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"First Blood": The 1960s Origins of the Australian Sharpie Youth Culture

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ABSTRACT

The sharpies were a uniquely Australian youth culture that lasted from the early 1960s into the 1980s and were a significant continuation of the trajectory of Australian, male-dominated, working-class, consumption-based, rowdy youth-cultural traditions, which include the bodgies and widgies of the 1950s and the larrikins of the 1860s to 1918. Sharpies are under-discussed in social narratives and academic texts. This article focuses on the life cycle of the original generation of sharpies. In addition to exploring the origins of sharpie culture, I explore why it provided an outlet for its bored suburban, working-class youths, present explanations for behavioural attitudes and offer some insight into its attraction. I also explore how the first generation of this youth culture came to its natural end, how it was picked up again by the next generation and why. In learning about the sharpies' activities and behaviours, from the egregious to the mundane, we open ourselves to learning something not just about suburban, working-class Australian youths but about all young people who take part in group-based youth cultures.

Sharpies were a uniquely Australian, (largely) working-class, postwar youth culture that lasted from the early 1960s until the mid-1980s. Sharpie culture was most popular and long lasting in Victoria, though sharpies could be found (to lesser degrees) in other states and cities, particularly Sydney. Melbourne-based sharpies are the primary focus of this research. From 1972 to 1973, sharpie culture reached its peak, becoming the most popular youth culture in Victoria.[1] Melbourne-based sharpie culture evolved through a succession of four notably different generations: 1964–1970, 1970–1972, 1972–1976 and 1976–1980s, before finally dying away by 1984.[2] Sharpies belong to the trajectory of Australian rowdy youth- and street-culture traditions that include such postwar groups as the bodgies and widgies of the 1950s and rockers of the early 1960s,

and prewar groups such as the larrikins.[3] The focus of this article is the first-generation sharpies and their origins.

A youth culture's distinct expression of style and specific cultural practices is in continuity with, and also disrupts, its lineage. In the sharpies' case, that pedigree is a long line of Australian working-class, rowdy youth street cultures of which they were a distinct "spectacular outgrowth". From sharpies to bodgies and widgies to larrikins, each was an internally non-monolithic youth cultural expression of a long-lived but fluid tradition of inherited working-class sociocultural practices that date back to pre-industrial groups of village youths.[4] This research is indebted to sociologist Jon Stratton's work on postwar Australian youth cultures and Melissa Bellanta's revisionist history of the larrikins.[5] It is also informed by theoretical work on youth cultures from the ethnographic studies of the Chicago School in the mid-to-early 20th century and Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s through to contemporary post-subcultural studies and beyond, including those focused specifically on Australia.[6]

A major emphasis of this research is on the ways the first sharpies viewed themselves and how they used consumption to differentiate themselves from other youth cultures and create a community of their own. The way they were viewed by outside observers is also considered, including the image of sharpies constructed by media reports, particularly in local newspapers. Stan Cohen's model of "moral panic" is a helpful frame of analysis that can explain the level of public attention the sharpies attracted.[7] Cohen famously used the term "moral panic" to describe the negative discourses (particularly in the media) instigated by subcultures if their behaviour is deemed problematic or offends mainstream sensibilities. He coined the term "folk devil" for those constructed as deviant and a threat to society. Cultural groups who display behaviours that diverge from dominant middle-class norms risk social alienation, disapprobation and hostility. Media reportage often constructs traditional rowdy working-class cultural practices, such as fighting, premarital sex and street-based gang and leisure activities, as interruptions to the established canon of behavioural norms. This disruptive identity is evident in press accounts of sharpies, who are portrayed as social and moral deviants or folk devils. The tendencies of some sharpies—across all four generations—to be disruptive and rowdy influenced the culture, earning sharpies a public reputation as undesirable, antisocial troublemakers.

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[3]Melissa Bellanta, *Larrikins: A History* (University of Queensland Press, 2012); Raymond Evans, "'So Tough'? Masculinity and Rock 'n' Roll Culture in Post-War Australia", *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 56 (1998): 125–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/14443059809387367; Jon Stratton, *The Young Ones: Working-Class Culture, Consumption and the Category of Youth* (Black Swan Press, 1992).

[4]John Randall Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770–Present* (Academic Press, 1974).

[5]Bellanta, *Larrikins*.

[6]Primarily Sarah Baker, Brady Robards, and Bob Buttigieg, eds., *Youth Cultures and Subcultures: Australian Perspectives* (Routledge, 2015); Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas, eds., *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia* (Pluto Press, 2003); Rob White, ed., *Australian Youth Subcultures: On the Margins and in the Mainstream* (National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 1999); Rob White, *Youth Subcultures: Theory, History and the Australian Experience*, 2nd ed. (National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 1993).

[7]Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2002).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Sharpies have been commonly overlooked in accounts of Australian social and political history.[8] This article goes some way to restore sharpies to social narratives. Its focus is the life cycle of the original generation of sharpies of the 1960s, which is the culture's least discussed era. To provide insight into cultural practices and lived experiences shared by sharpie participants over this period, I draw on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with 25 de-identified male and female former sharpies; Facebook group discussions with approximately 300 more sharpies; and biographies and scholarly work on sharpies,[9] which all form the basis of my PhD research. The testimonials gathered from these sources challenge previously held conceptions about sharpies.

