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Warwick Vere Oral History

Interviewee: Warwick Vere
Interviewer: Sean Sennett
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Legend: Sean Sennett (SS)
Warwick Vere (WV)

SS: My name is Sean Sennett and I'm here with Warwick Vere from Rocking Horse Records.

WV: Hi Sean.

SS: We're right her under, in this basement almost, in Albert Street.

WV: Albert Street.

SS: You've moved quite a few times. But Rocking Horse is kind of like a great Queensland institution where people buy independent music. I want to talk to you about your career as a retailer and also the cultural and social impact that Rocking Horse has really had on this community. Now Warwick, you're not from Queensland originally are you? You're an import.

WV: No. I'm not from Queensland. I was a Sydney boy. I came to Queensland in early 1973 and I'd been an avid consumer of the Vinyl Jungle in Pitt Street with Ashwoods and Martin's that had the fantastic imports. If you bought a Neil Young album it had beautiful stiff cardboard. You'd open it up. It even smelled better. There would be lyric sheet inserts and of course the poor old local one looked like something that came out of the World Record Club.

There was a little import store when I came up here. But I don't think they had their heart in it. I think it was called Wizards. It sort of - I guess it withered on the vine. But we opened in '75, mainly because there wasn't a lot for me to do once I'd finished my week's work. I was working for a judge in the Arbitration Commission. We travelled a lot.

Being back in Brisbane was nice to not go anywhere, but only to discover that the rest of Brisbane emptied out on the weekends and went to the Sunshine Coast or the Gold Coast. You could fire a shotgun up Queen Street at one o'clock on a Saturday and the only person you'd hit would be Rock n Roll George moseying up the street in his old beige coloured FJ Holden.

SS: That's right, yeah. So you were working for the judge and you decided to start your own independent import record store?

WV: Yeah.

SS: Was the first one in Elizabeth Street?

WV: No. The first one was in Rowes Arcade near Post Office Square.

SS: Right, okay.

WV: I had a friend who had a record shop in the Pavilion called Dora's House of Records. She was a Frank Zappa fan and Frank Zappa named it for her. It was - I think there was a Frank Zappa lyric. Give me some more of Dora right here on the floor or something, an overnight sensation. I'm not sure. But Frank had come to down. She'd met Frank and Frank had suggested the name Dora's House of Records.

She became a very good friend of mine and I'd hang out there and eat my sandwiches at lunchtime and unbeknownst to me, she'd been hit with writs from Festival Records about parallel importing. Parallel importing is when you bring in a David Bowie album that's been released in England and America and it's been out for a couple of months and there is no sign of it in Australia so you take matters into your own hands and you get a few copies in.

It was never really meant to displace the local market, but they saw it as a threat. They basically decided that these places must be stamped out. I think for \$400 and an air ticket to France, I got a second hand - I got some second-hand carpet, some racks and what was left over after her sale and then we opened with a little shipment from - oh, and an address. The most important thing was the address in Hollywood, where I could buy these import records.

I got my first shipment, opened the shop, probably within a few months we got a writ. Happily, because of my travelling, I was able to go and see established record stores in Melbourne, like Archie & Jugheads, Euphoria and Michael Coppel, who had a place called Gaslight Records and they would give me advice on how to cope with these writs.

I also had a lot of legal friends who were only happy to run their eye over these rather thick demands of ceases and desists and deliver-ups and we basically palmed them off pretty well so that didn't faze us at all. We stayed there about three years in Rowes Arcade. Then we moved to majestically larger premises, which I think were about 60 square metres, over in - opposite Coles in Adelaide Street. That was 1979.

SS: That's the shop I remember.

WV: Yes.

SS: Like a corridor.

WV: It was. It used to be a dress shop and it was bright red, had red carpet and it had - to attract people, I guess, it had flashing lights out the front, which looked like a hot chicken shop, which came in handy a few years later in the late 80s - not it was the early 80s, I think...Sunday trading was allowed and I think the only people in town that were open on a Sunday trading were Darrell Lea Chocolates and Rocking Horse Records and they'd see the flashing lights and say my God there is something open down there Doris. Let's go and have a look.

