FANDOM, TRIPLE J AND THE UNEARTHED COMPETITION: A Regional Perspective

Kate Ames
School of Contemporary Communication, Central Queensland University, Australia

Abstract
This paper addresses the link between fandom, empowerment, Triple J, and the Unearthed competition in a regional context. The Unearthed competition, run and promoted by Triple J, has enabled young musicians in Rockhampton to embrace the notion of a professional music career without having to leave school, families, and a familiar environment. Unearthed launched the careers of Grinspoon and Killing Heidi, and has made a huge impact on the Australian music scene, but its impact on regional youth is also great.

The paper is based on a study that reveals links between being a ‘fan’, stimulated by the impact of Triple J on youth culture in Rockhampton at the time (late 1990s), and the Unearthed Competition. It discusses how the Unearthed competition became something that provided social capital in an area that had previously had very little exposure to an ‘alternative’ music scene. This study provides some reflection on a time when Triple J was all-powerful in the Australian music scene, and looks at how the competition promoted by national youth radio made a difference to local/regional musicians.

Stream – Radio Studies

Introduction
In 1995, Triple J ‘came to Rocky’. It was a big moment – youth living in a socially and physically isolated part of Queensland, some eight hour’s drive north of Brisbane, were suddenly connected to a world that allowed them to escape the physical reality that surrounded them. While regional youth in the area had been well serviced by a few select commercial AM stations, this was the first FM, totally youth-oriented station in the area. The station was embraced wholeheartedly by youth, and adults seeking to hold on to their youth, in the region, with 33 per cent of listeners in the 18 – 23 year age group listening to Triple J (Regional Radio Surveys 1997).

The station’s expansion was well supported from a marketing perspective, and a cultural industry based around Australian alternative rock music was fairly quickly born. The complex position and often contradictory nature of Triple J as an ‘alternative’ music station participating in a ‘mainstream’ commercial environment has resulted in the station being subject to some specific academic research, from varying ideological (Albury 1999; Cook 1999) and policy-based (Dawson 1992) perspectives (including my own work on the station - Ames 1997; 1998; 2002; 2003).
Triple J has also been under scrutiny in relation to its power and role in the music industry (Stove 1995), and subsequent commercialisation (Tulich 1995; Zuel 2003).

This paper specifically addresses the Unearthed competition, initiated by Triple J in 1995 as part of its ‘nationalisation’ strategy, but rather than focussing on the bigger picture/commercial/ideological perspective, looks at what the competition meant to those who were involved with it at the time. While Albury (1999) notes the role of the Unearthed competition as part of a marketing strategy to help the station engage (and often learn about) its regional audiences, my interest is the role Unearthed played in empowering regional audiences. This paper will reflect on a time during the mid 1990s when Triple J was unchallenged as the dominant player in Australian youth cultural industry from a regional perspective, and much of the discussion in this paper is based on Rockhampton-based Unearthed winners at the time.

The Triple J impact on Youth Culture in the mid 1990s…
Triple J commenced its strategy of nationalisation in the late 1980s, and ‘rolled out’ to 18 non-metropolitan areas on Australia Day 1995, including Rockhampton. The impact was immediate, and significant – not only for those listeners who were suddenly able to tap into a virtual youth world, but for those involved with the music industry who were to benefit from the sheer jump in volume that ultimately translated into dollars and commercial success (see Tulich 1995; Zuel 2003). For many regional youth, however, the impact was a personal and emotional one. Bob Mansfield, in a speech to The Sydney Institute in 1997, talked about how he had received submissions from ‘grandparents in rural communities saying how beneficial Triple J was to their own children and grandchildren’ (Mansfield 1997). It was evident that one of the significant social impacts of the introduction of Triple J was the acquisition of social and cultural capital for a group that were previously socially and physically isolated. This acquisition of cultural capital by regional youth can be linked to the introduction of Triple J into areas where most youth had little access to ‘alternative’ music (or indeed any type of cultural) sources in a number of ways. My previous studies have shown the important link Triple J provided Rockhampton youth and their metropolitan counterparts from a cultural and social literacy perspective (Ames 1997; Ames 1998).