My research uses an analytical framework drawn from the three key periods of subcultural studies: the ethnographic, liberal-pluralist urban sociological and criminological studies of the Chicago School (1920s–1960s); the neo-Marxist Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) of the 1970s; and the poststructuralist/postmodernist and often psychoanalytic post-subcultural studies of the 1980s and beyond. While my work is informed by the CCCS's pioneering theoretical contributions, it is also tempered by the criticism that the CCCS' work romanticised masculinist resistance, was too often uncritical of its violent or criminal consequences, and championed British youth style as the work of self-consciously coded ideological subordination.[10] Certainly, the sharpie culture could be territorial and hostile. The CCCS also placed too heavy an emphasis on the most visible stylistic leaders of youth cultures at the expense of its mass membership.[11] Additionally, post-subcultural critics argue the CCCS tended to reduce all social inequality to variables of class and age while neglecting other key issues such as gender, ethnicity and race.[12] It is for this reason that I have sought to include the voices and experiences of a more representative range of sharpie-culture members including women and people from multicultural communities.

While there is some truth to the antisocial image of sharpies (and many sharpies admit as much), there is also much more to them than is commonly understood. The image of sharpies as folk devil tarnished their legacy and goes some way to explaining why they have been largely omitted from social histories. If they were spoken of at all in the late 20th century, it was mostly with derision. This attitude highlights the unfortunate tendency of recorded social narratives to privilege the middle-class youth experiences from the 1960s—such as the countercultural and bohemian youth movements—in

[8]Judith Bessant, "Hanging Around the Street: Australian Rockers, Sharpies and Skinhead 'Gangs' of the 1960s and Early 1970s", *Journal of Australian Studies* 45 (1995): 15–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/14443059509387224.

[9]For sharpie biographies, see James Cockington, *Long Way to the Top: Tales of Australian Rock & Roll* (ABC Books, 2001), 173–82; Julie Mac, comp., *Snap: Sharpies' Urban Folklore Australia 1952–1987* (pub. by author, 2014); Taylor, *Top Fellas*. For scholarly accounts of sharpie culture, see Michelle Arrow, *Friday on Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia Since 1945* (UNSW Press, 2009); Peter Beilharz, "Rock Lobster: Lobby Loyde and the History of Rock Music in Australia", *Thesis Eleven* 109, no. 1 (2012): 64–70, https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513611434136; Peter Beilharz and Sian Supski, "So Sharp You Could Bleed: Sharpies and Visual Culture, A Moment in the Seventies History of Melbourne", paper presented at the Imagination: City, Country, Culture and Creativity Conference, Monash University, Melbourne, 19 April 2011; Bessant, "Hanging Around the Street", 15–31.

[10]Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xlvii–lxxiv.

[11]Phil Cohen, "Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community", *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 2 (1972): 5–52; Phil Cohen, *Rethinking the Youth Question: Education, Labour and Cultural Studies* (Macmillan, 1997).

[12]Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"* (Macmillan Education, 1991); Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, "What is 'Post-Subcultural Studies' Anyway?", in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Berg, 2003), 3–23.

cultural memory while restricting marginalised working-class access to historical recognition.[13] As sociologist Judith Bessant argues, missing from these accounts are "the lives of young [working-class] people whose experiences were either largely ignored at the time or have since been mostly erased from the histories of that period".[14] Indeed, it is only in the last 15 years or so that the sharpies have gradually started to become a source of fascination again. In recent years, they have even been a partial inspiration for popular Australian pub-rock acts of the 2010s Amyl and the Sniffers and The Chats, with both recalling aspects of latter-era sharpie fashions and attitudes.

In addition to their origins, I discuss why the sharpie culture became an outlet for some of Melbourne's bored suburban working-class youths, provide explanations for behavioural attitudes, and offer some insight into its attraction. Former sharpie John sheds light on this while crystallising this article's central argument for why there was more to the culture than the constructed image allows: "Not denying [violence] wasn't there, but it wasn't the major part of it. I recall mateship, fashion and music a bigger part of it, and a sense of belonging. Of mates taking you in, teaching you the ropes, of looking out for each other."[15] I also explore how the first generation of this youth culture came to its natural end, and how it was picked up again by the next.

Sharpie Origins

After World War II, Australia enjoyed a time of reconstruction and high growth (in terms of population and prosperity) known as the "long boom". Though flattening through the 1960s, this lasted until 1974. Population increased rapidly through the government's immigration policy, with 2 million immigrants arriving between 1945 and 1965. The government was committed to "full employment" (no more than 3 per cent unemployment), causing the labour force to expand rapidly.[16] By 1960, manufacturing approached a record 30 per cent share of total gross domestic product.[17] With unemployment so low in the expanding industrial and consumer economy, most Australian young people (particularly those from working-class backgrounds) had little trouble finding employment.[18] Most worked to earn disposable income, which would quickly be spent on clothes and going out at the weekends. Their distinct leisure patterns and conspicuous consumption of youth-oriented goods identified them as "teenagers", just as that term was becoming widespread in Australia.[19] Previously, the expectation had been that maturing youths would get married and act responsibly as they entered adulthood. The teenage ideology of fun, spending, leisure pursuits and freedom from responsibility seemed positively un-Australian in comparison.[20] To an important degree, the teenagers that would eventually become sharpies were just ordinary young people from a distinct working-class cultural background. However, they were constructed by

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[13]Bessant, "Hanging Around the Street", 15.
[14]Bessant, "Hanging Around the Street", 15.
[15]John, interview by Nazz Oldham, 25 May 2024.
[16]Craig McGregor, *Profile of Australia* (Penguin, 1966), 323–324.
[17]Ian McLean, *Why Australia Prospered: The Shifting Sources of Economic Growth* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 181.
[18]Typical employment opportunities for 1960s sharpies are discussed later.
[19]Stratton, *Young Ones*, 87–88.
[20]This shift towards teenage ideology, leisure patterns and conspicuous consumption was felt throughout the Western world, not just Australia.

the media as deviants and a threat to hegemonic middle-class claims to Australian culture.[21]

The 1960s sharpies emerged from two distinct and separate cities between 1962 and 1963: one in Melbourne and the other in Sydney. Both were rowdy youth cultures who shared a rigid dress code and were primarily working-class, Anglo tough boys and girls in a hurry to grow up. Research shows that girls participated in the youth culture at this early stage but does not elaborate on how large a part of it they were.[22] Sharpies in both cities wore largely conservative fashions with a confident, intimidating front. The boys adopted a cocky strut, taking pride in cutting an impressive figure to impress each other and the opposite sex, wearing stylish masculine fashions that were readily available due to the prevalence of tailors, shoemakers and menswear shops. The girls wore off-the-rack fashions.

