCO event so that the daily business of Trades Hall could continue.

There was a "disco" area for the big draw-card, LIVE MUSIC, where people could dance and just have fun. On that first night, we were privileged to have our senses assailed by Melbourne guitarist Lobby Loyde and *The Wild Cherries*. Lobby really knew how to strangle incredible feed-back sounds from his 400 watts of amplifier power. The band consisted of Lobby Loyde on guitar, Danny Robinson - vocals, Les (Noddy) Gilbert - Hammond organ, Keith Barber - drums, and John Phillips on bass.



Lobby Loyde

Alan Anderson: "*FOCO attracted all kinds of people, it had an immediate appeal to the disco crowds: the late teens and early twenties, who were fed up with consumer entertainment and wanted something different.*"

The place was jumping as the music pumped out, with atmospheric effects provided by the ACME Light Show Inc. run by Rob MacColl, Larry Franks, Bob Hickey and Jeff Olive, among others. The light show was produced by projecting moving patterns over the stage from a shallow glass-tray sitting on an overhead projector. The tray contained a mixture of oil and water-based coloured dyes which would repel each other creating abstract patterns. The heat from the projector lamp, together with the repulsion properties of the oil and water mixture, would keep the patterns moving slowly. The operator could also manually agitate the mixture and squirt in different coloured dyes as needed, to set up rhythms which would, with a bit of luck, fit perfectly with the music.

ACME Light Show promotion from a FOCO newsletter

Other types of lighting trickery would be employed, including what would become standard disco fare, the almost epilepsy-inducing strobe lights; not to mention ultraviolet lamps which made everyone's teeth look weird.

Larry Zetlin adds this titbit: "*A FOCO member, a physicist named Doug Rickards, who had worked on the Mariner project with NASA, loaned FOCO a small strobe that he had used in his research. That initial puny light was soon replaced by a large scientific commercial strobe supplied to us by a member of a visiting US research ship that used the strobe to identify floating buoys at sea. I believe the strength of that strobe compares with strobes used on commercial planes today. I am not sure if the captain of the ship ever knew that he had inadvertently contributed to Brisbane's cultural life! By the way, Doug Rickards (now deceased), besides being a genius, was also an excellent maker of lutes and guitars.*"

Larry also talked about discovering the joys of making loops from clear 16mm film (and film with images already on it) and then drawing directly onto the film using colored felt pens; then projecting the loops onto the dance floor and the bands. These lighting effects were considered the height of hi-tech at the time. Although rather primitive by today's standards, they had a profound effect on the "heads" in the audience.

Alan Anderson: "*There were no dress restrictions, and all kinds of people moved around free of attack. There were few fights, and any that did erupt were quickly broken up by members, thus cancelling the need for bouncers.*"

Two of the prime movers behind FOCO were Brian Laver and Mitch Thompson. In late 1967, Laver was employed as a research assistant by the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council (TLC). The TLC was under the leadership of Communist Party of Australia member, Alex MacDonald. Meanwhile, Thompson worked for Left-Labor Senator George Georges. Their positions gave them sufficient influence and negotiating power to acquire the venue on the third floor of the Trades Hall building.

Laver explained: "*The movement itself was doing these things all over the world. We needed something...where we could show film; where we could have folk singing, which was fairly big; where we could have political discussion [and] where we could distribute our leaflets.*"

Laver and Thompson were key leadership figures in the SOCIETY FOR DEMOCRATIC ACTION (SDA), a prominent, vigorous and successful organization at the time. Just 6 months earlier, SDA had been behind one of the most influential demonstrations in a generation, the 1967 Civil Liberties march. Laver was a noted "ideas" man who had risen to prominence as a motivational speaker at anti-Vietnam war rallies, while Thompson contributed his genius as an inspired, hard-working organiser and coordinator.

The club began as a joint venture between SDA and the YOUNG SOCIALIST LEAGUE (YSL), a youth organisation affiliated with the then Soviet-aligned Communist Party of Australia. The YSL had evolved out the the EUREKA YOUTH LEAGUE (EYL) which originally formed in Brisbane in 1942. The EYL had been dissolved nationally the year before FOCO's launch and the earlier organization was largely replaced by the YSL.

SDA provided many of the ideas and key personnel, while the young Socialists were disciplined and hard-working supporters of the project. YSL members provided much of the essential manpower and undertook many of the day-to-day tasks necessary to keep the show on the road. Other trade unionists came onboard as founding members, including the influential and energetic Alan Anderson, a Plumber's Union delegate to the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council. Alan, a YSL and CPA member, was a key coordinator spanning FOCO's entire history.

Alan Anderson became President of FOCO, Brian Laver (SDA) became the Secretary, and Roland Hovey (EYL & YSL) the Treasurer. Thus both the trade union and the "student" (SDA) perspectives were represented.

Alan Anderson reflects: "*On a personal note and as a Trade Unionist and a CPA member I was acutely aware about how remote the labour movement was to young workers and thought how important it would be if we could be part of their joys as well as their troubles. FOCO achieved this connection. The combination of the disparate groups involved was important in ensuring its phenomenal success.*"

FOCO attempted to unite working class youth with middle class students in an experiment where the borders between politics and culture were consciously blurred and then melded together. There was an atmosphere of camaraderie in which everybody could relax in the knowledge that their point of view would be accepted. FOCO newsletters published in June 1968 proclaimed "*you can do your own thing at FOCO*" and "*FOCO: where the price of entry is your mind*".

Overall, FOCO was run as a collective and all major decisions were made by this group. Individuals from within the collective took responsibility for key areas of activity. For example, Larry Zetlin, with his experience in band promotion and underground film, took on the role of the venue's manager and was responsible for the day-to-day running of the club. Zetlin had built an extensive network of music and media contacts through his work with *Go-Set*. Larry explained: "*We modelled FOCO on what we thought was happening internationally. My knowledge of the underground music, art, cinema and performance scene(s) was gained by reading imported so-called Underground magazines, such as Rolling Stone, Village Voice, the San Francisco Free Press, etc. which I received for free because of my role with Go-Set in Australia.*"

Zetlin promoted FOCO during weekly radio broadcasts with Brisbane's much-admired and most "switched on" DJ, Tony Macarthur, a member of 4BC's "Geoff, Tony and Bob" team of DJs, and a great promoter of interesting new music. (Tony eventually left Australia to work with the pirate station, Radio Luxembourg.)

Word about the FOCO experiment spread quickly, and large crowds started to arrive. According to Laver, typical attendances were between 500 and 800 people per night. Local musicians got to show off their talents, and the popularity of FOCO grew with the regular appearances of resident band *The Coloured Balls*, featuring the enigmatic Mick Hadley (harmonica/vocals/rhythm guitar; ex-*Purple Hearts*), Bob Dames (bass; ex-*Purple Hearts*), Mick "Sam" Shannon (lead vocals), Peter Miles (drums; ex-*Bay City Union*), and Robbie Van Delft (guitar/flute; ex-*Mike Furber & The Bowery Boys*). The band became heavily influenced by the English band, *Jethro Tull*, so the group's guitarist doubled as their flute player.

The Coloured Balls on the set of "Everybody In" at QTO Channel 9 studios. Left-to-right: Peter Miles (drums), Bob Dames (bass), Mick "Sam" Shannon (vocals), Mick Hadley (vocals/harmonica/guitar), Robbie van Delft (guitar/flute). Sitting far right is 4BC's Greg Jeffery, one of the presenters of the show along with co-presenter, Kerry Ann Wright (not present).

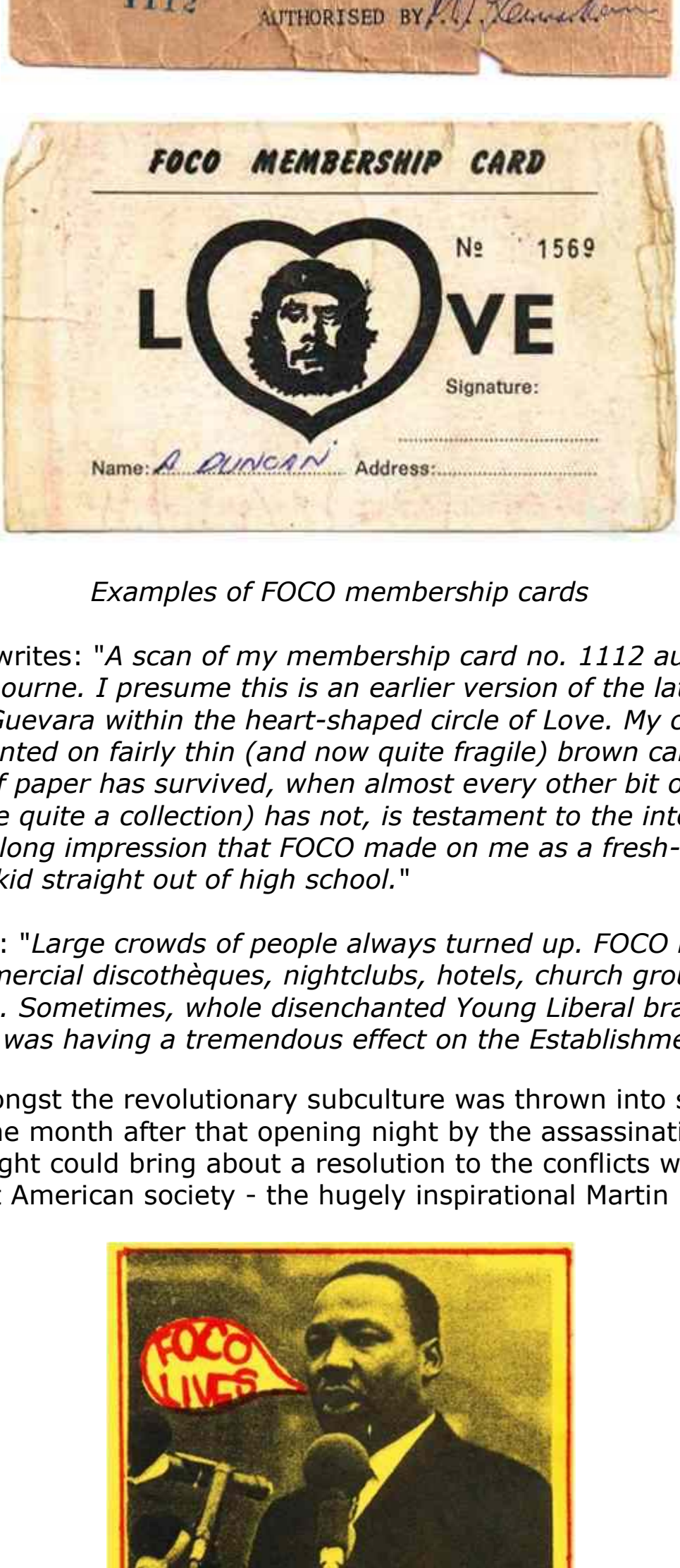
The generous and supremely talented *Max Merritt and the Meteors* made special trips from Sydney to play at FOCO, which further boosted its reputation as a great venue.

