

"Australia's most evil and repugnant nightspot"

**Memories from those involved:
The FOCO Club, Brisbane, 1968-69**

Peter Gray with recollections by Frank Neilsen

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

"In 1964, I was privileged to start working as a photographic assistant to Geoff Dauth at his Petrie Bight studio.¹ I fell into the habit of frequenting Brisbane's hippest place, the Primitif Café, which was owned by Geoff's friend, a glamorous woman named Peter Cox. At a time when the drinking age was twenty-one, there were very few places in Brisbane where young people could 'hang out'. This is where I first met Larry Zetlin, who had recently become the Brisbane correspondent for *Go-Set*, Australia's first pop-music newspaper, published weekly from February 1966 to August 1974. Larry invited me to become their Brisbane-based 'rock photographer'. That sounded interesting, so I agreed to an extra-curricular activity, mainly for fun, as the pay was a pittance."

"Larry and I attended almost every gig in town, from way out in suburbia (including the reputedly dangerous Inala) to the inner city. We interviewed and photographed nearly every musician around the scene at the time, including overseas arrivals, such as *The Yardbirds*."



Larry Zetlin with *The Yardbirds*

Left-to-right: Chris Dreya (bass), Keith Relf (vocals), Jimmy Page (guitar), Jim McCarty (drums), and Larry Zetlin (Go-Set).
(photograph © Frank Neilsen)

"We covered the very popular, though entirely conservative *Battle of the Bands* events at Festival Hall, and were regularly ejected by its eccentric manager, Bert Potts, for daring to photograph off-duty, uniformed police in action; paid by Potts to hurl fans off the stage. The kids would scream their lungs out for performers like Normie Rowe and Johnny Young."

"Brisbane also had a thriving folk music scene, based mainly at *The Folk Centre* in Anne Street. It provided a trouble-free, friendly environment where people could go for a sing-along with the resident band, *The Wayfarers*, or listen to influential musicians such as Margaret Kitamura and Don Henderson. Shayna Bracegirdle and Margaret Roadknight were favourites of the 'folkies'."

"Then out of the blue, the opening of a new club was to have a considerable impact on the cultural landscape of 'sleepy old Brisbane'. On Sunday, 3 March 1968, the FOCO Club opened on the third floor of the Trades Hall building. FOCO was a multifaceted extravaganza incorporating music, poetry, political discussion, film, literature and theatrical performance."



FOCO opening night poster
(scan courtesy Ted Riethmuller)

Many presumed the name FOCO had something to do with folk music. FOCO is a Spanish word meaning focus or centre and is connected to Che Guevara's Foco theory of revolutionary warfare. At the time, Che Guevara emerged as an iconic revolutionary figure shortly after his death at the hands of the Bolivian army and the CIA in October 1967. Guevara had postulated that armed resistance spearheaded by small rebel groups in developing countries ('focoist uprisings') might spark a chain reaction leading to popular rebellion. Throughout its existence, the FOCO Club was decidedly and openly political. It was also a place where you could let your hair down and have some fun.

FOCO was the brainchild of Brian Laver, a prominent leadership figure in the Society For Democratic Action (SDA), which, six months earlier, had been behind one of the most influential demonstrations in a generation, the pivotal 1967 civil liberties march. Laver was a noted 'ideas' person who had risen to prominence as an effective speaker at anti-Vietnam war rallies. In late 1967, Laver was employed as a research assistant by the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council (TLC) under the leadership of Communist Party of Australia (CPA) member Alex MacDonald, who helped Laver make the venture a reality.

The FOCO club began as a joint venture between SDA and the Young Socialist League (YSL), a youth organisation affiliated with the then-Soviet-aligned Communist Party of Australia. The YSL had evolved out of the Eureka Youth League (EYL), formed in Brisbane in 1942. The EYL had been dissolved nationally the year before FOCO's launch, and the earlier youth organisation evolved into the new YSL. FOCO, in turn, absorbed much of the YSL membership as partners in the enterprise.