SS: The name Rocking Horse, where did it come from?

WV: 1975. I have to admit, I purloined it because I did - when I was ordering my first order, I ordered what was happening on Billboard. There was a band called Rocking Horse in the Top 100, which probably fortuitously disappeared without a trace.

SS: So just to cast your mind back to 1973 when you opened.

WV: 75.

SS: 75. What was the big seller at the time? What kind of music were you stocking?

WV: Okay. It was probably... '75...

SS: Were you stocking a lot of glam stuff?

WV: Yeah. We'd stock a little bit of glam stuff. I was more concentrating on the things that I liked, like Bruce Springsteen and Van Morrison. I was a bit of a Sydney hippie, all of that stuff, Neil Young albums. But they were the lovely import pressings that I spoke about before.

SS: You mentioned people like Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen and Van Morrison. But just around the corner from 1975 and 1976 is the massive punk explosion.

WV: Yeah.

SS: So how did...

WV: '76 it happened. In fact, I was in England in 1976 and there wasn't a trace of it.

SS: Right.

WV: Not that I saw anyway. The Sex Pistols were happening, but you had to be very much in the know. But yes, within a few - within about a year of that, punk pretty much exploded. I was lucky enough to have the brother of a friend of mine come down from Townsville, who is Jim Dickson, who ended up in Radio Birdman. I think he did a stint in the Flaming Groovies for a while too.

SS: Survivors too, I think.

WV: Survivors of course was when we he started out here in Brisbane.

SS: Yeah.

WV: Jim was corresponding with the guys from Trafalgar Records and was friends with Radio Birdman and I think we became Radio Birdman central right at the right time. But yeah, the English imports were terrific. I can remember when Sex Pistols' Never Mind the Bollocks came out. We put our heart in our mouth and ordered 200 copies. It was like probably 10 times bigger than anything we'd ever ordered before.

It was lucky - and of course, they flew off the shelves. I don't actually don't even know whether it was out locally. I can't remember. I don't think it was.

SS: That's interesting and also around that time too, you've got a change in Brisbane scene. There's emerging bands like The Riptides and The Go-Betweens and the Saints, obviously. You were obviously very important in helping establish those bands here. I assume they weren't tied to major record labels, or even independent ones in some cases. Were the bands coming to you directly to stock their material?

WV: Yeah they were. The Saints didn't. They had - there was another record shop called [DiscReet] and I think I - I don't know. They must have had friends down there.

SS: They - [DiscReet had them all].

WV: DiscReet had them all, all the [Fatal] records. But I first saw - funnily enough with the Saints, I first saw the Saints at the opening of ZZZ Christmas party in 1975. They were playing on the grass in the afternoon outside - just inside the university swimming pool. I was just gobsmacked.

There was this fantastic band just playing on the lawn. One of the ZZZ people were saying come on, come on, you know, we've got things to see. I just want to stay here and watch this band for a while. That's the first time I'd seen them.

SS: I'm curious about the culture of the record shop. I was talking to Gary from Woodies, who you mentioned off-mike earlier. He said to me that a record shop was a place where people would come in and ask for information from you. That changed later with the internet, where they would come in and then tell you the information.

WV: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

SS: But how was it initially? How did you first - how did you stay connected to what was happening? Was it your staff? Was it street press? Was it radio? What was it?

WV: There was this wonderful bible called the NME, which you would race to the newsagents and get every week. That would give you pretty much what was happening, what the band that everyone was frothing at the mouth about and maybe it was Echo and the Bunnymen or something like that. NME would pick their favourites. Joy Division was very much a phenomenon before the first record arrived, because there was so much hype about it.

I think really wasn't anything other than bands like the NME. Sounds was a bit more boyish and yobbie. But that's - as far as I can remember, that's pretty much what we were - was our major source of information.

SS: I'm kind of curious too, because you have a very broad love of music and sometimes cool indie shops can be perceived as a certain thing. But you've always had a bit of a mandate of carrying a rather large cross-section of music.