Larry Zetlin recalls that the crowds at FOCO swelled to close to 2000 people when *Max Merritt and the Meteors* played. He explains: "*We fitted the greater numbers in at Trades Hall by opening all the areas into one large space and canceling movies and folk areas. And the numbers were even greater when Foco held free concerts in the city botanical gardens.*"

The FOCO Club opened every Sunday night at 7pm. It operated as a membership-based club to avoid restrictive legislation which kept all venues in Brisbane closed on a Sunday (except those associated with the church). Being a

registered club, FOCO was exempt from this antiquated, draconian law. It cost one dollar to become a member of the FOCO Club and 70 cents to attend the regular Sunday events. This money was used to offset the necessary costs of remodelling Trades Hall, the hiring of bands, renting films, importing radical literature, and so on. Right from the outset the club did very well financially.

Alan Anderson: *"That FOCO was successful is beyond question. It was an immediate hit involving what to us were enormous crowds – sometimes as many as 1200, but mainly around the 500 mark for the first six months. Our membership grew to (over) 3000, all of whom received our weekly newsletter."*

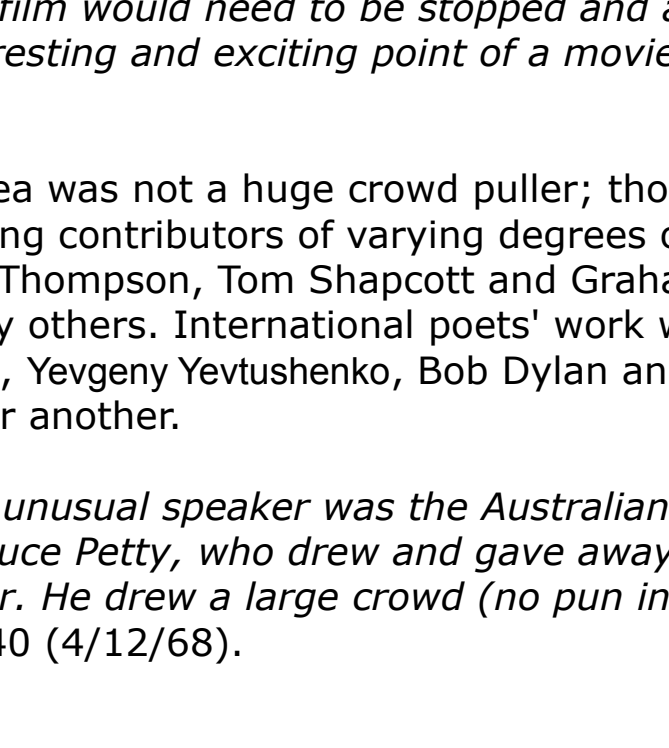


Examples of FOCO membership cards

Colin Beasley writes: *"A scan of my membership card no. 1112 authorised by Matthew Lambourne. I presume this is an earlier version of the later card that features Che Guevara within the heart-shaped circle of Love. My card was much plainer and printed on fairly thin (and now quite fragile) brown card. The fact that this slip of paper has survived, when almost every other bit of memorabilia (I used to have quite a collection) has not, is testament to the intoxicating effect and life-long impression that FOCO made on me as a fresh-faced, working class kid straight out of high school."*

Alan Anderson: *"Large crowds of people always turned up. FOCO became a real threat to commercial discothèques, nightclubs, hotels, church groups and the Young Liberals. Sometimes, whole disenchanting Young Liberal branches arrived. FOCO was having a tremendous effect on the Establishment."*

The mood amongst the revolutionary subculture was thrown into shocked despair just one month after that opening night by the assassination of the man everyone thought could bring about a resolution to the conflicts which were eating away at American society - the hugely inspirational Martin Luther King Jr.



A promotional sticker featuring Martin Luther King Jr. Larry Zetlin came up with the idea for the "FOCO LIVES" slogan.

There was an area which screened films, where people could drop in and out to watch feature-length movies such as Fellini's "8 1/2", or Vittorio De Sica's wonderful "Umberto D", or short experimental films, many of which were Australian-made. Many of the better shorts were made by the Sydney-based UBU films, which was started by Albie Thoms and Aggie Reed, among others; involving people destined for the big time, such as Peter Weir, Phillip Noyce and Bruce Beresford. One of those makers seemed to specialise in little erotic adventures, beautifully shot black and white 16mm films where a hand-held camera would chase a coquettish, naked girl through the interior of a Sydney house.

One memorable six-minute experimental film, directed by Albie Thoms (1941 - 2012) and Bruce Beresford, was 1963's *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*, which starred Lyn Collingwood, Germaine Greer, Terence McMullen and Cam Perry. The film was banned from cinema release and is considered by Metro Magazine to have marked "the birth of the Australian experimental film". The story centred around human faeces falling from the sky; a little at first, though by the end it was coming thick and fast, a real shit-storm. It was quite surreal, and totally hilarious. Albie Thoms introduced the film on the night it was screened at FOCO.

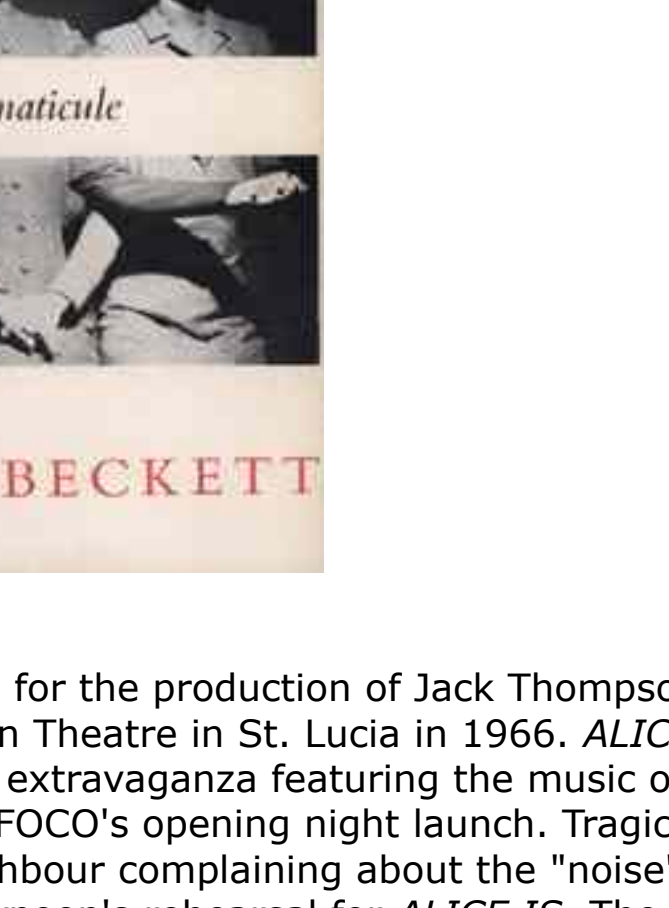
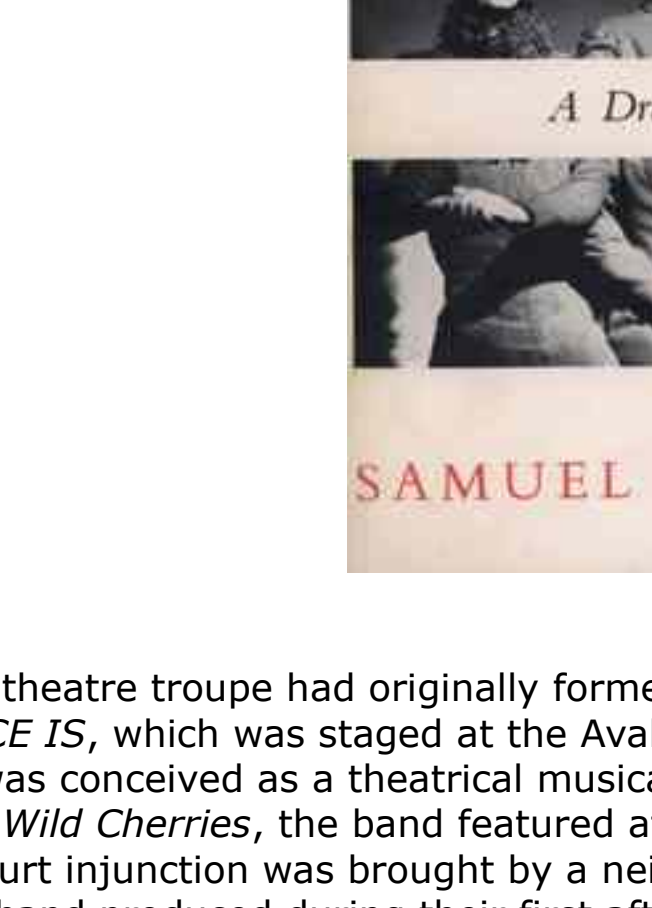
There were many examples of film loops which were simply a few metres of blackened colour stock, joined end-to-end and roughly scratched to reveal its component colours. These chaotic images could be run for hours, providing what were then quite hallucinatory effects, depending on one's state of mind.