It is worth noting that Melbourne and Sydney factions developed largely in isolation from each other. To a certain extent, this mutual lack of awareness points to a weakness in the state-oriented nature of media directed at Australian youths at the time, though there were some nationally televised teen programs, such as ABC's *Six O'Clock Rock*, the Nine Network's clean-cut *Bandstand* and Channel 0's *Kommotion*. Occasionally, programs could also be shown across states using coaxial transmitters and videotape. The visual cohesion of teen styles across Australia would occur in earnest in the 1970s with the regular simultaneous televising of national networked youth programs such as ABC's *GTK* and *Countdown*.[23] Certainly, most Melbourne sharpies I surveyed either questioned the legitimacy of sharpies from elsewhere or were oblivious to their existence until many years after the phenomenon had died out. As a result, there is a history of defensiveness, suspicion or provocation from both sides when discussing regional preferences, stylistic norms and experiences across all sharpie generations. In keeping with the longstanding rivalry between Australia's two largest cities, the animosity between Melbourne and Sydney sharpies over validity and authenticity remains palpable to this day. What can begin as a civil discussion over subjective experiences can quickly decline into a tense exchange of insults and "territorial pissing". This, I believe, has a lot to do with long-term misunderstanding, misrepresentation, or the under-representation, of sharpies from all regions, and the fact that, for the most part, they developed without knowledge of the others' existence. This article now turns to how the first generation of Melbourne sharpies "proper" developed out of two key groups—the Collingwood boys and the '64 rockers—in competition with their mod contemporaries.

The Collingwood Boys, the '64 Rockers and the Mods

The immediate origins of Melbourne sharpies begin with the Collingwood boys, a notorious gang of teenagers from the early 1960s who hailed from the tough, impoverished northeast inner-city suburbs of Collingwood and Fitzroy.[24] As former Collingwood boy Eugene explains, "[We] originated around Collingwood and Fitzroy during the

[21]On bodgies and widgies, see also Stratton, *Young Ones*.

[22]Mac, *Snap*, 11.

[23]Sally Stockbridge, "From *Bandstand* and *Six O'Clock Rock* to MTV and Rage: Rock Music on Australian Television", in *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism: Popular Music and Australian Culture the 1960s to the 1990s*, ed. Philip Hayward (Allen and Unwin, 1992), 68–85.

[24]Mac, *Snap*; Chris O'Halloran, "Sharpies: The Early Years, 1967–1969", *Skins 'n' Sharps*, http://skinsnsharps.com/scrapbook/2008/04/24/sharpies-the-early-years-1967-1969-by-chris-ohalloran (accessed 10 December 2016) (site discontinued).

early to mid-1960s, and were mostly the sons of painter and dockers, crims and poor migrants who carried guns and dressed like movie stars … I'm talking about origins mate … I was a member of the Collingwood Boys for years, prior to being sent to prison for bank robbery."[25]

The Collingwood boys comprised hard young men who dabbled in petty crime, many becoming gun-carrying career criminals before reaching the age of 17, some serving prison sentences.[26] Due to their illegal proclivities, they often carried a significant amount of disposable cash. The Collingwood boys originally wore rocker fashions of the early 1960s, which were a hangover from bodgie culture. The traditional early-1960s rocker look included studded belts, black/red cardigans with red/black shirts, tight drainpipe trouser pants, Raoul Merton pointed-toe shoes and long Brylcreemed hair.[27] However, by 1962, the Collingwood boys were growing more aspirational,[28] presumably due to the combination of precocity, money to spend and sense of power.

Tiring of the early-1960s rocker look, the Collingwood boys shifted towards a more self-consciously well-dressed, formal style.[29] The first iteration of the new look consisted of a college-boy haircut (a slightly longer crew cut), Italian single-breasted, or double-breasted, three-button blue and brown suits, plain-coloured and slim-fitting continental cardigans, and chisel-toe shoes custom-made by skilled Mediterranean shoemakers in Collingwood.[30] The influence behind the look came from a combination of gangster glam, spivchic, and the dapper 1930s-throwback hard-man styles seen on the boxing-gym elders.[31] As former Collingwood boy Berg explains, "I remember one day in early 1963 a guy got sick of the suit jacket, and swapped it for a cable-stitched jumper, and it looked so cool, so we all started to wear cable-stitched jumpers and cardigans."[32] Berg states that the term sharpies first came into use in "late 1963 when this guy changed his normal blue pants for a pair of windowpane-check pants with a one-inch cuff at the bottom, and I think it was Terry Condies who said 'WOW, that looks sharp mate' … the word 'sharp' was then our way of complimenting each other on our dress code, as we started to try to outdo each other. It was other local people at the time that used the word sharpies to refer to us because we kept telling everyone how sharp we were".[33] Labelling of the youths as "sharpies" originated from complimentary slang used by the youths themselves. What is unclear is whether outsiders used the label cynically.