Rockhampton-based listeners of Triple J became ‘fans’ of the station in quite an intense, and dependent way. They became loyal listeners, transported from the physical reality of ‘cowtown’ to the virtual youth world where all the presenters and the music seemed to speak only, and directly, to them (Ames 1998). Listeners became fans not only of the bands and the music, but also of the presenters who had established, through interaction and conversation, what was ‘cool’, and this fostering of a youth sub-culture that has global norms and influences helped to foster the concept of ‘fandom’. The process of becoming a fan of the radio station resulted in listeners become fans of music (as well as the presenters), and the absorption of cultural norms that were required to be a fan were part of this empowering process. In a series of interviews conducted with Triple J listeners in Rockhampton in 1997, it became evident that an increased sense of self esteem in relation to metropolitan counterparts resulted in greater social mobility. This can be seen in the following responses by male listeners:
I’m sure I was the straightest looking person at the Big Day Out, and I had a shaved head at that stage, and I was still the straightest looking person, but because I knew all the bands that were playing, and I had most of their albums, I felt pretty much part of the whole scene. (Male, 20)

I went to Livid…and I looked like the squarest person there. There were guys running around there, painted all red with devil’s masks on with Henry Rollins tattooed on the back – ‘Search and Destroy’ - all that sort of stuff…every kind of freak you could imagine was running around but that’s didn’t bother me…as soon as I got there, I said ‘oh shit’, but got over it and went to see the bands. (Male, 20)

I know that when I was in Sydney last, I knew more hip music…because they have the mix up on Saturday night, I knew more really good techno stuff than my cousin who lives in Sydney, who lives in techno nightclubs…you know what I mean? I didn’t feel as much like a hick…you don’t feel as much like you’re left out. (Male, 26)

These interactions indicated that regional listeners realised that they were different, but were empowered by their own cultural knowledge that enabled them to mix in previously alien circles. This ‘cultural knowledge’ was intrinsically linked to the cultural industry of popular music, which included video clips, CDs, magazines, concerts, radio and press interviews, websites. At the time of its national expansion, Triple J’s music was situated in the same cultural ‘place’ as Rage, Recovery, and Rolling Stone magazine. Triple J, through its selection of music and construction of ‘celebrity’ presenters created and maintained ‘cool’; it established norms and reiterated these through a wide of cultural commercial practices. These norms, challenging a traditionally conservative worldview, were embraced by regional youth listeners. This is consistent with Jenkins’ view of fandom (1996), which will be discussed later in this paper.

While there was little at the time written or recorded linking the ‘explosion’ of the Australian music scene and Triple J, it could be inferred from a number of indirect sources. For example, in an article entitled ‘Free Spirits’ by David Bentley, published in The Courier-Mail (17-18 May 1997), Brisbane’s then new status as a ‘crucible of new wave pop – an Australian Seattle no less’ (Weekend /1), was highlighted. The Seattle reference to Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Jimi Hendrix, and other internationally successful Seattle-based bands was important, for this linked Brisbane with a ‘credible’ rock and roll nursery. The focus of the article was on two Brisbane-based bands, Powderfinger and Regurgitator. The latter band took out eight nominations and two wins in the 1996 Australian Record Industry Awards, and whose top-selling album Tu Plang, went platinum ‘having remained a fixture on both the mainstream and alternative pop charts for more than a year’ (Weekend /1). There was little reference to the context of this success, with the exception of the statement: ‘Had not Triple J put it on the high rotation, he says (Michael Parisi, A&R chief of Warner Bros Australia), no-one outside the band’s immediate circle of fans would have been any the wiser’ (Weekend /1).

In Bentley’s article, reference to Triple J was also made with an interview with rock specialist and announcer Costa Zouliou, who noted the impact of national exposure
that Triple J provided. The article discussed the rapid rise of band profiles and willingness of record label to sign, and referred to the ‘Dark Ages of Brisbane pop when no bands had a contract,’ as noted by one entrepreneur and band manager (Weekend/1). Custard’s David McCormack said at the time: “I can’t recall a time when three Brisbane bands were doing well at the same time. Maybe it’s my perception of it, but from 1986 to 1992, did anything happen? The brain-drain to the south was awful” (Weekend/2). Brisbane received Triple J for the first time in 1989; what happened, it could be argued, was Triple J’s expansion, and the number of listeners. This is supported by discussion from Tulich (1995).

Triple J’s impact can be actually assessed by examining the music industry situation in 1995, when the station expanded nationally into regional areas. This was the year that, according to Christie Eliezer in *Billboard Magazine*, the ‘new guard’ took over. This was led, she wrote, by the phenomenal success of the ‘teenage grunge act silverchair and their US hit album *Frogstomp* (1995, p.53). She attributes this change to Triple J, which ‘championed new music from home and abroad, set trends and broke ratings records’ (1995, p.53). She noted that simultaneously:

> Four year old indie Shock scored its first No.1 single and album and became a major player. The Lollapalooza-influenced annual Big Day Out grew from a single-city event to a national tour incorporating New Zealand. The five year old independent Mushroom Distribution Service (MDS) reported a 70 per cent increase in sales. Music fans in Australia were signalling loud and clear: No more recycling’ (1995, p.53).