Another important founding member was the influential and energetic Alan Anderson, a YSL and CPA member and a Plumber's Union delegate to the Brisbane TLC. While others came and went, Alan Anderson was a key coordinator spanning FOCO's entire history. Anderson became President of FOCO, Brian Laver (SDA) became the Secretary, and Roland Hovey (EYL and YSL) the Treasurer. Thus both the trade union and the 'student' (SDA) perspectives were represented. Even though many people directly and indirectly associated with SDA were involved in running FOCO, they did so as individual members of the FOCO collective. They were not directly representing SDA interests or policy.

Alan Anderson reflects:

On a personal note and as a Trade Unionist and a CPA member, I was acutely aware about how remote the labour movement was to young workers and thought how important it would be if we could be part of their joys as well as their troubles. FOCO achieved this connection. The combination of the disparate groups involved was important in ensuring its phenomenal success. (Personal correspondence, 13/9/2012)

The student and SDA contingent provided many of the ideas and key personnel, while the young Socialists were disciplined and hard-working supporters of the project. The SDA had many talented members, including Mitch Thompson, who

was noted for his exceptional organisational and financial skills. Thompson recalls:

The real creativity and energy came from a whole lot of people such as Larry and Di Zetlin, David Guthrie, Bob Daly, Doug Anders and others who came and went. They were the ones who provided the ideas, energy and organised the shows and people (bands etc.). The YSL comrades provided the 'muscle', the arduous setting up of the nuts and bolts. (Personal correspondence, 17/12/2012)

Likewise, Alan Anderson remembers:

Lee Walkington, Rod Pemberthy, Lynda Boland, and lots of Lynda's friends were the core. It was always a vibrant passing parade. There were scores of people, too many to mention, who came and went or performed, but a solid core was necessary week after week to keep the show going. The role played by Alec Macdonald, TLC secretary, was also crucial. (Personal correspondence, 26/9/2012)



FOCO was run as a collective, and this group made all major decisions. There was a relaxed camaraderie among organisers and audiences alike where everyone's point of view would be listened to and respected.



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

(Photo: *Fryer Library / University of Queensland*)

FOCO opened every Sunday at 7 pm. It operated as a membership-based club to avoid restrictive legislation, keeping all Brisbane venues closed on Sundays (except those associated with the churches). Being a registered club, FOCO was exempt from this antiquated, draconian law. It cost one dollar to become a member of the FOCO Club and 70 cents to attend the regular Sunday events. This money was used to offset the operating costs, which included some remodelling at Trades Hall, hiring bands, renting films, and importing radical literature. Right from the outset, the club did very well financially.



Examples of FOCO membership cards

"On the opening night, my initial impression was the bare wooden floors and lack of decor within the building made the whole thing seem pretty spartan, almost forbidding. Members were encouraged to explore simultaneous events which were separated by movable partitions. There was a 'disco' area for the big draw card, LIVE MUSIC, where people could dance and just have fun. We were privileged to have our senses assailed by (ex-Brisbane) Melbourne guitarist Lobby Loyde and his band, *The Wild Cherries*. The place was jumping as the music pumped out, with atmospheric effects provided by the *ACME Light Show Inc.*"

Larry Zetlin recounts:

A FOCO member, a physicist named Doug Rickards, who had worked on the Mariner project with NASA, loaned FOCO a small strobe that he had used in his research. That initial puny light was soon replaced by a large scientific commercial strobe supplied to us by a member of a visiting US research ship that used the strobe to identify floating buoys at sea. I believe the strength of that strobe compares with strobes used on commercial planes today. I am not sure if the ship's captain ever knew that he had inadvertently contributed to Brisbane's cultural life! (Personal correspondence, 12/8/2012)

"In the film-viewing area, people could drop in to watch feature-length movies, including Fellini's *8 ½*, Vittorio De Sica's wonderful *Umberto D*, or short experimental films, many of which were Australian-made. One memorable six-minute experimental film, directed by Albie Thoms (1941-2012) and Bruce Beresford, was *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*, produced in 1963, which starred Lyn Collingwood, Germaine Greer, Terence McMullen and Cam Perry. The film was banned from cinema release and is considered by Metro Magazine to have marked 'the birth of Australian experimental film.' The story centred around human faeces falling from the sky; a little at first, though by the end, it was coming thick and fast, a real shit-storm. It was quite surreal and totally hilarious. Albie Thoms introduced the film the night it was screened at FOCO."