Larry Zetlin: *"At that time Rob MacColl was already working for the ABC and had access to unlimited used 16mm film, with images (ex News) or clear and it was Rob who pioneered the use of this film as a medium to draw on. However it meant that we needed a clapped out 16mm movie projector and this was supplied by Jan Murray who was a technician and TV repair bloke. Jan owned a 16mm projector and he knew how to lace it up so it fell to him to run the machine. My memory was that it was very noisy and often interfered with the sound of the film. We didn't have a soundproof projector room. Also, as we only had one projector the film would need to be stopped and a new reel laced up, often at the most interesting and exciting point of a movie. However no one ever complained!"*

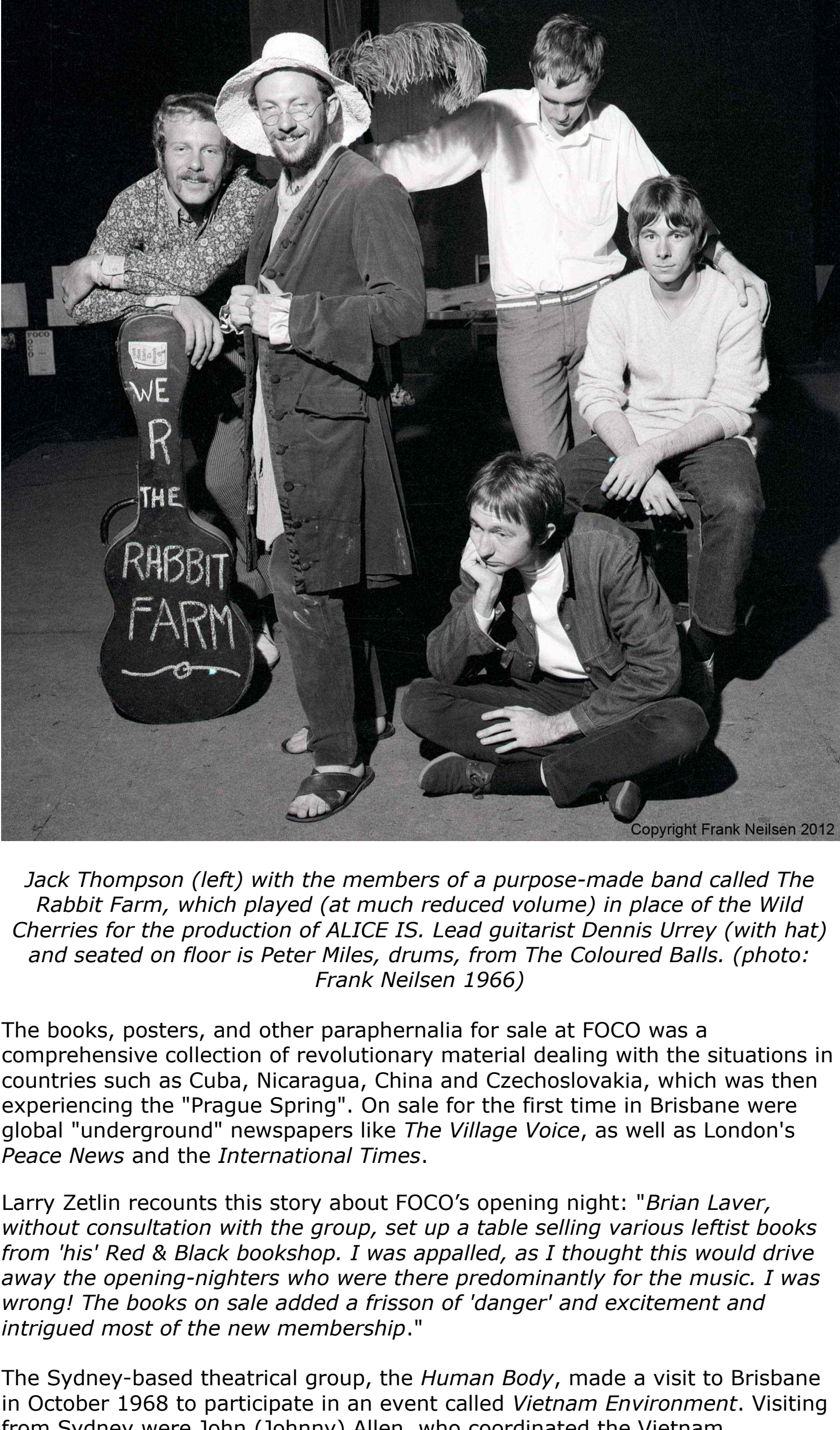
The poetry-reading area was not a huge crowd puller; though it was attended by some very interesting contributors of varying degrees of seriousness and talent. The actor Jack Thompson, Tom Shapcott and Graham Rowlands all read there, along with many others. International poets' work was also heard - Dylan Thomas, Günter Grass, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg were featured at one time or another.

Larry Zetlin: *"Another unusual speaker was the Australian newspaper's then resident cartoonist, Bruce Petty, who drew and gave away large cartoons drawn on white butcher paper. He drew a large crowd (no pun intended)!"* See FOCO newsletter Vol. 1 No. 40 (4/12/68).

Sharing this space were acclaimed folk performers including Margaret Kitamura, Declan Affley, Don Henderson, Sylvia Burns, Shayea Karlin, Harry Robertson, Chris Nicholson and Barbara Bacon. Blues performers were also featured including Matt Taylor, Paul Johnson, Terry Hannagan and gifted bluegrass player Chris Duffy on banjo, mandolin and guitar. The Red Belly Stompers Jazz Band, The Ram Jam Big Band and the Rammitta 'P' Jug Band were also popular, as was the flamenco guitarist, Brian Crawford.



Don Henderson

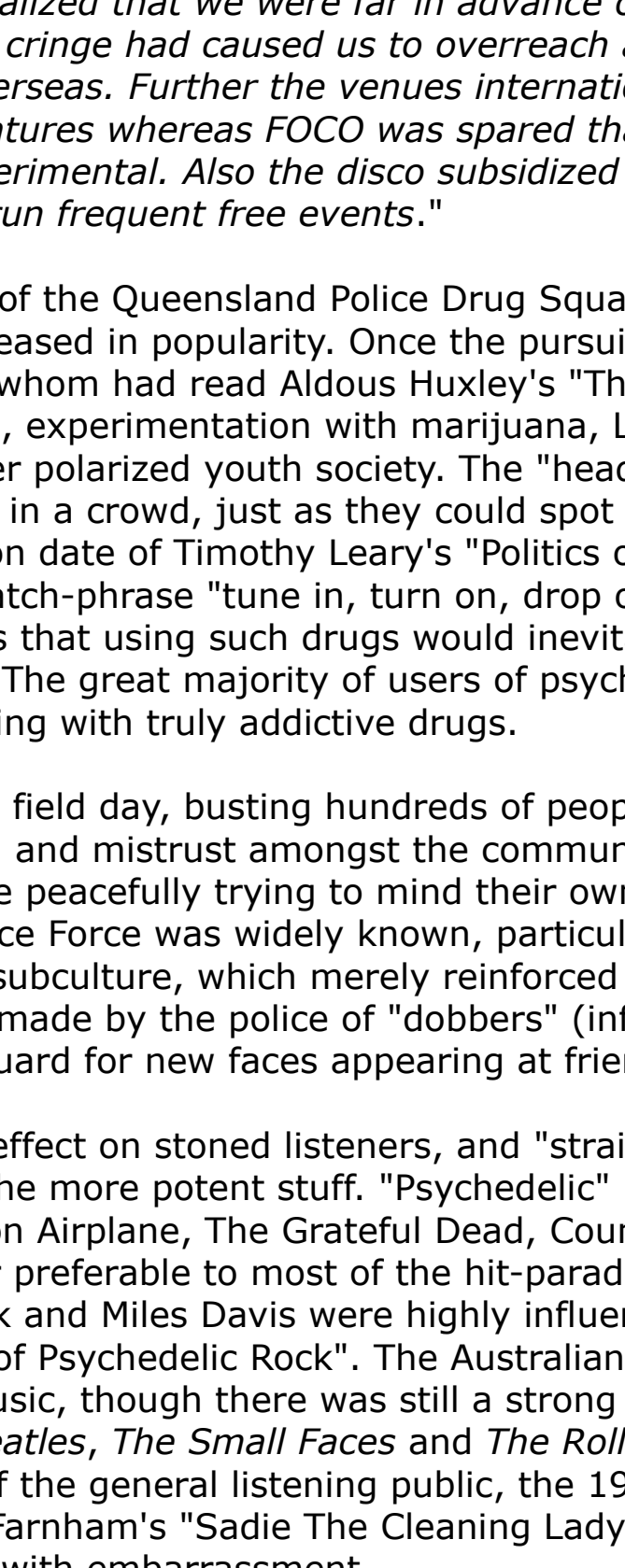


One of the bands performing at FOCO.

Alan Anderson: *"It was always difficult to have a consistently high quality of entertainment but even at its lowest level, FOCO outstripped the best offered by commercial rivals."*

I think there may even have been a chess-playing area, though how anybody could concentrate on a chess game escapes me. Elsewhere, there was a coffee-making section, and a forum for political discussion. One evening, the crowd was addressed by Ted Baldwin, the leader of the Queensland Teachers' Union. On another night, Brian Laver detailed his first-hand experiences of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. Public forums were held on such diverse subjects as the US Civil Rights movement, rock music, the global press, Brisbane architecture and the environment, Australian folklore, Catholicism, Transcendental Meditation, the Vietnam War, and the European Student/Worker Movement. Audience participation was encouraged during such events, leading to much spirited discussion.

The theatrical performance troupe, *THE TRIBE* (originally *The Dire Tribe*), consisted of players from the University of Queensland who would enact *avant garde* "happenings" for the delight and/or mystification of the audience. The troupe included Doug Anders, Elizabeth (Libby) Nosworthy, Barbara Bacon, Barbara McCarthy, Di Fuller, Ross Gilbert, Robin Gurner, Brent McGregar, (a then young) Geoffrey Rush, and Dianne Neale (who would become Di Zetlin after she and Larry married in late 1968). This experimental group gave performances of Samuel Beckett's 'dramaticule', *Come and Go*, as well as Harold Pinter's *The Black and White*, the controversial *Motel* by Jean-Claude van Itallie, and Wymark's *Coda*. Audience participation was especially encouraged.



The theatre troupe had originally formed for the production of Jack Thompson's *ALICE IS*, which was staged at the Avalon Theatre in St. Lucia in 1966. *ALICE IS* was conceived as a theatrical musical extravaganza featuring the music of *The Wild Cherries*, the band featured at FOCO's opening night launch. Tragically, a court injunction was brought by a neighbour complaining about the "noise" the band produced during their first afternoon's rehearsal for *ALICE IS*. The show opened minus *The Wild Cherries*, an integral part of the show, so the injunction effectively undermined the heart and soul of the production.



