

Hard Rock, Limp Singles

Singles life in Sydney begins with a nostalgia trip. Pick your decade and then your nightspot. BERWYN LEWIS reports on what the preppie set puts up with to stay in fashion.

SIXTIES revivalist tunes are the anthems at Sydney's nightspot, the Hard Rock Cafe, but dancing at places like this is taboo. Speaking and signs of life are minimal, a sure way to blow the cool.

The best tables and stools are closest to the mostly male '60s iconography like Elton John's picture in perspex, his silver boots or his suit.

A stamping ground for freshers and freshettes wearing the latest collegiate-sorority cheer squad gear (windcheaters, sloppy joes and off-field gridiron-style outfits), this is where preppy singles enter the entertainment and food chain. In this barnyard of Beatle, Stones and INXS sacred artefacts, the hopeful young faces wait for the privilege of being offered seating.

Even to be singled out for rejection by a bouncer is a privilege. Vacant tables are announced through a savage PA system in the style of a youth camp or compound megaphone.

"Number 953!"

"Emma to the Cashier!"

"Robert Party!"

You can perch on a bar stool all night and no one will speak to you. Take regulars Sally Jackson, 27, and her friend, Diana Blackwood, 22. Resplendent in black, highlighted by glossy lips and painstakingly frizzed hair, they sit toying with straws in glasses. They have eaten. They have spent \$40 each.

"It would be nice to meet someone but I haven't met anyone yet," says super-cool Diana, a record store manager. She enjoys being a "party person".

"But I'd like to meet the right person, get married, settle down, have children and live in the country."

"Jones Party!" The PA ruptures a few more ear drums as Diana extends a long, luminous nail. "If a man gave me a compliment and I thought he was a real gentleman I'd be interested."

"A guy came up. When he opened his mouth he spoke like a male chauvinist. He kept touching me on the leg. He seemed to have a lot of money. He was such an arsehole that we let him buy us some drinks. Normally I'd buy my share."

"But this guy kept talking about all his girlfriends. He wore rings on his fingers. We just let him go on. I haven't got a guilty conscience. His name was Tony, a real show-off, he said he was a solicitor..."

Diana is interrupted by a member of the Hard Rock Cafe service police who addresses me:

"Have you eaten?"

"No. I'm standing at the bar drinking..."

"Well I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Why can't we sit at the bar and drink?"

"You can drink at the table where you eat but you can't drink at the bar. Move along."

Did they get their training at Holsworthy Army Camp?

Diana pipes up bravely: "... In other words spend your money and leave."

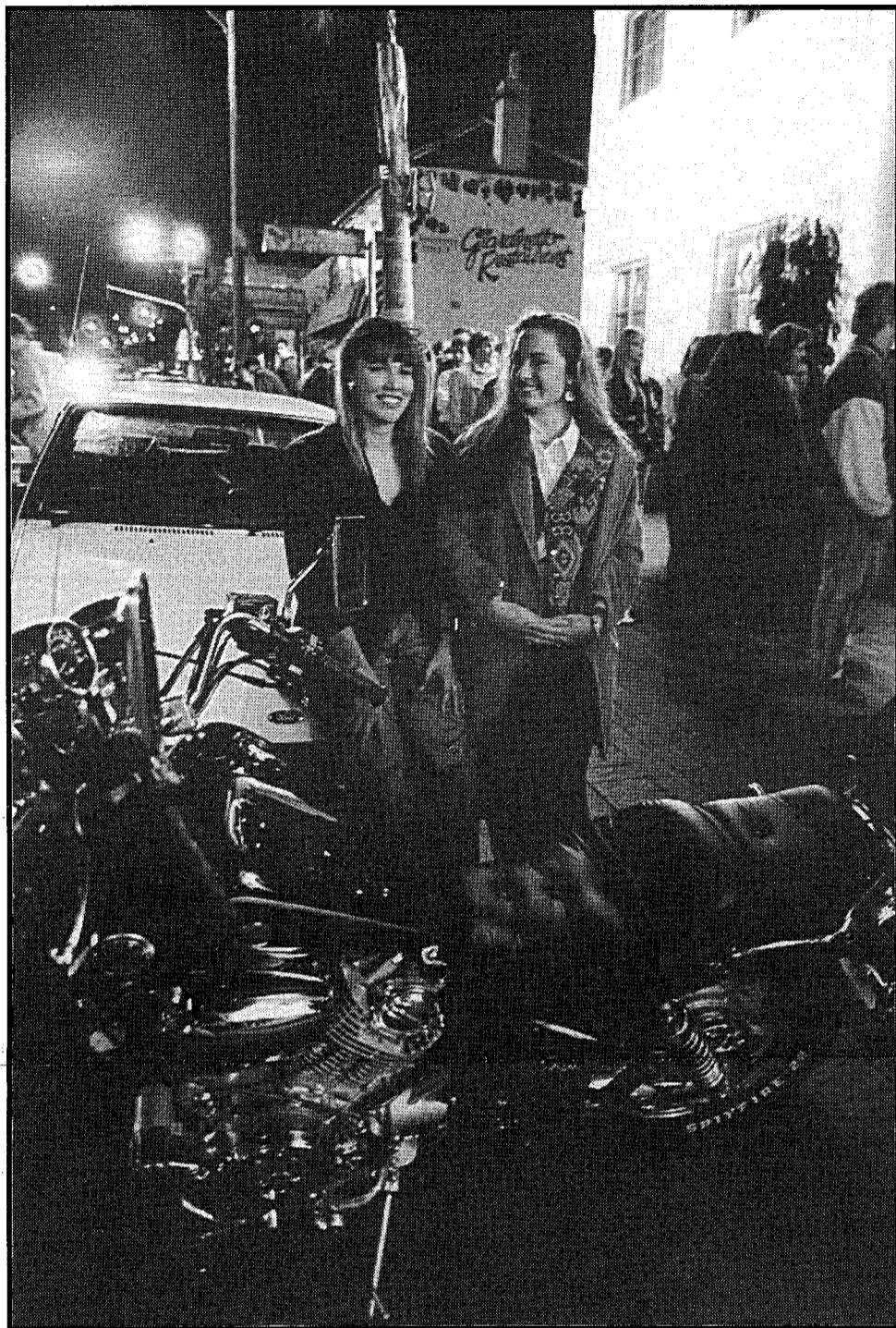
"Move along."