The globalising influences of European fashion imported through migrant culture were to exert an increasing attraction. The sharpies' interest in European fashion was directly informed by the quality handmade garments they saw worn by European locals and in inner-city suburban shopfronts. In Melbourne, continental chic was

[25]Quoted in Mac, *Snap*, 5.

[26]Mac, *Snap*.

[27]Taylor, *Top Fellas*, 13–14; Robert, interview by Nazz Oldham, 11 February 2014.

[28]Also the case with English mods.

[29]Mac, *Snap*.

[30]Taylor, *Top Fellas*, 16.

[31]Other influences on the tough style were readily consumable popular-culture icons seen in British and Hollywood crime films. See Roodhouse, "In Racket Town: Gangster Chic in Austerity Britain, 1939–1953", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 45, no. 4 (2011): 523–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2011.620846. "Spivs" were English wartime black marketeers, also known as "wide boys" (and "loo yanks" or "Fitzroy yanks" in Australia).

[32]Berg, quoted in Mac, *Snap*, 6.

[33]Berg, quoted in Mac, *Snap*, 7.

mediated by Italian and Greek migrants.[34] This is due to the high influx of European workers who entered the country after World War II because of the migration push led by the first Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell. Migrant hostels were originally on the outer fringes of Melbourne. As Anglo Melbournians began relocating to the outer suburbs to follow job opportunities in the mid-to-late 1960s,[35] the areas they left behind were swiftly repopulated by Southern European migrants. Through the 1960s, the urban lower-working-class northern inner-suburbs of Melbourne had growing numbers of Italian and Greek migrants, especially in places such as Carlton, Fitzroy, Collingwood, Brunswick, Northcote and Preston.[36] Most of these areas had an abundance of tailors, shoe shops, fish-and-chip shops, ice-cream parlours and little coffee shops. It was around such places that the sharpies first started to congregate and became exposed to local urban manifestations of continental chic.

The sharpest dressers among the men had fashions made to order by the best Southern European tailors and shoemakers in Melbourne, since off-the-rack styles were not available. The Collingwood boys set the guidelines for the sharpies' meticulous attention to detail and cutting-edge, clean and austere fashions.[37] They became more widely visible when they started to attend public events en masse at dances, boxing matches, Saturday football matches and popular hangouts such as St Kilda's Luna Park. The distinct street style also caught the eye of other working-class youths who came into their territory to get inked in the garage of popular Collingwood tattoo artist Alfie Mingin.[38]

Between 1963 and 1964, the Collingwood boys' pre-sharpie style began to be adopted by other prominent working-class, inner-city Melbourne youth gangs that had been around for decades.[39] The influence was seen first in the southeast with the Richmond boys, Oakleigh boys and beachside Frankston boys in the far southeast.[40] It then spread to tough and feared southern suburban gangs, such as the St Kilda boys, the South Melbourne boys, the Port Melbourne boys, and the Prahran boys; in the west, the Footscray boys, and in the north, the Carlton boys, the Broadmeadows boys, the Preston boys, the Heidelberg boys, and the Crevelli Street boys.[41] According to Berg, "A lot of us went to Luna Park in those days and the St Kilda boys would sometimes take us on, but they also copied our clothes."[42] In the same year (1964) as the Collingwood boys' style began to spread through Melbourne's sprawling, repetitive working-class suburbs, a new and younger breed of rocker also emerged to add to the look. Though the '64 rockers saw themselves as contiguous with '50s rockers and bodgies,

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[34]Indirect knowledge of continental fashion was mediated in Australia through popular-culture media channels.

[35]The outer suburbs had "sprung up too quickly, and with too few decent facilities and the needed infrastructure". Bruce Milne, "Sharpies", *Perfect Sound Forever: Online Music Magazine*, December 2007, http://www.furious.com/perfect/sharpies.html.

[36]Lygon Street in Carlton is famous for its Little Italy precinct and considered to be where Melbourne's café culture was born.

[37]See Paolo Hewitt, ed., *The Sharper World: A Mod Anthology* (Helter Skelter, 1999); Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (Thames and Hudson, c. 1994).

[38]Mac, *Snap*, 7–8.

[39]Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, 3rd ed. (Lothian, 2003).

[40]Frankston is 41 km southeast of the city centre.

[41]Crevelli Street was a notoriously tough, high-crime public-housing village in East Reservoir. See Phil Cleary, *Brian Kane and the Keoghs and Others from the Underbelly of Life* (Phil Cleary Holdings, 2000).

[42]Berg, quoted in Mac, *Snap*, 8.

they were keen to differentiate themselves with an increasingly neater style that was inspired by the sharp Collingwood boys.[43] According to a '64 rocker named Dennis, "Anything [the Elvis-styled pre-'64 rockers] wore we'd wear the opposite. They wore peg pants, so we wore flares … the point was to always look sharp, that's why people started calling us sharpies, but we never called ourselves that, you were just one of the fellas or not one of the fellas."[44] The '64 rockers' hair was modelled after the Collingwood boys' college-cut (square back and sides and cut every two weeks).[45]

In June 1964, the Collingwood boys self-consciously began referring to themselves as sharpies to differentiate themselves from a newly emerged Australian youth formation called mods, whom sharpies viewed with disdain. In many ways, middle-class Australian mods were very different from their working-class English counterparts. Australian mods were a middle-class youth culture which flourished until 1968 when much of its remaining membership eventually transitioned to hippie culture. Their fashion blueprint was derived from the widespread and populist long-haired third generation of English mods (c. 1963–1966). The catalysts for mod culture in Australia were two specific events: the first was the rash of sensationalised local reports about English mod culture that appeared in the wake of the highly publicised "Battle of Brighton" clash between mods and rockers on the Whitsun holiday 17–18 May 1964.[46] The second was the mania surrounding the Beatles' tour of Australia in June 1964.[47] During their visit, the Beatles sported their classic long-haired "mop top" look and matching suits. Inspired, youths began growing their hair, slavishly following English fashion and becoming versed in mod culture. Sharpies strongly rejected what they perceived to be the Australian mods' (and later, hippies') affected slovenliness and a suspicious lack of masculinity.