In the same year, three Australian albums debuted at Number 1: *Hi Fi Way* by You Am I, *Frogstomp* by silverchair, and *Three Legged Dog* by The Cruel Sea (Poole 1995, p.15). The phenomenal increases in attendance at concerts such as Livid and the Big Day Out also began during this time, and were additional testaments to the exposure given to alternative bands by Triple J. The Livid Festival, for example, was initiated in Brisbane with the support of the University of Queensland and 4ZZZ in the mid-1980s, and attracted an average audience of around 5000. The concert, once sponsored and promoted nationally by Triple J, began to sell out months in advance. It now attracts and audience from throughout Australia, and hosts an average of 40 000 people, as well as being toured nationally.

If the ideology of rock music is ‘progressive’, distinguishing itself from the commercial music market ‘by virtue of its artistic and political ambitions’ (Wicke 1990, p.92), the progressive messages generated from within the site of Triple J at the time were complementary, and highlighted the station’s attempt to function as a political site. However, just as rock music is ‘under no less an obligation to the capitalist system of music production and distribution than it’s commercial counterpart’ (Wicke 1990, p.100), so too was Triple J unable to distance itself from the capitalist-based cultural industry within which it was situated, and upon which it depended. While attempting to remove itself ideologically from the commercial aspect of the cultural industry in which it was placed, the station appeared aware of its power within the Australian rock music industry and depended on this in order to continue operation. Unlike commercial stations, which have no ideological problem with their position within the cultural industry of popular and rock music, Triple J’s situation was complex. Economically, however, Triple J’s influence at the time was
profound for the Australian music industry, and one of the ways the station’s economic and social influence manifested itself through its highly successful Unearthed competition. The competition gave ‘fans’ a chance to prove themselves, and move from the realm of fantasy to reality.

Triple J’s Unearthed program was established in 1995 as part of the nationalisation process, apparently inspired by the success of silverchair after they won the Triple J supported SBS Nomad program ‘Pick Me’ in 1994 (‘Long Way to the Top’, 2001). The first Unearthed was held in northern NSW, in Lismore, and was won by Grinspoon, now arguably one of Australia’s best mainstream bands now with an impressive longevity. Other winners included Killing Heidi (Goulburn Valley – 1997), Endorphin (Cairns - 1996), and The Tenants (Orange/Bathurst – 2001), and the competition is still going strong, although it appears to have less ‘hype’ than it did a few years ago. The competition, from its inception, was incredibly popular, and saw Triple J representatives travelling to regional areas to see young, live bands who were without record contracts. Its aim was (and is) to ‘discover’ new Australian talent. Given that this was being done by SBS’s Nomad program, the success of Triple J’s Unearthed competition was integrally linked to the commercial and cultural network that it created for itself (see Albury 1999). [Note that at the time Triple J came to Rockhampton, SBS was not a viewing or listening option, as SBS did not start broadcasting television into the area until 1998 (DOCITA Annual Report 1997).]

**Fandom and Empowerment**

Fandom is a theory that highlights the active nature of consumers within a cultural context. Foucault (1979) states that ‘power is not exercised imply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transformed by them’ (1979, p.27). In other words, power flows through different social positions within the total system and ‘empowers’ the people who occupy those positions to transform it before they pass it on (Bertsch 1993, p. 4). Fandom is, at least potentially, the site of ‘optimism, invigoration, and life’ (Grossberg 1992, p. 65), and is often discussed in the context of sport, or media consumption.

Within the context of fandom, fans position themselves through the use of fantasy in a situation where they would be seen as ‘cool’ by the object of their affection. In the almost impossible or highly unlikely event that they would meet their idol, they would have positioned themselves so that it was they who were admired or envied by the ‘star’. This may involve learning to play the guitar or another musical instrument, forming a band, adopting a particular style or mode of fashion. Alternatively, they may acquire knowledge that allows them to engage with others who have similar interests, and as a group of fans, place pressure on cultural institutions because of an even greater demand for knowledge (see Pruter 1997). In the case of Robert Godwin, for example, who was the founder of international music distributor Griffin Music Inc., being a passionate fan of Led Zeppelin led to a successful business career in the music industry (LeBlanc 1996).