Jack Thompson (left) with the members of a purpose-made band called *The Rabbit Farm*, which played (at much reduced volume) in place of the *Wild Cherries* for the production of *ALICE IS*. Lead guitarist Dennis Urrey (with hat) and seated on floor is Peter Miles, drums, from *The Coloured Balls*. (photo: Frank Neilsen 1966)

The books, posters, and other paraphernalia for sale at FOCO was a comprehensive collection of revolutionary material dealing with the situations in countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, China and Czechoslovakia, which was then experiencing the "Prague Spring". On sale for the first time in Brisbane were global "underground" newspapers like *The Village Voice*, as well as London's *Peace News* and the *International Times*.

Larry Zetlin recounts this story about FOCO's opening night: *"Brian Laver, without consultation with the group, set up a table selling various leftist books from 'his' Red & Black bookshop. I was appalled, as I thought this would drive away the opening-nighters who were there predominantly for the music. I was wrong! The books on sale added a frisson of 'danger' and excitement and intrigued most of the new membership."*

The Sydney-based theatrical group, the *Human Body*, made a visit to Brisbane in October 1968 to participate in an event called *Vietnam Environment*. Visiting from Sydney were John (Johnny) Allen, who coordinated the Vietnam Environment, Judy Gemes, Hugh Williams and Clem Gorman. The *Human Body* worked with *TRIBE* and other participants for one week to create an environmental event, using all the available spaces in the building.

Allen commented: *"When I saw the potential of the building I wanted to use everything - pop, fighting, stairs, fire escape, film, music, sound, action, violence, blood, symbols of life, advertising, the comic strip approach to reality and the reality of the comic strip."*

Allen added: *"Vietnam Environment, using the whole of FOCO, and bringing in many outside people, poets, readers, painters, architects, environmentalists, dancers. At its centre an American young-anarchist anti-Vietnam script called 'American Atrocities in Vietnam'."*

"Tribe performed a series of Vietnam sketches," Allen recalls. *"A boy in a clear plastic cylinder of ox blood wiped the blood across the plastic view which people had of his prison before breaking out to spread ox blood among the crowd."* Then, Allen recorded, *"audience members were extracted, put through an interrogation box, and either offered a lucky dip or pushed onto the fire escape. The pop band played an abstract sound poem based on the siren of an ambulance, and the TRIBE improvised an interpretive dance under strobe lights. Chants of 'stop the war', 'leave Vietnam', were passed around and picked up."*

The FOCO Vietnam Environment, a special night held on Sunday 6 October of 1968, incorporated film, theatre, music, painting ... architectural structures ... anything which could be used to explore the central theme of the ongoing conflict in Indochina.

Alan Anderson regrets: *"The trade union movement had remained indifferent practically all the way through. How could they fail to comprehend that something was happening, something more than words or insignificant acts, but something that many young people were absorbed in and identified with?"*

Larry Zetlin recalls: *"We modeled FOCO on what we thought was happening internationally. In late 1968, when Di and I travelled to live in London, via the west coast USA, we realized that we were far in advance of what we saw overseas. Our cultural cringe had caused us to overreach and exceed what was actually happening overseas. Further the venues internationally were usually run as commercial ventures whereas FOCO was spared that limitation and we could be far more experimental. Also the disco subsidized all the other activities and allowed FOCO to run frequent free events."*

Prior to the formation of the Queensland Police Drug Squad, marijuana smoking had exponentially increased in popularity. Once the pursuit of a clique of intellectuals, many of whom had read Aldous Huxley's "The Doors of Perception" and "Heaven and Hell", experimentation with marijuana, LSD and psilocybin mushrooms had further polarized youth society. The "heads" could wordlessly recognize one another in a crowd, just as they could spot the "straights". 1968 was also the publication date of Timothy Leary's "Politics of Ecstasy", popularising Leary's catch-phrase "tune in, turn on, drop out". The popular wisdom of the day was that using such drugs would inevitably lead to the "hard stuff", namely heroin. The great majority of users of psychedelics never had any interest in experimenting with truly addictive drugs.

The Drug Squad had a field day, busting hundreds of people, and creating a general air of paranoia and mistrust amongst the community of users, the vast majority of whom were peacefully trying to mind their own business. Corruption in the Queensland Police Force was widely known, particularly amongst members of the drug subculture, which merely reinforced the "enemy" status of police. Wide use was made by the police of "dobbers" (informers), so one always had to be on guard for new faces appearing at friendly gatherings.

Music had a powerful effect on stoned listeners, and "straight" pop music was shunned in favour of the more potent stuff. "Psychedelic" rock from American bands such as Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, Country Joe and The Fish, and The Doors was far preferable to most of the hit-parade pap. Modern jazz performers Roland Kirk and Miles Davis were highly influential. Janis Joplin was hailed as "The Queen of Psychedelic Rock". The Australian Top 40 hit parades did not feature this music, though there was still a strong influence of English groups such as *The Beatles*, *The Small Faces* and *The Rolling Stones*. Pointing up the conservatism of the general listening public, the 1968 No.1 pop song in Australia was Johnny Farnham's "Sadie The Cleaning Lady", which made most of the "heads" squirm with embarrassment.

FOCO published a weekly newsletter mailed to each member, advising them of the upcoming Sunday's events or "happenings". Each newsletter featured interesting, often humorous, cover designs and graphics, many created by the talented artist, Bob Daly; who usually took care of the layout as well.

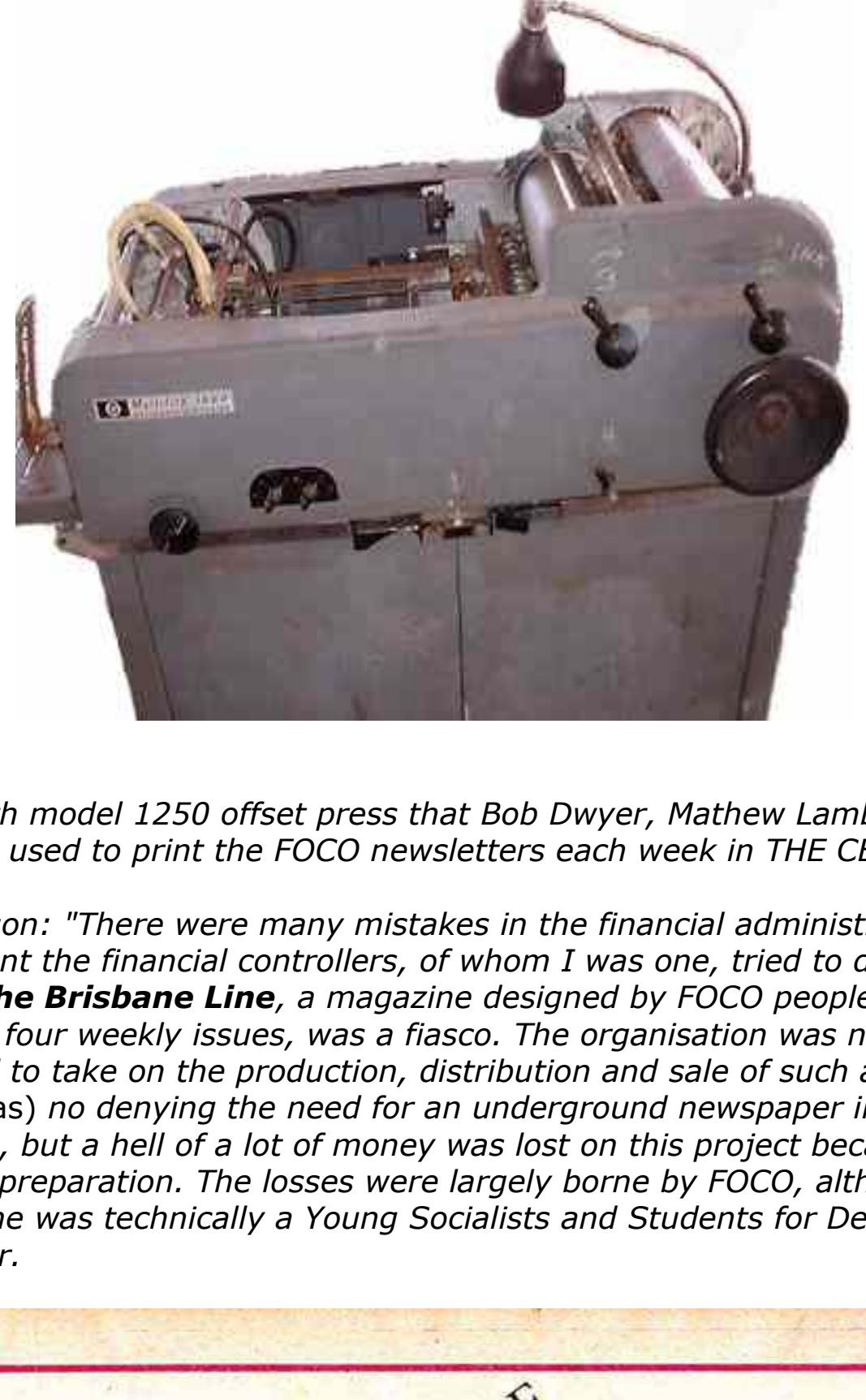
Cover page of a FOCO newsletter

The FOCO newsletter was offset printed on both sides of a foolscap sheet, which was then folded in half to create a conveniently-sized four-page booklet. Sometimes, a coloured ink, and/or coloured paper, was used for variety, or to add interest.

A selection of cover pages from FOCO newsletters.