Larry Zetlin, with his experience in band promotion and underground film, took on the role of venue manager and was responsible for the day-to-day running of the club. Zetlin had built an extensive network of music and media contacts through his work with *Go-Set*. Larry explained:

We modelled FOCO on what we thought was happening internationally. My knowledge of the underground music, art, cinema and performance scene(s) was gained by reading imported so-called Underground magazines, such as Rolling Stone, Village Voice, the San Francisco Free Press, etc. (Personal correspondence, 11/9/2012)

Zetlin promoted FOCO during weekly radio broadcasts with Brisbane's most 'switched on' DJ, 4BC's Tony Macarthur, a great promoter of interesting new music. Macarthur eventually left Australia to work with a pirate station, Radio Luxembourg.

Word about the FOCO experiment spread quickly, and large crowds started to arrive. Typical attendances were between 500 and 800 people per night. Local musicians got to show off their talents, and the popularity of FOCO grew with the regular appearances of the resident band, *The Coloured Balls*.



The Coloured Balls on the set of "Everybody In" at QTQ Channel 9 studios. Left-to-right: Peter Miles (drums), Bob Dames (bass), Mick "Sam" Shannon (vocals), Mick Hadley (vocals/harmonica/guitar), Robbie van Delft (guitar/flute). Sitting far right is 4BC's Greg Jeffrey, one of the show's presenters.

The popular band *Max Merritt and the Meteors* made special trips from Sydney to play at FOCO, which further boosted its reputation as a great venue. Larry Zetlin recalls that the crowds at FOCO swelled to close to 2000 people when Max Merritt played:

We fitted the greater numbers in at Trades Hall by opening all the areas into one large space and cancelling movies and folk areas. The numbers were even greater when FOCO held free concerts in the city botanical gardens. (Personal correspondence, 12/11/2012)

FOCO

SENSATIONAL EXCLUSIVE

MAX MERRITT
AND THE METEORS

SAT., 15 MARCH — ALL NIGHT

SUN., 16 MARCH — ALL NIGHT

SAT., 22 MARCH — ALL NIGHT

SUN., 23 MARCH — ALL NIGHT

At last the return of Australia's best group ever to Foco. Don't miss the incredible gutsy soul sound of Maxy, the King and the Meteors, on the last trip to Brisbane before leaving Australia for the American campus circuit.

FOCO

TRADES HALL BRISBANE

Alan Anderson notes that as the club grew in popularity:

*FOCO became a real threat to commercial discothèques, nightclubs, hotels, church groups and the Young Liberals. Sometimes, whole disenchanted Young Liberal branches arrived. FOCO was having a tremendous effect on the Establishment.*²

"The poetry-reading area was not a huge crowd-puller, though it was attended by contributors of varying degrees of seriousness and talent. Actor Jack Thompson, Tom Shapcott and Graham Rowlands all read there, along with many others. Readings of works by international writers were also presented, including Dylan Thomas, Günter Grass, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Bob Dylan, and Allen Ginsberg."

Larry Zetlinrecalls:

Another unusual speaker was the Australian newspaper's then-resident cartoonist, Bruce Petty, who drew and gave away large cartoons drawn on white butcher paper. He drew a large crowd (no pun intended)! (Personal correspondence, 13/9/2012)

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



One of the folk bands performing at FOCO

(Photo: Tribune, September 1970)

"Elsewhere, there was a coffee-making area and a forum for political discussion. Speakers included Ted Baldwin, the leader of the Queensland Teachers' Union, and Brian Laver, who spoke about his first-hand experiences of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. Public forums were held on such diverse subjects as the U.S. Civil Rights movement, rock music, the global press, Brisbane architecture and the environment, Australian folklore, Catholicism, Transcendental Meditation, the Vietnam War, and the European Student/Worker Movement. Audience participation was encouraged during such events, leading to spirited discussion."