The connection of listeners to Triple J was not only to the music, but also to the presenters, such as Helen Razer and Mikey Robbins, and notably Michael Tunn, who was mentioned numerous times by interviewees in my original study (Ames 1997). Along fandom theory lines, to impress Michael Tunn, one would have to have a greater knowledge of the Australian music scene than Tunn himself. Additionally, to
impress Michael Stipe (REM) one would have to be able to play guitar as well as he; to impress Helen Razer, one would have to have a thorough knowledge of feminism and be able to hold one’s own with alcohol. Therefore, from the point of youth, fandom in this context became an active process of acquiring cultural capital based on a level of desire.

This active process of acquisition is related to what Jenkins refers to as the ‘fan community’s politics of cultural preference’ (1996). Jenkins argues that fans like to promote ‘scandalous’ taste and ‘shocking behaviour’ (1996, p.23), and are often bonded by the desire to be different from a social norm. Triple J was already challenging a traditionally conservative and isolated public through its alternative music, alternative presenters, and ‘metroview’ in a regional environment. For many regional youth, Triple J provided a meeting of minds and values. Engagement with the station was a non-threatening way to challenge the reality of regional life, while at the same time bonding with other people in the same situation. What is different from Jenkins’ view of fandom is that in the case of Triple J, fans were not embarrassed by their enthusiasm for the station – indeed, symbols such as the ‘Beat the Drum’ logo in the form of stickers on bags and cars were a way of identifying one another. This process of cultural acquisition ultimately manifested itself in practical application via the Unearthed competition, whereby regional youth were suddenly exposed to musical and political influences that were adopted as a rebellion against the perceived boredom of regional life.

Fandom and Unearthed in Rockhampton
According to Grossberg, empowerment refers to the ‘generation of energy and passion, to the construction of possibility’ (1992, p.65). This ‘construction of possibility’ as a result of being a ‘fan’ of Triple J is evidenced when examining the motivation and effects of the Unearthed competition on the two bands who were selected as winners of the Unearthed competition in Rockhampton in 1996. Members of the bands, mostly male, were interviewed shortly after their wins, and at the time, both bands were still located in Central Queensland, and were still coming to terms with the effects of the win.

The impact of fandom in relation to Unearthed was made evident in a number of ways. The cultural industry that surrounded Triple J created a sense of demand, as all members indicated a high level of involvement in the overall rock industry (‘cultural capital’). One member was designated as the band’s regular purchaser of rock magazines and papers (lack of money being the reason for this efficiency). This band’s members talked about Nirvana and Kurt Cobain as being their major musical influences initially. As they progressed, they believe they adopted and accepted a wider range of musical influences. One band member admitted that it was the desire to be in a band, rather than musical ability, that motivated him. This had been stimulated by the introduction of Triple J to the local area:

You start listening to bands more and more, and you start wanting to buy CDs, and I just thought I wanted to do that, I wanted to play a guitar. I thought it would be really cool…I got really into it, and saw bands live, and then just picked up a guitar and went from there (Male, 17).
Another member of the same band admitted that winning Unearthed competition was a major shock: ‘It really gave us a kick up the backside, because of a sudden, we were out doing gigs, and we thought, “Oh God, we’d better learn to play”’.

The ability to remain located in the region was relevant for both bands, and this subsequently ensured that the bands became the actual objects of fandom within the local area. The success of winning a national competition, and receiving airplay meant that there was a sense of ‘we know them’ among regional listeners. A Rockhampton band manager believed that the Unearthed competition was not solely responsible for his band’s success, but that winning it had been a good thing. Others in the local music industry, however, argued that that it wasn’t necessarily the music that had attracted a recording company to the band, but the fact that they had been ‘unearthed’ and had already received some level of publicity (Interview 1, 1997). The sense of self-esteem, not only for members of the bands themselves, but of people who were associated by location with this bands, was profound. All interview participants mentioned knowledge of someone they knew who had been involved in Triple J some way – either through ringing up on talk-back, or having entered the Unearthed competition. So the very interaction with the ‘object of affection’, that is, Triple J, was a source of empowerment for those who engaged actively with the station, and once the bands won Triple J, they in turn became the ‘objects of affection’.

In a case of ‘it’s easy to be a big fish in a small town’, it became evident that the close interaction between band members provided a source of local pride and self-esteem for all involved. One band, comprised of indigenous youth based in Woorabinda (an indigenous town west of Rockhampton), signed to a national record company that was happy for them to remain based in that location. In this case, record executives were flown to Rockhampton for recording purposes. In the other winning band, where all members were still at school, the Unearthed competition afforded them the opportunity to both complete school and enter the music industry (as silverchair members had done). In this band, two members who had completed school said that they were prepared to stay in Rockhampton while the rest of the members finished school, at which point they would reassess what they would do. It is significant that band members who would have been reluctant to leave their community and families to pursue a full-time musical career, were able to do both as a result of Triple J, with the hope that a fan base would in turn be created that would provide financial benefits.