Interestingly, the continental aspects of pre-1964 English mod fashion had more in common with the closely cropped hair and fashions of the early sharpies, though the two youth cultures were otherwise distinct. English first- and second-generation mods were among the nearly a quarter of a million "ten-pound poms" who sailed to Australia as part of the "Bring out a Briton" Assisted Passage Migration Scheme (1957–1966).[48] It is likely that the sharply dressed former-mod migrants who moved to Melbourne during the early 1960s influenced the early sharpie look.[49] As John observes, "British immigrants were [where] it all begun with their teens with the music and fashion and the access to Italian tailors and cobblers. The fashion side was due to the big immigration push of the postwar period. They brought fashion and music and culture to what really was a big country town, as Australia was."[50] Many working-class kids preferred a more conservative but still stylish cultural expression.[51]

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[43]Eugene, quoted in Mac, *Snap*, 5.

[44]Dennis, quoted in Taylor, *Top Fellas*, 13.

[45]The college-boy cut was a variation of an Italian- and French-influenced short and neat crop popular among second-generation mods in late 1950s England.

[46]For example, Larry Boys, "A Mod, Mod World", *Australian Women's Weekly* 31, no. 51 (20 May 1964): 4–5.

[47]Chris O'Halloran, "Sharpies".

[48]British migrants were charged only 10 pounds sterling to travel to Australia as part of the scheme. "Pom" is an Australasian colloquialism for English people.

[49]Taylor, *Top Fellas*, 12.

[50]John, interview by Nazz Oldham, 25 May 2024.

[51]Cockington, *Long Way to the Top*, 173–82.

1965–1969: First Generation "Proper"

The Collingwood boys and '64 rockers converged in late 1965, forming the sharpie culture proper. The swelling of their numbers led to a high level of visibility in Melbourne's city and suburbs, and the look was adopted by other youths who developed it until late 1967, when it fell into decline. This first generation of sharpies differs significantly from its 1970s successors. Indeed, in many important ways, it can be thought of as a discrete culture of its own. The first-generation sharpies became a fixture of Melbourne's inner city and surrounds. The 1960s saw job opportunities shift from the inner suburbs to places further afield. Sharpie gangs began appearing in working-class, mostly Anglo suburbs stretched along the rail corridors and formed around factories in suburbs such as Reservoir, Preston, Broadmeadows and extending as far out as the then-new Mulgrave (21 km southeast of the CBD).[52] As John remembers, "Crime rates were higher in these suburbs, although many good people were living there. Just like some likeminded people gravitated to fashion or music, some did towards crime."[53] These suburbs had a high concentration of housing-commission homes.

Many youths first became aware of the culture in 1966. As Jennifer confirms, "I know I was 15 when the magic began [in '66] … but cannot remember seeing people dressed as sharpies prior."[54] Former rocker Robert agrees: "I certainly didn't see anything like it before [1966]. In my humble opinion there was only jazzers and rockers … All of a sudden [there was] this whole new age … [of] snappy dressers. At Box Hill Bowl … [my friends and I] met these two [sharpie] kids … from Collingwood … [and] they had these … amazing baggy trousers on, … short hair, they were brothers, they were … Scottish … [and] over the next couple of weeks … [I] became a sharpie."[55] My interviewees indicate that the sharpies expanded quickly across Melbourne in 1966 and ranged in age from 12 to their early 20s, after which they were expected to settle down and start a family. The first-generation sharpies were male-dominated, mostly working class and largely identified as Australian from Anglo ethnic backgrounds, though Italian, Greek and Eastern European (particularly Yugoslavian) sharpies were common. In this regard, the members were not conspicuously racist.[56] While the gender ratio varied from group to group, it was commonly four or more boys to one girl.

Sharpies hung out at fish-and-chip shops, milk bars and occasionally late-night hamburger joints.[57] Sharpies were also known to socialise at sites of institutionalised leisure, such as boxing gyms, and at football games and cricket matches. Boxing is embedded within the longstanding working-class traditions of masculine physicality, hardness and toughness. The preparedness to fight and defend, as well the ability to both threaten and follow through with violence, has long been particularly valued in working-class, hyper-masculine street traditions.[58] Sports clubs were ideal places to practise, hone and display these traits. However, the chief regular entertainment venues were unlicensed

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[52]Warren Osmond, "Sharpies—A Dying Race", *Lot's Wife* 7, no. 4 (18 April 1967): 14.
[53]John, interview by Nazz Oldham, 25 May 2024.
[54]Jennifer, interview by Nazz Oldham, 1 July 2014.
[55]Robert, interview by Nazz Oldham, 4 April 2014.
[56]Beilharz and Supski, "So Sharp You Could Bleed".
[57]Popular US-style fooderies such as hamburger cafés and milk bars (modelled after drugstore soda bars and imported largely by Greek migrants) have been an established part of Melbourne culture since the 1930s. See Stratton, *Young Ones*, 107–11. See also Mac, *Snap*, 44, 59.
[58]Peter Corris, *Lords of the Ring: A History of Prize Fighting in Australia* (Cassell, 1980).

dances held on Friday or Saturday nights, or on Sunday afternoons (the most popular being church dances, night clubs, school dances and formals). First-generation sharpies also developed a kind of line dance known as the sharpie shuffle and a couples dance known as '66 rock. Male sharpies from all generations described the anticipation they felt about getting dressed up at the weekends. The guys who achieved a higher level of "sharpness" were known as "top fellas".