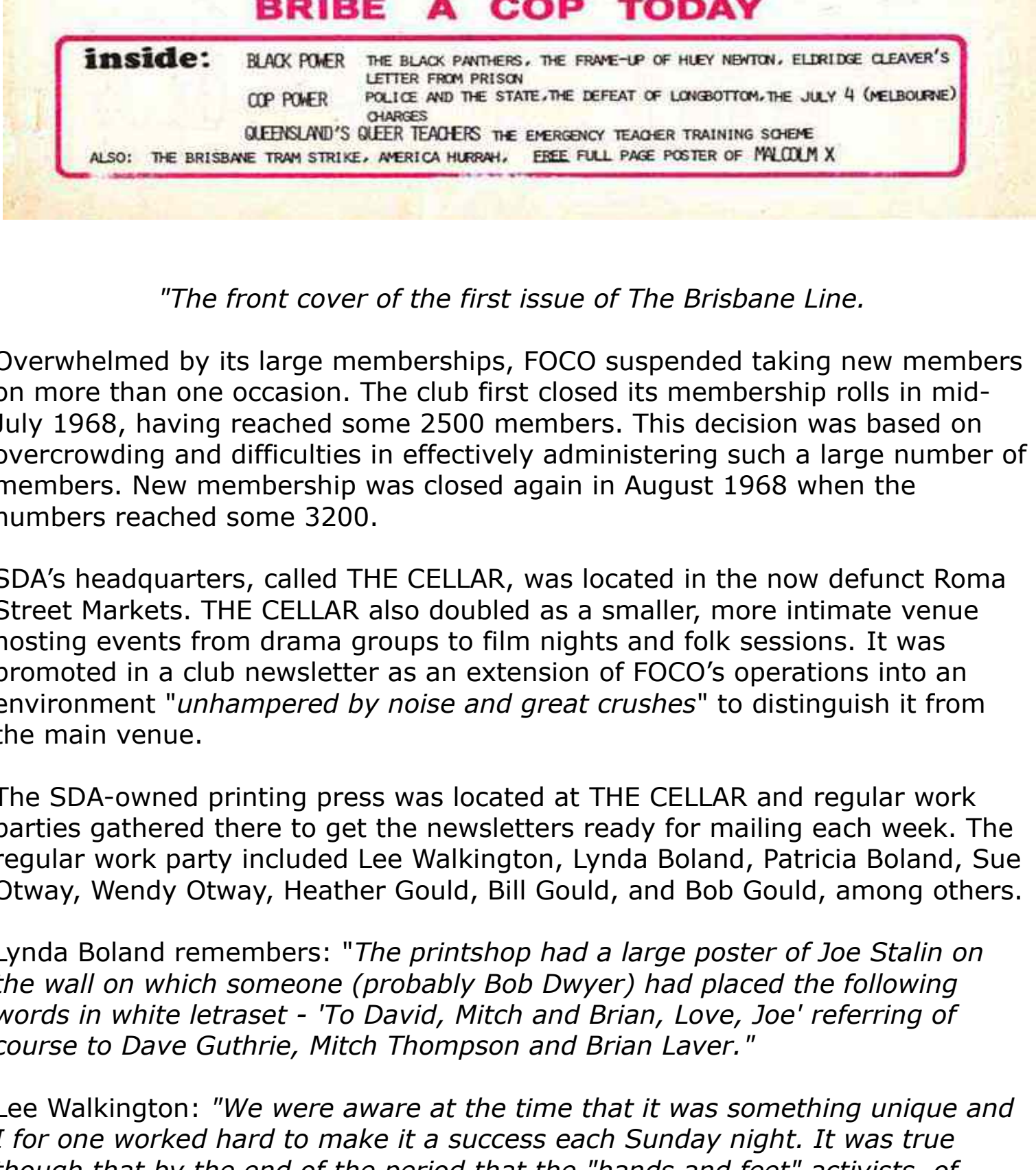
In a November 1968 edition of the newsletter, FOCO stated that it cost over 2 cents to print and mail a newsletter to each member. Moreover, it took about 100 (combined) hours each week to fold the newsletters and sort them into post-code order (a requirement for bulk mailing).

Larry Zetlin adds: *"In those days each newsletter had to have the name and address of the member glued to the folded newsletter and I was responsible for bulk mailing them every Thursday morning at the North Quay post office, where the newsletter was registered as 'printed matter' and the postage was therefore discounted. There was a large working bee every Wednesday night at THE CELLAR with the bulk of the labour provided by the disciplined CPA youth from the Young Socialists League."*



The Multiith model 1250 offset press that Bob Dwyer, Mathew Lambourne and others used to print the FOCO newsletters each week in THE CELLAR.

Alan Anderson: "There were many mistakes in the financial administration; to a certain extent the financial controllers, of whom I was one, tried to do too much too soon. **The Brisbane Line**, a magazine designed by FOCO people, which folded after four weekly issues, was a fiasco. The organisation was not prepared or equipped to take on the production, distribution and sale of such a magazine. There is (was) no denying the need for an underground newspaper in Brisbane at that time, but a hell of a lot of money was lost on this project because of inadequate preparation. The losses were largely borne by FOCO, although Brisbane Line was technically a Young Socialists and Students for Democratic Action paper.



"The front cover of the first issue of The Brisbane Line.

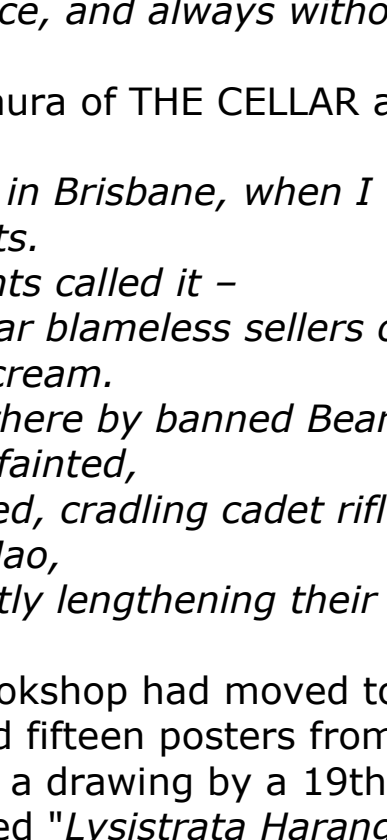
Overwhelmed by its large memberships, FOCO suspended taking new members on more than one occasion. The club first closed its membership rolls in mid-July 1968, having reached some 2500 members. This decision was based on overcrowding and difficulties in effectively administering such a large number of members. New membership was closed again in August 1968 when the numbers reached some 3200.

SDA's headquarters, called THE CELLAR, was located in the now defunct Roma Street Markets. THE CELLAR also doubled as a smaller, more intimate venue hosting events from drama groups to film nights and folk sessions. It was promoted in a club newsletter as an extension of FOCO's operations into an environment "unhindered by noise and great crushes" to distinguish it from the main venue.

The SDA-owned printing press was located at THE CELLAR and regular work parties gathered there to get the newsletters ready for mailing each week. The regular work party included Lee Walkington, Lynda Boland, Patricia Boland, Sue Otway, Wendy Otway, Heather Gould, Bill Gould, and Bob Gould, among others.

Lynda Boland remembers: "The printshop had a large poster of Joe Stalin on the wall on which someone (probably Bob Dwyer) had placed the following words in white leterset - 'To David, Mitch and Brian, Love, Joe' referring of course to Dave Guthrie, Mitch Thompson and Brian Laver."

Lee Walkington: "We were aware at the time that it was something unique and I for one worked hard to make it a success each Sunday night. It was true though that by the end of the period that the 'hands and feet' activists, of which I was one, were left worn out by it all. It took a lot of work to set it up and an even greater amount of work to clean up after it was over."

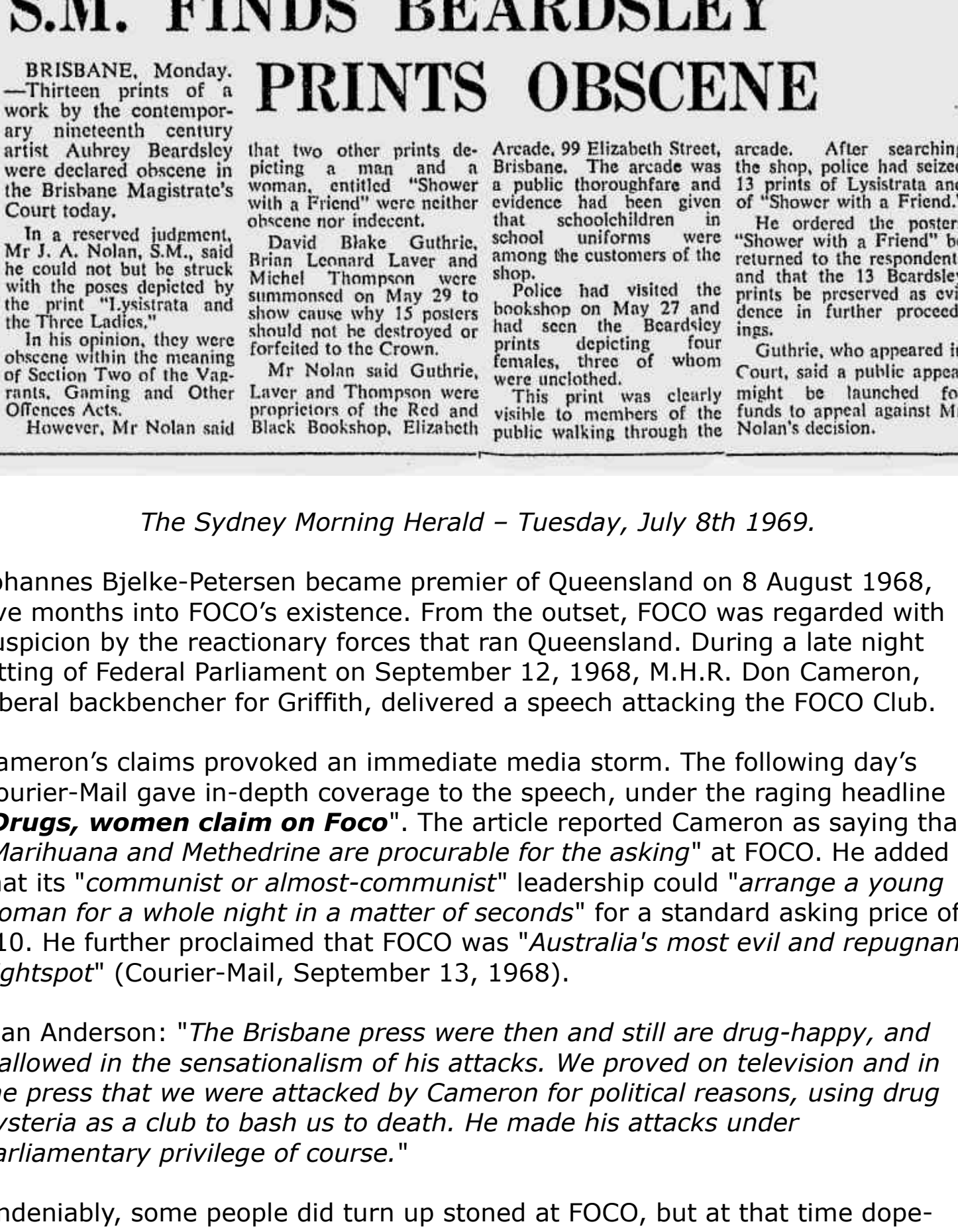


The SDA-financed *The Red and The Black Bookshop* was located immediately next door to THE CELLAR. The bookshop was damaged in police raids and Neo-Nazi attacks. On one occasion, police broke into the bookshop while pursuing demonstrators who had taken refuge inside. The break-in caused \$6,000 worth of damage, for which the police never took responsibility. In April 1969, a suspicious fire also caused significant damage, primarily from the resulting water damage. An issue of SDA's own newsletter (*Student Guerrilla*) described state police "paying almost daily visits" to the bookshop "usually without giving any reason for their appearance, and always without a warrant".