Funny behaviour for a place with the logo: "Save The Planet. Love All. Serve All."

"Now I'm afraid to buy another drink in case we're asked to leave," says Diana, perplexed by the Tonys of this world and the eviction order.

Eating at this upmarket McDonald's is a challenge. At the snack bar stalls of chompers and grazers pick their way through mountains of raw leaves glistening with dressing. Others, like 30-year-old John, tackle fish, meat and thick shakes.

A computer systems analyst, he hopes to meet someone. With his pierced ears, power



Lorrie Graham

The queues form outside the Hard Rock Cafe late on a Saturday night.

ponytail and liberated man looks he stands a good chance. The women outnumber the men by far. But the only thing in his sights at this stage are the sauce bottles, condiments and mustards on the snack bar counter.

"Being single these days is different. AIDS rears its ugly head," says John patting his pocket. He is a confident condom carrier. (Condom vending machines in the women's

toilet declare "wrap that rascal" to anyone who has forgotten theirs.)

This is the fastfood, fast turnover lane: "Would you like to see the dessert menu now?" snarls the blue-capped bar hop. John has barely made an impression on his steak.

Four hours later John is gazing across a line of ashtrays and glasses. He does not meet anyone and no one speaks to him.

"I have no idea how to pick someone up. Invariably I seem to be picked up," he says nursing a hot chocolate nightcap.

In his Fox (film studio) windcheater 35-year-old Geoff Tanner, TV director, is concentrating on his fish. After that he will "buy the newspapers at Darlinghurst and then buy a house tomorrow in Annandale".

An aficionado of Hard Rock Cafes, LA to Houston, he sees Sydney as "a city on the American imperialist food trip." But he feels at home in the airport playpen homogeneity.

"In LA young executives shun Hard Rock Cafes. They're for tourists. A Hard Rock cafe jacket is really passe. It's American conservative yet it's supposedly at the cutting edge of the latest trend."

He despairs at the lack of originality. "Even the clothing look is imported. It's Disneyland for late-nighters."

"I'm not here to pick up anyone. I like the speed of the place and the music. It's a mix of a hamburger joint and a club," he says watching the fashion victims watching him.

He polishes off his fish and slips away to buy the newspapers and a house.

Jerry Benitez, 35, a motor mechanic, and his brother Ross, 31, want to meet girls.

"I've got my doubts about this place. I'm not expecting to be picked up but I'd like to make some friends," says the immaculately suited Jerry.

Ross says he does not believe in one-night stands. "It's dangerous going home with someone you've just met."

"The only person I've met here tonight is the bar tender," says Jerry, adjusting a shirt handcuff.

But a very young blonde in black at the bar has met someone. With a runaway look in her eyes she toyed with three young male admirers, pirouetting between them, sitting on a knee, leaning against a body as Elvis stares down from a poster above her.

Surprisingly marriage is on her mind but not quite yet. At '18' doing Year 12, she says "my ex-friend used to abuse me for talking to others."

"I found out I can talk to guys here and I feel comfortable about it. But I'd like to get married then have kids."

Three very sophisticated young women have staked out the booths. Alex Craighead, Honor Paterson and Aleta Ferguson are all 17 years old and home for a weekend from Frenschem (Mittagong, NSW), an exclusive school.

The Hard Rock Cafe is "fun", "relaxing" and "a good gossiping place".

"We have no intention of picking up men," they say, picking at desserts and sipping water.

"It's not a place to pick up guys. It's not like the Oak (a Double Bay pub). That's a hang (a pick-up place)," says Aleta, contemptuously waving perfectly painted and ringed fingers. "I like the music but it's not the latest. It's not acid or housie (house muzak)."

None of these women have boyfriends yet. They come to The Hard Rock Cafe to "pull ourselves together before we go home". Their parents are well trained.

"We vaguely said 'we're going out'. I've built up a trust with them over the years," says Aleta.

Brad Webster, 30, of Cronulla is retired. A world traveller who made a fortune from a pizza shop he says: "I'm disappointed in this place. I don't think the stuff here is authentic."

Sceptically he turns to the guitar ornamenting the wall above his table. "The frets on this AC-DC guitar haven't been worn in. The strings are new."

"I came out to have a few drinks with a friend, not to pick up women. You can't meet someone when they're five-parts . . ."

A single man, he yearns for the nostalgia of his parents' and grandparents' times when "men had time to know what a woman wanted".

"Men have missed out now. It's like there's a generation gap between men and women. They don't respect each other so you think what's the use of trying. There's a lack of real values now. Men are to blame and women are suffering for it." ■