Public Visibility and the Sharpie Folk Devil

Sharpies were entrenched in working-class traditions, including notions of masculinity and codes of toughness, such as the testing of one's mettle and protection of territory, property, honour and reputation, often through physical violence. Fighting was largely restricted to the boys, but girls also participated in violence. Clashes were typically forms of territorial tussle over turf, reputation and the opposite sex. Sometimes it was just something to do. Sharpie gangs certainly fought with long-haired middle-class youth, or working-class rockers, or indeed whoever else got in their way. But in the main, their clashes were between rival gangs of sharpies—a point largely unreported by newspapers, who concentrated on the sharpies' inter-, rather than intra-, youth cultural conflict. Though there were serious clashes between bigger gangs, the majority of skirmishes were between smaller groups exercising the same kind of territorial "fierce hostility for outsiders, particularly rivals for the affections of local girls" and the "wish to assert the supremacy of their own neighbourhood against that of some neighbouring one" that extends back through to the youth gangs of the industrial era and even to pre-industrial village youth groups.[59]

By the mid-1960s, sharpie hostilities, particularly with mods, were becoming more visible. The increasing violence between youth groups on the streets flew in the face of respectable middle-class social norms. It is probable that parental concerns played a role in drawing the attention of both the media and social-control agents (such as judges and the police). As sharpies were commonly identified as the antagonists, it was their problematic behaviour, more so than the Australian mods, that the media depicted as deviating from the shared morality of respectable society. Several respondents claimed that the media blamed sharpies for any violent outbreak involving teens.

As per the second moment of Cohen's processual model of moral panics, the press took dutiful inventory of rising public concern and the street theatre provided by the clashes.[60] From late 1965 to mid-1966 the media increasingly reported on sharpie behaviour as threatening to civic safety.[61] As tales of skirmishes grew, violent incidents (and the anxieties surrounding sharpies) amplified, creating the feedback loop described by Cohen.[62] The media and moral entrepreneurs' responses both fed resentment within the sharpies against mods and reinforced their desire for retribution.[63] Their penchant for fighting made sharpies ideal candidates for the construction of an imaginary

[59]Gillis, *Youth and History*, 62.
[60]Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.
[61]For example, "200 Youths in City Gang Brawl", *Age*, 1 August 1966, 1; "Brawl Alert Tonight", *Herald*, 18 December 1965, 1; "This Is Gang 'Warfare' Says Sharpie", *Herald*, 18 December 1965, 3.
[62]Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.
[63]Bessant, "Hanging Around the Street", 20.

rowdy youth folk devil. This construct was readily deployed by the media to engender and feed social anxieties, spread moral panic and to encourage the Victorian Government and local authorities to make regular pronouncements on what social-control measures they would plan or use to curb the youth problem. As Rob White argues, "It is the location of young people in the social structure that largely determines whether particular group activities will be socially acceptable, the subject of close social regulation, or the object of sensationalist media attention."[64] As working-class youths, sharpies were convenient placeholders for a continuation of those moralising discourses about the working class that had been established since the turn of the 20th century.[65]

Between August and November 1966,[66] moral panic about the sharpies' rowdy and public demonstrations of violence against other youths and public property became a fixture in local newspapers: *The Age* ran a front-page story about a "vicious running brawl in Swanston and Bourke streets" in the city involving 200 sharpies and mods;[67] a televised investigation into Australian youth by ABC's *Four Corners* featured a report on mod and sharpie clashes;[68] *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on police breaking up 77 brawls between mods and sharpies in Melbourne and 48 of the city's suburbs over the course of a single weekend;[69] and the pop-music newspaper *Go-Set* ran an impassioned front-page story by future celebrity Ian "Molly" Meldrum entitled "Someone Will Be Killed".[70] In each instance, the language used in the articles served to heighten public anxieties by drawing on damning statements from law enforcement agencies to reinforce the perceived "sharpie threat" to public safety.

The media's incitement of public outrage worked to reinforce established conservative social norms. Moral entrepreneurs pronounced on the problem. By late 1966, public disapproval of both sharpies and mods resulted in impingements on their leisure activities. It was more often sharpies who were turned away from church dances and public youth events in the city and suburbs.[71] Many unlicensed events began to identify as mods-only or sharpies-only, causing resentment from whichever was the excluded party. Sharpies were the group most targeted as undesirables by security staff at events. The most notorious security team was Bob Jones's Trouble-Shooters, who worked at popular sites such as The Catcher, Berties, Sebastians, Q-Club, and many music events, and whom many sharpies from the 1960s and 1970s referred to as their nemeses.[72] As Robert points out, "Sharps in '66–67 were not wanted … [as] we were known as troublemakers, and looking back … that's exactly what we were."[73]

The by-products of this media attention were increasing attacks by the forces of law and order on the sharpies, whose negative image had been exaggerated by the media.