The ability to create a fan base within the regional area was limited because of lack of opportunities to play live. All those interviewed at the time noted noted this, and that despite their success on Triple J, they were forced to play covers to satisfy audiences and venue operators. This created a sense of frustration, and reinforced the feeling that ultimately, to achieve success, the bands would still have to move to a metropolitan city to get live experience. However, all band members interviewed acknowledged the benefits of having commenced their careers in a regional area – the lack of competition, and access to good recording facilities at reasonable prices. Triple J therefore physically provided choice for regional youth via Unearthed – given that choice, they were able to remain in their local area without feeling that they were completely missing out on opportunities. Band members indicated hope that their music would be picked up on Triple J playlists, and according to one band manager:

I think it would be harder to convince the band that there was a future for them (if Triple J was not present). With Triple J here, there’s a sense that even
though we do come from a cattle town, a dusty old cattle town, we can still ‘make it’…There is not really an industry here, and there never has been. But when you tune in to Triple J, you realise that you are part of a bigger picture, that you aren’t just this dusty cattle town with no musical future’ (Interview 2, 1997)

This manager also believed that as a result of the Triple J influence, musicians in Rockhampton became Australian musicians, rather than Rockhampton musicians. Indeed this observation is supported by Gibson, who noted that Unearthed winners are rarely referred to in the context of their regional origins, banking on the ‘replicability of niche production and consumption across urban and rural contexts’ (2002, p.7). However, in the case of the band manager interviewed, this regional invisibility actually had important consequences on self-esteem, which was improved as musicians were assessed on their musical ability alone. The Unearthed competition was therefore important in its embracing of talent outside metropolitan areas. This point was noted in a number of interviews, in terms of self-esteem, and in opening ‘windows of opportunity’. The competition was one of the most prominent and successful examples of cultural adhesive for regional youth, in that it allowed youth to pursue a potentially international career while remaining in their local community. The winners were guaranteed airplay, and included on ‘Unearthed’ record compilations and concerts that consolidate commercial success.

The above cases are examples of ‘fandom’ empowering two Rockhampton area-based groups to the point that they activated their desire to make a successful career in the rock industry, where they sought a range of skills (musical, marketing, promotion, recording) that they may never have considered prior to exposure to the Unearthed competition. This was reflected within focus groups, where participants with a high level of cultural capital within the rock industry expressed the possibility of a career in the area. While this is also true of metropolitan based audiences, the implication of choice for a regional audience is significant. Gibson (2002) discussed the emergence of popular music as a cultural industry, and its importance in the context of the far north coast of NSW, attributing some of this to the success of Grinspoon, which comprised a group of Southern Cross University students who won Unearthed only a few weeks after forming. He states: ‘a growth of hard rock scenes on the Far North Coast is most obviously influenced by the international success of Grinspoon...’ (p.7). This has not actually been the case in Rockhampton, which has had a different experience. In addition, in contrast to the Grinspoon experience, neither of the Rockhampton winners is together in its original form; one band has altered shape substantially and has moved to Brisbane, and is successfully performing in a city now renowned for its production of alternative rock performers. This, however, does not negate the impact of the experience of winning Unearthed in Rockhampton at the time, an experience that was prompted by being a fan of Triple J – its music, its presenters, its worldview, and all that it represented.

**Conclusion**

The Unearthed competition has provided an important avenue for regional youth to articulate their passion for music in a creative way that they would not have had access to without the introduction of Triple J to regional areas. The creation of Triple J as a youth cultural icon, and the promotion of Triple J within a commercial context has commodified the station to the point that ‘it’, the station (music, presenters) is the
object of affection. Fans of the station, who are also fans of the station’s music, have been empowered by the station, and its associated activities, particularly the Unearthed competition. This paper has reflected on a time when Triple J was all powerful in the Australian music industry. It could be argued that this influence has somewhat faded in more recent years as competition has entered regional and metropolitan market places. However, it is evident that Triple J’s Unearthed competition did make a difference to Rockhampton youth, socially and economically at the time.

**References**

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**Personal Interviews**

Interview 1 – Record company representative, 15 November 1997.

Interview 2 – Band manager/music educator, 4 November 1997.

**Address for correspondence**

Author Name: Kate Ames  
Department: Faculty of Informatics and Communication  
Institution: Central Queensland University  
Street address: Central Queensland University, Building 353 City Campus, Rockhampton QLD 4702  
Location: Rockhampton  
Country: Australia  
Email address: k.ames@cqu.edu.au

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