A young visitor captured the aura of THE CELLAR as follows:

The Red and Black Bookshop, in Brisbane, when I was nineteen, was the place to discover poets. 'A corrupting place', our parents called it – dubious as Dracula lurking near blameless sellers of batik and too many flavours of ice cream. In the dangerous spaces left there by banned Beardsley prints, young men who had recently fainted, spit-polished and khaki-creased, cradling cadet rifles on Anzac Day, were turning over Marx and Mao, arguing for anarchy and intently lengthening their hair.

On 27 May 1969, after the bookshop had moved to new premises in the Elizabeth Arcade, police seized fifteen posters from the shop. Thirteen of these posters were reproductions of a drawing by a 19th-century artist, Aubrey Beardsley (1872 - 1898) called "*Lysistrata Haranguing the Athenian Women*". The proprietors of the bookshop, Brian Laver, Mitch Thompson, and David Guthrie, faced obscenity charges for displaying this print in public. In a Brisbane Magistrate's Court hearing on 7 July 1969, the prints were declared obscene. Despite an appeal to the High Court, the bookshop was forced to pay a substantial fine. The judge ruled that the other poster confiscated, called "*Save Water - Shower with a Friend*", was neither obscene nor indecent and was returned.



"Lysistrata Haranguing the Athenian Women" by Aubrey Beardsley.

S.M. FINDS BEARDSLEY PRINTS OBSCENE

BRISBANE, Monday. —Thirteen prints of a work by the contemporary nineteenth century artist Aubrey Beardsley were declared obscene in the Brisbane Magistrate's Court today.

In a reserved judgment, Mr J. A. Nolan, S.M., said he could not but be struck with the poses depicted by the print "Lysistrata and the Three Ladies."

In his opinion, they were obscene within the meaning of Section Two of the Vagrants, Gaming and Other Offences Acts.

However, Mr Nolan said that two other prints depicting a man and a woman, entitled "Shower with a Friend" were neither obscene nor indecent.

David Blake Guthrie, Brian Leonard Laver and Michel Thompson were summonsed on May 29 to show cause why 15 posters should not be destroyed or forfeited to the Crown.

Mr Nolan said Guthrie, Laver and Thompson were proprietors of the Red and Black Bookshop, Elizabeth Arcade, 99 Elizabeth Street, Brisbane. The arcade was the shop, police had seized evidence had been given of "Shower with a Friend."

Police had visited the bookshop on May 27 and had seen the Beardsley prints depicting four females, three of whom were unclothed.

This print was clearly visible to members of the public walking through the

After searching the shop, police had seized 13 prints of Lysistrata and "Shower with a Friend." He ordered the posters be preserved as evidence in further proceedings and that the 13 Beardsley prints be preserved as evidence in further proceedings.

Guthrie, who appeared in Court, said a public appeal might be launched for funds to appeal against Mr Nolan's decision.

The Sydney Morning Herald – Tuesday, July 8th 1969.

Johannes Bjelke-Petersen became premier of Queensland on 8 August 1968, five months into FOCO's existence. From the outset, FOCO was regarded with suspicion by the reactionary forces that ran Queensland. During a late night sitting of Federal Parliament on September 12, 1968, M.H.R. Don Cameron, Liberal backbencher for Griffith, delivered a speech attacking the FOCO Club.

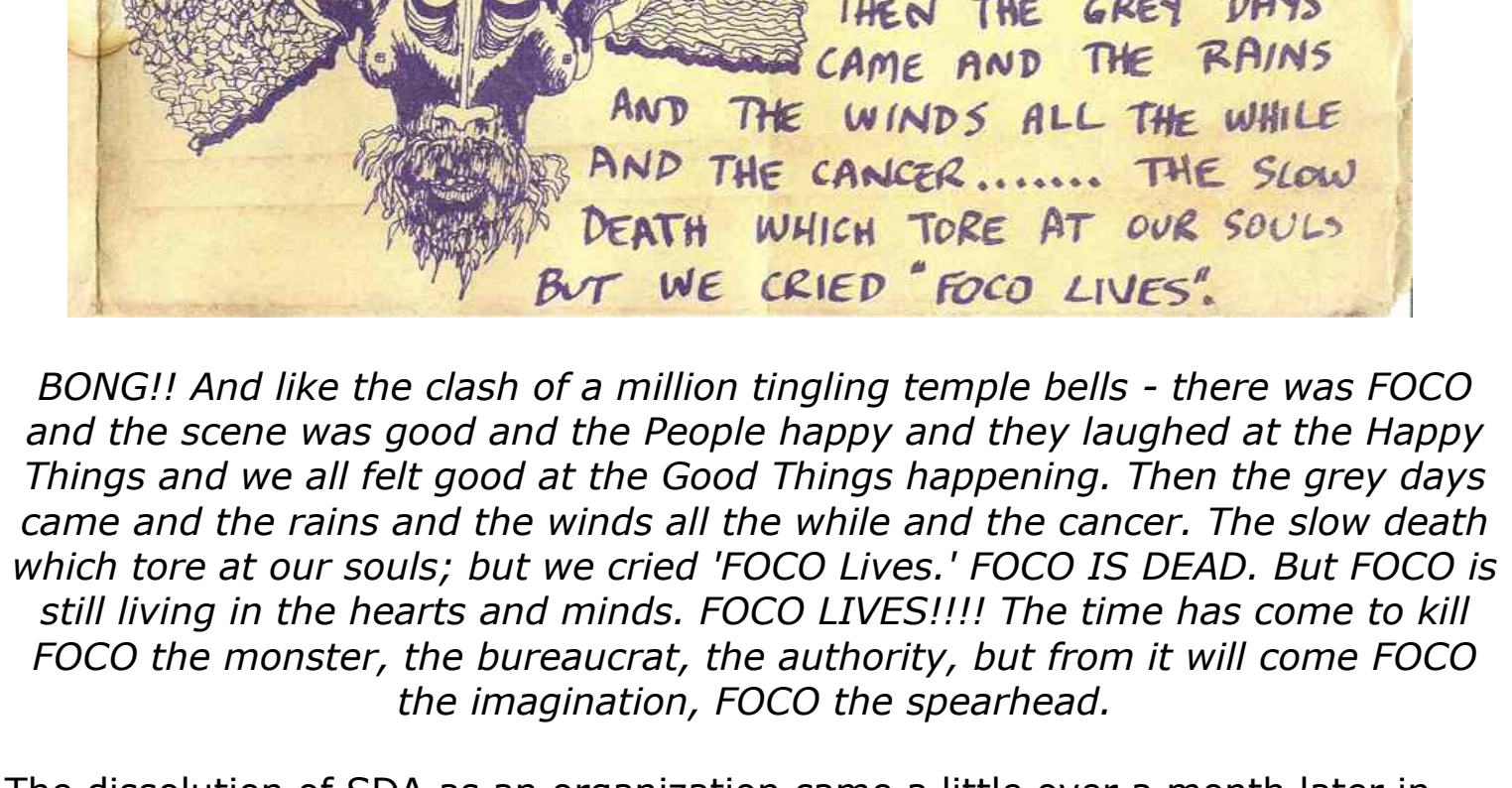
Cameron's claims provoked an immediate media storm. The following day's Courier-Mail gave in-depth coverage to the speech, under the raging headline "**Drugs, women claim on Foco**". The article reported Cameron as saying that "*Marihuana and Methedrine are procurable for the asking*" at FOCO. He added that its "*communist or almost-communist*" leadership could "*arrange a young woman for a whole night in a matter of seconds*" for a standard asking price of \$10. He further proclaimed that FOCO was "*Australia's most evil and repugnant nightspot*" (Courier-Mail, September 13, 1968).

Alan Anderson: "The *Brisbane press* were then and still are drug-happy, and wallowed in the *sensationalism* of his attacks. We moved on television and in the press that we were attacked by Cameron for political reasons, using drug hysteria as a club to bash us to death. He made his attacks under parliamentary privilege of course."

Undeniably, some people did turn up stoned at FOCO, but at that time public smoking was carried out very discreetly; normally, in total privacy, before going to a gig. Nobody fancied being busted.

Alan Anderson: "The *Cameron allegations* did have an effect on FOCO, and numbers did drop off. His allegations were like the attacks on the *Moratorium*, hysterical, crude and untrue but like the Goebbels lie technique, some of it sticks."