[64]White, *Youth Subcultures*, ix.
[65]Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze: Sexuality, Class and Surveillance* (Allen and Unwin, 1993).
[66]For example, "An Embattled City by Night", *Sun*, 13 August 1966, 2; "City Shooting Followed by Wild Chase—Teenage Violence", *Age*, 28 November 1966, 3; "'Dance Ban' on Youths", *Sun*, 9 August 1966, 3; Osmond, "Sharpies", 14–15; "Two Youths Injured by Gang", *Age*, 9 August 1966, 1.
[67]"200 Youths in City Gang Brawl", 1.
[68]*Four Corners*, "Go-Go Where?", aired 17 September 1966, on ABC.
[69]"77 Melbourne Gang Brawls over Weekend", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1966, 5. Notably, the brawls occurred one week after St Kilda defeated Collingwood in the 1966 VFL Grand Final.
[70]Ian Meldrum, "Sharpie Wars: 'Someone Will Get Killed'", *Go-Set*, 16 November 1966, 1, 3.
[71]Ian Meldrum, "Sharpies and Mods: What the Disco Owners Say", *Go-Set*, 30 November 1966, 14.
[72]Taylor, *Top Fellas*, 73–74.
[73]Robert, interview by Nazz Oldham, 11 February 2014.

Long-serving Victorian Premier Henry Bolte pledged to give the police "every support in efforts to break up gangs of youths".[74] The Victoria Police formed a six-person plain-clothes response team to "stamp out … [teenage] street offences in the inner-city area of Melbourne".[75] Inner-city sharpies who gathered under the Flinders Street Station clocks in the city centre were among the primary targets of this special duties squad, nick-named the "silent six", which patrolled the streets at night. As Berg explains, "[They would] pummel the crap out of us, then jump back into their van and drive off. We soon got pissed off with this and stayed out of the city till things cooled down."[76] Several sharpies who remembered the silent six called them thugs, though their often-brutal methods proved an effective deterrent to the "sharpie menace". While there was a sensationalised piece on fashion and violence by Nick Davies in *Pix* magazine on 24 December 1966,[77] the problematic behaviour that had been the focus of the moral panic subsided, and the visibility of sharpies in the media decreased substantially until the early 1970s.

Other factors contributed to the fizzling out of first-generation sharpies in addition to the pressure from media, moral entrepreneurs, official responses from the authorities (such as the police crackdown on youth gangs), and their now-entrenched image as public nuisance. By 1967 the original youth group of sharpies began to fragment as its members were drawn towards assuming adult responsibilities. In the 1960s, there were three key stages towards adulthood for young Australians in Victoria: leaving school at 15 years of age, getting a steady job, and then getting married (in 1966, the median age of marriage for Australian men was 24.2, and 21.5 for women).[78] Additionally, in Victoria the age of consent (for sex) had been 16 since 1891, the drinking age was 18 (since 1906), conscription age was 20, and the age of majority, or legal adulthood, was 21. Most sharpies left school in Year 10 after a decade of compulsory schooling. Most sharpie boys were apprenticed to a trade (as a mechanic, automotive engineer, butcher, sign-writer, painter and decorator, stonemason, wall and floor tiler, plumber, fitter and turner, electroplater or bricklayer). The more educated pursued professions in such fields as accountancy and education, while others performed unskilled work in abattoirs or as cooks, low-level clerks, storemen or railway-station assistants. Girls primarily found jobs as office workers or in service work, while both sexes worked as shop assistants (largely in clothing retail) or in factories, though the latter was considered by peers to be of a lower class.[79]

There was a short-lived post-*Sgt Pepper*, psychedelic era–influenced subset of the sharpies circa 1967–1968 called stylists, who donned psychedelic fashions, scarves and ruffles and were distinct (but took their name) from the similar subset of English mods also known as stylists.[80] However, for many sharpies, the dramatic, politically charged shifts in Western youth culture from 1968 to 1970 coincided with the sense that it was

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[74]"Bodgie Squad Not Being Reformed", *Age*, 9 August 1966, 3.
[75]Peter Stone, "Police Set Up to Combat City Louts", *Age*, 3 December 1966, 1.
[76]Berg, quoted in Mac, *Snap*, 9–10.
[77]Nick Davies, "The Girls of Melbourne's Teenage Jungle", *Pix* magazine, 24 December 1966, 2–3.
[78]Dennis Trewin, *Year Book Australia 2003* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).
[79]Some Sharpies with less messy jobs continued to dress sharply at work, especially in retail.
[80]On the Australian stylists, see Tadgh Taylor, "Sharpies, Stylists & Mods", in *Tomorrow Is Today: Australia in the Psychedelic Era 1966–1970*, ed. Iain McIntyre (Wakefield Press, 2006), 43–48. On the English mod subset known as stylists, see Paolo Hewitt, *The Soul Stylists: Six Decades of Modernism—From Mods to Casuals* (Mainstream Publishing, 2000), 85.

time to move on. It is telling that most of my interviewees (from all generations) had left the sharpie lifestyle by the time they turned 18. The legitimisation of crossing the threshold into adulthood between the ages of 15 to 21 years of age marked the beginning of the end of the sharpie life for many (not to mention the threat of adult sentencing if charged with a crime). Once they entered their early-to-mid-20s, many former sharpies had married, started a family and found legitimate employment, or else had embarked on activities that respectable society considers criminal in nature.

Legacies

The sharpies were a diverse youth culture spanning three aesthetically distinct generations.[81] Each belonged to the trajectory of Australian rowdy youth- and street-culture traditions that stretched back to before the industrial revolution. Though the original era of sharpies ended in the late 1960s, their legacy was continued into the 1970s by a younger crowd who had been admiring the first generation's style from the sidelines. While the next generation (1970–1972) of sharpies implicitly viewed themselves as a self-conscious continuation of the first, they did not explicitly refer to themselves as sharpies to the degree that the third and fourth generations would. They were working-class suburban Australian youths looking for something exciting that reflected their common interests. Young people who found hippie ideals to be at odds with their conservative leanings were nevertheless overshadowed in the public imaginary by the countercultural revolution. Many experimented with other subcultural identities before returning to first-generation sharpie style. Fashion, music, behaviour and lifestyle choices were changing markedly for all Western youth cultures at the turn of the decade.[82] By 1970, Australian popular culture had been infiltrated by middle-class counterculture, which held little appeal to young sharpies-in-waiting. It is worth noting that class-based tensions that brewed between Australian youth cultures of the 1960s and 1970s can be seen to have spilled over into discourses of authenticity and belonging in cultural memory and popular-culture histories in which the sharpies are noticeably left out.