WV: Yeah, we do. I think it's snobby not to - to say we don't stock this kind of thing. That's basically - I've always said to the kids, if someone comes in orders a Barbara Streisand album, you don't - you keep a very straight face and you order it for them. But I can remember, funnily enough, there were record shops at the time in Sydney, like Waterfront, for instance.

I can remember going into Waterfront and saying could I - I was going to a party and thought blast, I've forgotten to get a present, I'll buy him the Beastie Boys album. I went in there and I said have you got Licensed to Ill and they said we're not a hip-hop shop. I said you're a bloody record shop. What are you talking about? It's new music. Oh no, no, you'll have to go to Central Station for that.

SS: Particularly a record like that. It's interesting. I wanted to ask you too, about the culture of Queensland politically, because obviously when you started the shop it was very much in the Joh years in the 1970s.

WV: Yeah.

SS: What impact did the Queensland Police Force and that kind of National Party attitude have on you as a retailer? Did they smash [unclear]?

WV: Well, funnily enough, it had a very positive aspect - impact on us. Only perversely it was supposed to close us down or basically tame us into submission. But there was a raid

on Valentine's Day 1989. The same day, I think, REM and The Go-Betweens played at Festival Hall.

SS: Just down the road. Yeah.

WV: Yeah. In fact, we got a bit of - I know Robert Forster gave us a bit of a dedication and I can't remember if Michael Stipe did or not, but a great concert. But the police were acting on a complaint by a South African pastor who'd set himself up in Ipswich, the Reverend Pastercamp. He'd already successfully heaved Cosmic Records at Ipswich to take the Dead Kennedys off the shelves and the reason that they picked the Dead Kennedys was the Christian right had been having a fight with Jello Biafra in America. Tipper Gore, who was Al Gore's Mrs, she was running this thing called the PMRC, the Parental Music Resource Centre and they were going to clean up obscene lyrics in rock records. Jello took them on - or they tried to bankrupt Jello over a fairly obscene poster in Frankenchrist, I think.

So it was war with Jello and between him and the Christian right. So somehow or other, this model got transferred to Ipswich and the wonderful pastor went into Cosmic and caused a bit of trouble and they took it off the shelves. He then must have written to the Attorney-General, who was a guy called Clauson at the time. This was just post Joh. I think Mike Ahern was the premier.

They were looking for an election issue and they thought that this would be a bit of a goer and they organised the raid. They organised to go into Rocking Horse and buy a couple of Dead Kennedys cassettes and the tracks on them were Too Drunk to Fuck and I Kill Children. To them, that's totally indefensible. I actually served the detective at the time, I think it was a Saturday morning or something like that.

He said I want it for a buck's party. I said I don't think you'll like it. I just don't think it's that kind of music. He said oh, no, no, no, no, I'll take it anyway and the next thing is they came in on a raid and seized 20 items, some of - and their brief was to go through the racks and find anything with the word fuck on it. That wasn't very fruitful so then they seized records with the warning sticker that the record companies had put on... this record may be offensive to someone out there, which was the record companies' groovy way of warning people that they might have swear words in it. But one of those records was Guns N' Roses Appetite for Destruction. It had just dropped out of the Top 40. The raid and the interest in it rocketed it back into the Top 40 all over Australia, so Warner Records were very pleased with everything.

I wrote to them and I said you'll obviously like to help me out with my legal expenses in fighting this case and they reluctantly agreed. I was very lucky at the time. I had a QC, Shane Herbert, living next door and he was a good friend of mine and he said I'll do the case for records. We basically won the case on proving that the F word had long ceased to shock and - what do you call it - shock and?

SS: Offend?

WV: Shock and disgust people. On that basis, we had three witnesses. One was [Laurie Muller] from Queensland University Press, who gave evidence that the book for 12 year olds that year had the F word in it. Dad dropped something on his toe and said f-u-c-k. I was directed to go off and see the Academy Award winning movie of that year, which was Rain Man and that...

SS: That had a lot of f'bombs.

WV: Seventeen fucks in Rain Man and, of course, we gave evidence to the magistrate that this - the community attitudes had changed and pretty much he was painted into a bit of a corner. He'd previously ruled against Rodney Rude and Rodney Rude had tried to protect

himself by putting a sandwich board out the front saying don't come in if you are going to be offended.