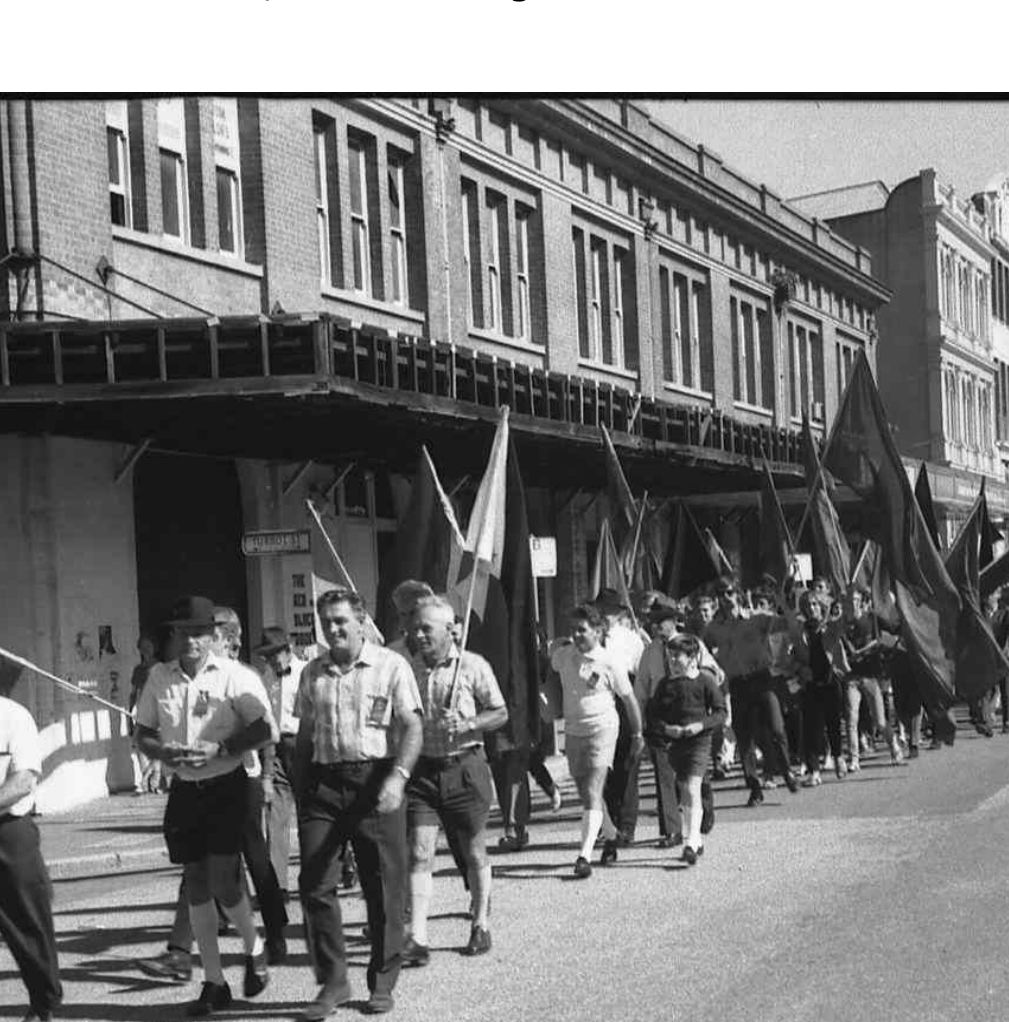
The FOCO collective responded to the attack in their next newsletter, assuring mums and dads that their teenage sons and daughters were perfectly safe attending FOCO events. Tragically, the upshot of all the media hype was a significant decline in attendance causing financial stress for the club. Cameron's unscrupulous and self-serving campaign against FOCO was, regrettably, quite effective. Attendances dropped to as low as 200 people per night, when a minimum of 300 patrons was required to break even.



Foco Newsletter promoting the second appearance of Lobby Loyde and The Wild Cherries. The Cherries played to reduced crowds at the regular FOCO Sunday night event at the height of the Cameron controversy.

In the FOCO newsletter dated 12 September 1968 (vol. 1 no. 28) it was stated: "The visit this week of the *Wild Cherries* has special significance to the mouldy old walls of FOCO. The *Cherries* are synonymous with so many things dear to the very heart of FOCO that their return seems more of a reunion than just a visit of another group. The very first chords ever to be wrung from a guitar are from the *Cherries* on the first night, 29 Sundays ago, the very first band ever to appear at FOCO was the *Wild Cherries*."

John Stanwell, who kept many aspects of the FOCO tradition alive in later campaigns, observes: "FOCO was an amazing confluence of art and politics, which made it both attractive to young people and a threat to 'their parents' (which is largely why it was closed down). Most importantly, FOCO showed us we could successfully run large and complex ventures that were successful in both cultural and financial terms; which exposed a new audience to radical ideas; and which made a profit that we could use on more political activities."



Another promotional sticker in the series "FOCO LIVES".

Around this time, "politicos" in SDA started to express a concern that the original intention of FOCO was being lost, since many members were content to simply have fun in the disco while ignoring the political aspects of the club. By the latter part of 1968, most radicals within SDA had reevaluated their position in regard to the FOCO experiment. For them, FOCO was no longer "*aiding the revolutionary movement*" and instead they saw FOCO as "*channelling potential revolutionary people into non-revolutionary activity...of a cultural, unorganised nature*". This theoretical dilemma saw SDA largely pull out of FOCO activities before the end of 1968.

Lee Walkington: "I was influenced by all the ideas and struggles in 1968 but as a working class lad with a job I found it hard to relate to the student radicals who had interesting ideas but had no concept on how to relate to the average person that I worked alongside every day."

A newsletter published on 26 February 1969 (Vol. 2, No. 9) announced "FOCO IS DEAD". This did not mark the end of FOCO however, but was part of the final decline.

BONG!! And like the clash of a million tingling temple bells - there was FOCO and the scene was good and the People happy and they laughed at the Happy Things and we all felt good at the Good Things happening. Then the grey days came and the rains and the winds all the while and the cancer. The slow death which tore at our souls; but we cried 'FOCO Lives.' FOCO IS DEAD. But FOCO is still living in the hearts and minds. FOCO LIVES!!!! The time has come to kill FOCO the monster, the bureaucrat, the authority, but from it will come FOCO the imagination, FOCO the spearhead.

The dissolution of SDA as an organization came a little over a month later in April of 1969, arguably a nail in the FOCO coffin. The old SDA quickly reformed as the new REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST STUDENT ALLIANCE (RSSA) wishing to "pass from a protest organisation to a radical or revolutionary movement" in order to build a libertarian-Marxist political group rather than a social club.

Alan Anderson: "The student Left developed a theory that FOCO was not aiding the revolutionary movement. They suggested it was channelling potentially revolutionary people into non-revolutionary activity. Their alternatives were hazy. After the pull-out the radical student movement had little action, less socialism and no masses. FOCO continued, the poorer for their going."

Referring to SDA, Lee Walkington comments: ".....their withdrawal hastened the end even though other less experienced and less well connected people did step up."

Unfortunately, political discontent was brewing in other quarters. The club's alliance with the Trade Unions was becoming increasingly strained. The reformist nature of the old guard institutions didn't sit well with the aims and activities of the more energetic and more radical youth.

The overtly radical books and pamphlets shamelessly being peddled at FOCO were seen by many of the more conservative "old Left" stalwarts as a danger to the club's, and possibly their own, respectability. The trade union movement was concerned that the controversial publicity FOCO was attracting would eventually harm what they saw as their own respectable position in the community.

Alan Anderson: "The 1969 Labor Day incident which the student section of FOCO engineered and the Young Socialists agreed to, also played a part in FOCO's demise. The annual Labour Day, or May Day, procession in Queensland is a public holiday. It is traditionally led by ALP leaders in the political and industrial arena."

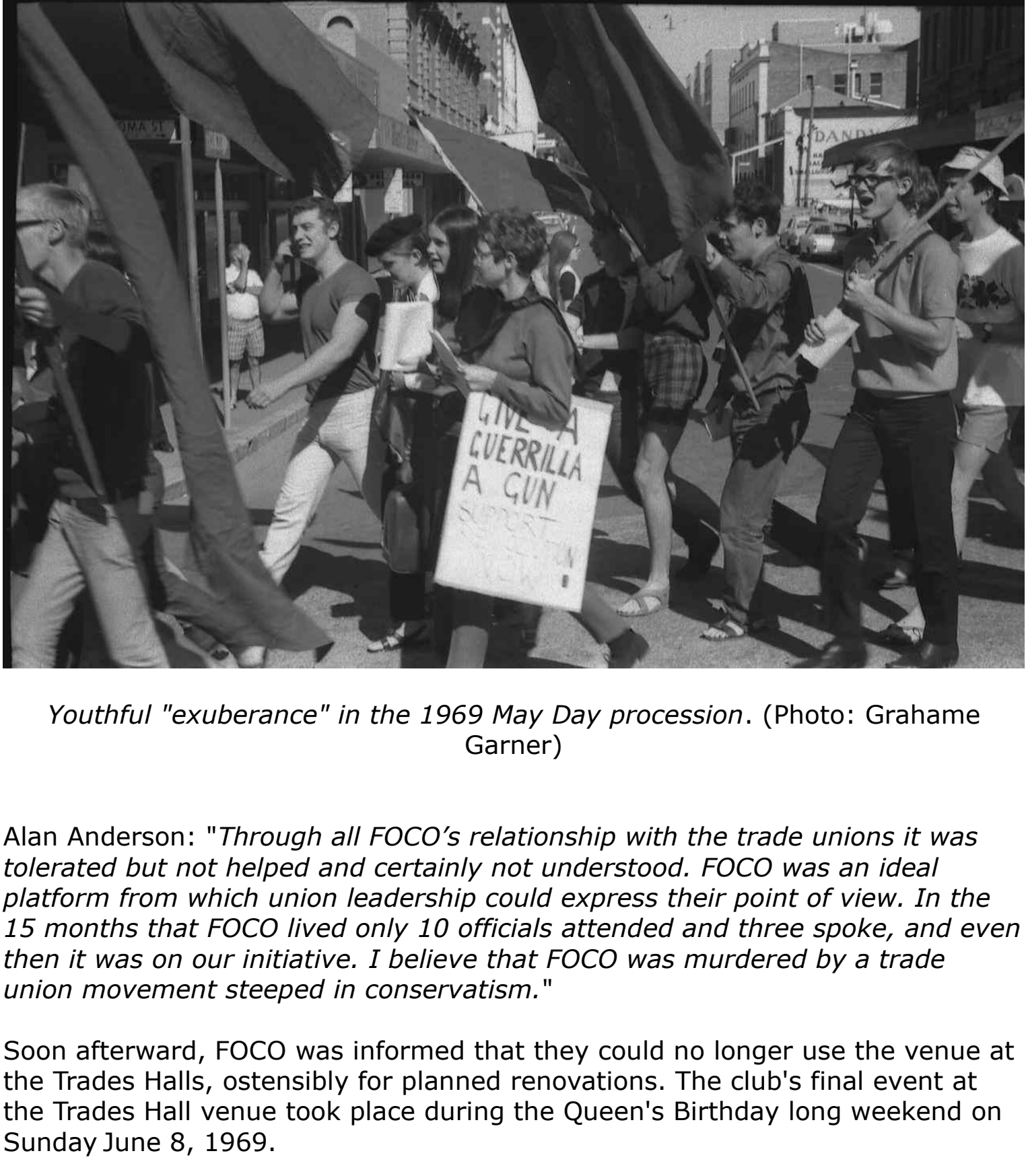
"Young radicals, mostly FOCO members, staged...a European-style demonstration – red and black flags predominating, chanting slogans, sitting down and then running linked armed at full pace with flags flowing. The building workers accommodated us within their ranks; there was little disruption of the procession, but there was a resulant cultural shock."