The third generation of sharpies (1973–1976) coincided with the popularity of the glam rock phenomenon. Younger brothers and sisters eager to be seen had been inspired by the interstitial generation's implicit interpretation of the distinctive styles and practices of the original sharpie culture, particularly in the developments of glam's spectacular fashion and hair styling, increasing popularity, fierce participation in the local pub-rock scene and hostile approach to local hippies.[83] As second-generation sharpie Peter explains, "We didn't really call ourselves sharpies … from '70 to '73, we just followed

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[81]For more on latter-era sharpies, see Mac, *Snap*; Paul "Nazz" Oldham, "Drongoes in the Dress-Up Box: Glam Rock in Australia", in *Global Glam: Style and Spectacle in Popular Music from the 1970s to the 2000s*, ed. Ian Chapman and Henry Johnson (Routledge, 2016), 258–71; Paul "Nazz" Oldham, "'Go Sharp or Go Home': The Competitive Subcultural Practices of a Historical Australian Youth Culture Known as 'Sharpies'", *Continuum* 37, no. 4 (2023): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2023.2271677; Paul "Nazz" Oldham, "Lobby Loyde: The G.O.D.father of Australian Rock", *Thesis Eleven* 109, no. 1 (2012): 44–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513612444558; Paul "Nazz" Oldham, "'Suck More Piss': How the Confluence of Key Melbourne-Based Audiences, Musicians, and Iconic Scene Spaces Informed the Oz Rock Identity", *Perfect Beat: The Pacific Journal for Research into Contemporary Music and Popular Culture* 14, no. 2 (2013): 121–38, https://doi.org/10.1558/prbt.v14i2.120; Taylor, *Top Fellas*; Nick Tolewski and Dean Crozier, *Once Were Sharps: The Colourful Life and Times of the Thomastown Sharps* (pub. by author, 2011).
[82]See Arrow, *Friday on Our Minds*.
[83]See Oldham, "Drongoes in the Dress-Up Box".

on from what the [earlier] sharpies were … but the third-generation sharpies, … young kids with … a lot of aggro, proudly had all the t-shirts with the sharps on [them]."[84] Sharpies related to the way glam represented a shift away from the politically minded, soft and scruffy hippie counterculture towards sexually charged, performative rock and pop music fans could dance to, and they responded to its transparent acknowledgement (and caricature) of deliberate, playful and arbitrary elements present in consciously fashionable dressing.[85] In this regard, it was a far remove from the more austere first generation. It is from 1973 to 1974 that most former sharpies and popular-culture historians agree that the youth culture entered its most iconic and popular form. Thus, the third generation marked the height of this youth formation's spectacular visibility, which largely defined the sharpies in the public imagination (and popular-culture histories) and led to its subsequent downfall through negative media coverage and crackdowns by state authorities.

Fourth-generation (1976–mid-1980s) sharpie style for both sexes became progressively longer-haired, exaggerated and body-clinging. As Julie explains, "The smaller you could get a cardigan and still get it on, the better. We'd all go down the laundromat and wash and dry them till they shrunk."[86] Fourth-generation fashions are commonly disregarded by previous sharpie generations as "bogan" or "Mickey Mouse". The culture's masculine aesthetic became more spectacularly pronounced, as did other aspects of the fashion. Some of the more prominent gangs of the fourth generation have admitted that, for them, fashion's precedence had been supplanted by territoriality and violence. By the time sharpies began to peter out in the mid-1980s, few outsiders remembered its rich street culture beyond brawling and bullying. Most third- and fourth-generation participants in my research were largely ignorant about 1960s sharpies' existence. Many original sharpies expressed displeasure at the culture's later generations, with many preferring to be disassociated from them. They considered the newcomers "pretenders to the throne" who had corrupted the original style.

Conclusion

Sharpies of all generations upheld their conservative working-class values and pursued rebellion through antisocial behaviour and fighting. Though they were products of the process of postwar cultural, social, economic and political change, they stood apart from the 1960s/1970s cultural revolution in comparison with progressive bohemian youth culture or radical student cultures (and others) who protested the Vietnam War or gender and racial oppression.[87] Sharpies were working-class youths whose practices were enmeshed in long-established traditions that had once been self-contained and invisible to the middle classes. When made publicly visible, these practices were reclassified as deviant. The same had also been the case for other postwar working-class youth cultures. While some factions of society find them to be an inconvenient or unpleasant

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[84]Peter, interview by Nazz Oldham, 23 July 2008.

[85]Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson, eds., *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader* (Pandora, 1992).

[86]Julie, quoted in Taylor, *Top Fellas*, 62.

[87]Early generation sharpies have discussed protesting the Vietnam War at Melbourne's various moratorium rallies in the early 1970s despite their rivalries or dislike for hippies. This attendance was not picked up by the media or protest commentators.

memory, sharpies were a legitimate cultural expression of youth culture lived by a small but highly visible faction of Australian young people. Furthermore, the culture should have its cultural value judged objectively by future generations. It is hoped that this article has provided a deeper understanding of the sharpie culture contextually and helped ascertain which of the social anxieties that they engendered were warranted and which were misplaced.

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