But that - in effect, that wasn't the law. The law was if you - an offence is still an offence. What we had to prove that community standards had changed and it was no longer offensive. Happily, we won the case.

You were saying before what did Bjelke-Petersen's influence have on you? Well, it was incredibly positive. We were a little only known to a few record shop and we came sort of somewhat celebrated after that. People dropped in and oh, this is the record shop.

SS: Yeah. It was the famous photos of the pastor ripping up the sleeve that we had in the paper.

WV: Yes. We've got that as our shield. [Robert Moore], the artist, who is a mate of mine, he made up a wonderful kangaroo and emu shield with the Reverend Pastercamp ripping the Dead Kennedys album and Jello Biafra dutifully came in and autographed it all.

SS: Terrific. You know, looking back at that time, which isn't really that long ago, 25 years ago.

WV: No, it's not.

SS: But the attitudes were very different. But there seemed to be a lot of people like yourself out there, independent people, creating these businesses of great influence in Queensland. There were guys running independent cinemas, people running independent record shops. Was there a bit of fraternity amongst people like that at the time? Or were you all on your own?

WV: Well, I don't know. I wasn't fraternal with the Red and Black Bookshop because I didn't really know them. I don't think it lasted much longer than '75 when we opened.

SS: No.

WV: We got along pretty well with the other record shops like DiscReet and Skinnies. But, yeah, look, I guess we were friendly with the guys from the Cane Toad Times, I guess, which was somewhat subversive.

SS: Yeah. It's funny though, because Rocking Horse, as you said, became so popular after the controversy and you actually won quite a few ARIA awards, this is the Australian Recording Industry Association awards for best record shop, best independent record shop.

WV: Yes.

SS: Did it feel - it must be interesting to be embraced by the mainstream after that.

WV: Well it was funny... Well of course there was a very big case called the Prices Surveillance Authority with the wonderful Professor Fels. He basically ruled against the record companies and said that they were using this parallel importing copyright argument as an argument to inflate prices and keep prices inflated. At the time the exchange rate was quite good overseas and you could actually get records in cheaper.

SS: Yeah, wow.

WV: Of course they had this wonderful ability to see what was going to be a hit and what wasn't going to be a hit. So everything they released was probably likely to be a hit. They'd

wait and see how it did in the UK and wait and see how it did in the US, to determine how many copies they were going to print. Now that all became a bit embarrassing for them because it had become such an accepted practice.

I think it was around 1978 - maybe '77/'78 - Jackson Browne toured Australia on the strength of the import stores and Warner hadn't released any of his albums in Australia and he sold out festival halls all over Australia.

SS: On imports.

WV: And of course, the head of Warner in Australia got his arse kicked because they hadn't released the albums. They - really, they could have used the import stores as a taste thing.

SS: Of course, yeah.

WV: Because the other thing was at one stage they got very paranoid. I think with Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes was about to come out and they thought ah, we are going to nip this in the bud. We are going to put a seizure order at Customs on every airport in Australia, every airport of entry in Australia and we'll get all these albums.

They got about 40 albums and they had to lodge something like \$1000 with each Customs entry point as an assurance that the customer wasn't going to sue them for holding the stuff up. And of course they lost all that and they ended up with 40 albums which had all had the words CBS blocked out.

Really, it was time and then - as you were saying before, yeah, well around about the - by the mid-90s the record industry had come to live comfortably with places like Rocking Horse.

SS: Well I was going to ask you about that because obviously vinyl was a big part of your early life and really, you've had vinyl all the way through the history of the shop.

WV: We have. Yeah.

SS: Now we've had a vinyl revival. How was the move to CD for you? Were you guys early adopters of that?

WV: We were and they didn't sell at all. I can remember the guy from Kent Records saying to me it's like having twenty dollar notes pinned to the wall. Nobody is touching them. But by 1990 the revolution was well and truly here and we were scratching our heads as to whether we'd continue with vinyl at all. The kids were very attached to vinyl and so was I but, you know, we had to make a buck.