"The leader of the Federal Parliamentary Opposition, Mr Whitlam, was harangued by large sections of our group, and was undoubtedly embarrassed. There were a few excesses, these we regretted."

The red-and-black flag waving "student" contingent following behind in the 1969 May Day procession. (Photo: Grahame Garner)

Alan Anderson continues: "The Premier joined in and said we were 350 paid southern agitators – (his remarks) hysterical but typical. The subsequent reaction of the established Left was a reflection of FOCO's problem of acceptance. The resulting anti radical press publicity upset many in the Labour movement, but it should be pointed out that the demonstration was not an idle thing. The aim was to present to the people of Brisbane a genuine desire of young radicals to transform into something effective a Labour Day which had in the past relied upon Punch and Judy shows and ice-cream for its revolutionary content. In short: put politics back into Labour Day."

The majority of the labour movement then closed ranks and came out against FOCO. They seized this opportunity to dissociate themselves from the radical youth movement. TLC president, Jack Egerton, drew a clear line between the respectable reformist Left and radical students by describing ".....the irresponsible actions of a group of misguided way-out individuals who abuse the trade unions in the name of civil liberty and the right to dissent by disrupting the Labor Day procession, committing acts of vandalism and subjecting Labor leaders to rude and unwarranted personal attack." Egerton insisted, "responsible trade union officials have no intention of allowing a group of scrubby, confused individuals who are unable to differentiate between civil liberties and anarchy to cause dissent in the trade union movement". (Courier-Mail, 16/5/1969)



Youthful "exuberance" in the 1969 May Day procession. (Photo: Grahame Garner)

Alan Anderson: *"Through all FOCO's relationship with the trade unions it was tolerated but not helped and certainly not understood. FOCO was an ideal platform from which union leadership could express their point of view. In the 15 months that FOCO lived only 10 officials attended and three spoke, and even then it was on our initiative. I believe that FOCO was murdered by a trade union movement steeped in conservatism."*

Soon afterward, FOCO was informed that they could no longer use the venue at the Trades Hall, ostensibly for planned renovations. The club's final event at the Trades Hall venue took place during the Queen's Birthday long weekend on Sunday June 8, 1969.

Despite the blow, FOCO struggled on. Alan Anderson explains: *"In vacating that venue we sought alternative places to continue which was difficult both politically and logistically. It should be noted that in addition to these problems there was considerable exhaustion on the part of those of us still carrying out the arduous job of putting on a show whilst all of us were working full-time jobs. We felt that having an activity such as FOCO gave us a way of maintaining continuing contact with thousands of young people who, even 40 years later, still regard FOCO as their introduction to radical life. With this in mind, the continuation of it was important notwithstanding the difficulties. Through Peg Penberthy, we secured the AHEPA hall in Boundary Street, West End and tried to continue there. Knowing that we would also not enjoy the protection of Trades Hall, a raid by the police was likely and indeed took place as anticipated."*

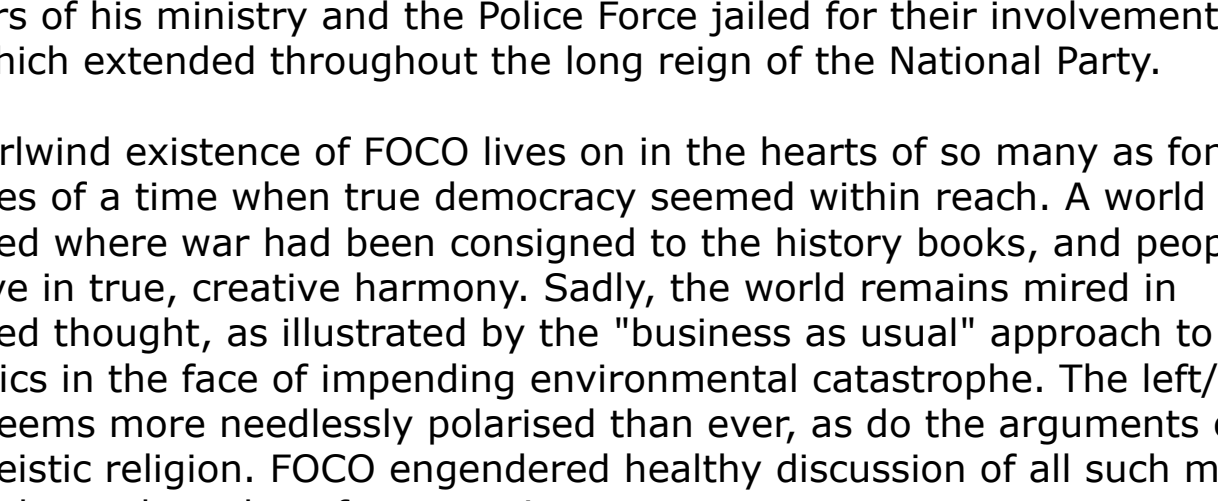
While searching for a new venue, there was about a 6 week lapse in the continuity of presenting regular FOCO events each week. AHEPA HALL was far from an ideal venue but the best option available. The intention was to resume regular weekly events at this new venue.

Alan Anderson: *"In the days leading up to what became a one night stand, we received a number of serious threats that were passed on to us by Alec Macdonald who was always a tower of support to FOCO from beginning to end. Nevertheless we opened with the slogan FOCO LIVES."*

Alan Anderson: *"The night at the AHEPA Hall was well attended but before the night began I told those present that a police raid was expected and if people wished to leave they should. Few people left and our resident group, The Coloured Balls, began playing. I wandered out onto Boundary street and observed a large contingent of police drilling about 100 metres further down the road. I rang a police officer stationed nearby confirming that the raid would happen. Back inside, I repeated my warning again but everyone stayed. Then in the police came and began dragging people out. The band stopped and began playing 'We'll sing you a song and it wont take long, all coppers are bastards'. Perhaps this surreal experience convinced me that our time had come."*

After this, an attempt was made to rent part of the Queensland Waterside Workers' Club. While the union leadership was open to the idea, the initiative was not supported in sufficient numbers at the rank and file level. So FOCO remained venue-less.

Alan Anderson: *"Later I organised Trade Union Youth Week, as we had done the previous year, with an open air concert held in the Botanical Gardens. This was the last time an event under the banner of FOCO was held. That was in September 1969."*



Poster for Trade Union Youth Week 1968.

Left without a regular venue, their political base progressively eroded, and facing both ongoing financial difficulties and their organizers experiencing "burn out" from exhaustion, the decision was made to close FOCO permanently. In September of 1969, the grand experiment finally drew to a close.

Alan Anderson: *"Did the police raid at AHEPA Hall bring an end to Foco? No it did not. What brought about its demise was the breakdown of the good working relations between those who saw a role for a popular radical mainstream activity and those who believed that FOCO diverted energy and attention away from the real struggle."*

"All up however, including 30 more years of life as a union official in Sydney, FOCO remains the most significant event I (ever) participated in."

"FOCO may have been slightly ahead of its time for the Australian political and cultural climate, but it was a creative jump in the right direction with lessons that should have value for the future."

The endemic corruption presided over by Bjelke-Petersen would eventually be made public knowledge by the Fitzgerald Enquiry which concluded in 1989, with members of his ministry and the Police Force jailed for their involvement in dirty deals which extended throughout the long reign of the National Party.

The whirlwind existence of FOCO lives on in the hearts of so many as fond memories of a time when true democracy seemed within reach. A world was envisaged where war had been consigned to the history books, and people could live in true, creative harmony. Sadly, the world remains mired in outmoded thought, as illustrated by the "business as usual" approach to economics in the face of impending environmental catastrophe. The left/right divide seems more needlessly polarised than ever, as do the arguments over monotheistic religion. FOCO engendered healthy discussion of all such matters, and taught us the value of community.

Lee Walkington: *"Even today some 40+ years on I know of quite a few people who credit their interest in politics and art and radical culture to FOCO."*

FOCO LIVES!

About the author:

Brisbane-born Frank Neilsen was employed as a commercial/industrial photographer during the sixties. He studied art and photography at Brisbane Technical College, and was a member of Poets, Essayists and Novelists (P.E.N.), as well as being a member of the Miscellaneous Workers Union. He moved to Melbourne in 1973, where he operated his own photographic studio. He holds the degree of Bachelor of Information Technology, and is a member of the *Brisbane Discussion Circle*.

This presentation was co-ordinated and edited by Peter Gray with contributions from *Brisbane Discussion Circle* members.

Peter Gray is an independent filmmaker, and award-winning director of photography, with a career spanning forty years and four continents. Peter was a student at the University of Queensland in the early 1970s, and is a Graduate of the Australian Film and Television School. Peter is a founding member and manager of the *Brisbane Discussion Circle*.

Brisbane Discussion Circle

*In an effort to develop and preserve the historical legacy of an era, political and cultural activists have formed the **Brisbane Discussion Circle (BDC)**, an email group that exchanges information and resources about the events and activities spanning the period 1960 to 1985. The circle is comprised of a diverse group of individuals who achieved amazing things in Brisbane during this time. The aim is to preserve our history for posterity with sophistication and accuracy. This article is an example of a document arising from such joint effort by BDC members. Requests for membership to BDC (including full name and brief details of your activism in this period) can be e-mailed to: <BrisbaneDiscussionCircle+subscribe@googlegroups.com>*

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