SS: Yeah.

WV: The acid test was the Ramones Mania album which was \$9.99, \$10.00 for a double album, and it had sat in the racks for six months and no-one had bought it and I said well look, there is your evidence. We can't sell the Ramones Mania. What are we... and they said why don't we just keep going with dance vinyl and second-hand vinyl and that's what we did.

SS: Look, it's interesting when you look at the price of music. When CDs came out, you know, probably... you find an old one now, double CD's like \$30 from the mid-90s. You can buy a double CD now for \$10.

WV: I know.

SS: Sadly, music isn't priced according to how good it is. What was the shift there when CDs started to de-value and people wouldn't pay for them? What sort of stress did that put on you as a retailer?

WV: Well, look... first up, it was fine. There was this phenomenon that started in Sydney, I think, \$10 shops. So everything was \$10. Now the record companies were interested in making money and funnily enough at the same time there was record companies cannibalising one another. So to get the price of their value up, they'd say look, we've moved 200,000 CDs a month more than we did last year so our value is right up.

But what they weren't saying is they were selling them to us for about \$5 and we were selling them for \$10. Of course, you'd have Led Zeppelin IV for \$10 and you'd sell - I think we were making our rent on \$10 - on CDs. So it was fine. Then you'd have this giant library of CDs, which was very compact, of course and you could put a lot in.

But around about 2010 I think we had our first downturn that Christmas. Kids weren't buying it anymore. It was kind of a bit uh-oh. What were they doing? They were downloading.

SS: Yeah, yeah. So when downloads were in full swing, there was talk of Rocking Horse closing its doors and of course people freaked out. Nobody wants to see Rocking Horse go.

WV: Well, yeah, but they didn't vote with their feet. They didn't come in and - it was only when we had a fire sale that we saw people that used to shop there all the time. They'd come up and everything was half price.

SS: Yes, yes. Got you.

WV: So that was a bit galling.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

WV: But unfortunately, pretty much that's what happened. So we knew that there was a big turn to vinyl. But in order to pay for it, we had to sell what we had.

SS: Yeah.

WV: It was a bad situation. You couldn't sell what you had. You basically had to write that off and then find money to stock up on the burgeoning LP market. It was like turning the Queen Mary around or something. You just - it was so hard to do.

SS: But it's interesting. You did turn the Queen Mary around and now vinyl is thriving.

WV: Vinyl is incredible. Yeah.

SS: And Rocking Horse is the place to find that stuff. It must be an amazing feeling for you this many years down the line, to have the shop still at the centre of the cultural heart of the city.

WV: Yeah. It's back to the future.

SS: Yeah. Yeah.

WV: We're very much a vinyl record shop.

SS: Absolutely.

WV: In fact, I had to give a talk to other music retailers so I did a few figures and it comes up 75 per cent vinyl and 25 per cent other things like t-shirts and CDs. Record Store Day - I did figures for April. Record Store Day it went up to 84 per cent vinyl.

SS: Wow.

WV: Because the Record Store Day vinyl - I don't know what you'd call it, it's vinyl mania. It's 10 times a good day. It's bigger than Christmas and it seems to have really established itself in people's imagination. That they should go out and so many people say I love to support a record shop. I think well thank you very much, very happy to have you here.

SS: Going way, way back. Do you remember the first person that bought a record from Rocking Horse, way back in 75?

WV: I wasn't there. I had to put a - I was working and I had to put a manager in, so I don't know who - he's long gone, so I can't ask him. Sorry, yeah. But some of our early - Ed Kuepper was a pretty early customer. They'd hear about these funny little shops and pop by. We didn't have any promotional material to open with so I... on one wall I had a blow up of the Rolling Stones Beggars Banquet interior.

SS: Fantastic.

WV: The other one was Bryan Ferry with a cigarette and standing by a swimming pool with a cigarette and they were on the wall. That was it. We were a record shop.

SS: Fantastic. Warwick, I think that's covered everything.

WV: We've covered it?

SS: Thank you for your time.

WV: Okay. Thanks Sean.

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