The theatrical performance troupe, *The Tribe* (originally *The Dire Tribe*), led by Doug Anders, consisted of players from the University of Queensland who would enact *avant-garde* 'happenings' for the delight and mystification of the audience. This experimental group gave performances of Samuel Beckett's 'dramaticule' *Come and Go*, as well as Harold Pinter's *The Black and White*, the controversial *Motel* by Jean-Claude van Itallie, and Wymark's *Coda*. Audience participation was encouraged.

The theatre troupe had originally formed for the production of Jack Thompson's *Alice Is*, which was staged at the Avalon Theatre in St. Lucia in 1966. *Alice Is* was conceived as a theatrical musical extravaganza featuring the music of *The Wild Cherries*, the band featured at FOCO's opening night launch, together with another band called *The Rabbit Farm*. Tragically, a court injunction was issued in response to a neighbour's complaint about the "noise" the Cherries produced during their first afternoon's rehearsal. The show opened minus *The Wild Cherries*, who were an integral part of the musical extravaganza.



Copyright Frank Neilsen 2012

Jack Thompson (left) with the members of a purpose-made band called *The Rabbit Farm*, which played (at significantly reduced volume) without *The Wild Cherries* for the production of *ALICE IS*. Lead guitarist Dennis Urrey (with hat) and seated on the floor is Peter Miles, drums, from *The Coloured Balls*. (Photograph © Frank Neilsen)

The books, posters, and other paraphernalia for sale at FOCO were a comprehensive collection of revolutionary material dealing with the situations in countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, China and Czechoslovakia, which was then experiencing the 'Prague Spring'. In addition, on sale for the first time in Brisbane were global 'underground' newspapers like *The Village Voice*, London's *Peace News*, and the *International Times*. Larry Zetlin recounts this story about FOCO's opening night:

Brian Laver, without consultation with the group, set up a table selling various leftist books from 'his' Red & Black bookshop. I was appalled, as I thought this would drive away the opening-nighters who were there predominantly for the music. I was wrong! The books on sale added a frisson of 'danger' and excitement and intrigued most of the new members. (Personal correspondence, 8/8/2012)

The Sydney-based theatrical group, *The Human Body*, visited Brisbane in October 1968 to participate in an event called *Vietnam Environment*, coordinated by John (Johnny) Allen. Over the course of a week, *The Human Body* worked with *The Tribe* and other participants using all the available spaces in the building.

Johnny Allen recalls:

*At its centre was an American young-anarchist anti-Vietnam script called 'American Atrocities in Vietnam'. Tribe performed a series of Vietnam sketches. A boy in a clear plastic cylinder of ox blood wiped the blood across the plastic view people had of his prison before breaking out to spread ox blood among the crowd. Then, audience members were extracted, put through an interrogation box, and either offered a lucky dip or pushed onto the fire escape. The pop band played an abstract sound poem based on the siren of an ambulance, and 'The Tribe' improvised an interpretive dance under strobe lights. Chants of 'stop the war' and 'leave Vietnam' were passed around and picked up.*⁴



The FOCO 'Vietnam Environment', a special night held on Sunday 6 October 1968 (Publication: FOCO Collective)

As to the significance of FOCO in a broader context, Larry Zetlin comments:

We modelled FOCO on what we thought was happening internationally. In early 1969, when Di and I travelled to live in London via the west coast USA, we realised that we were far in advance of what we saw overseas. Our cultural cringe had caused us to overreach and exceed what was actually happening overseas. (Personal correspondence, 11/9/2012)

Overwhelmed by the large membership, FOCO suspended taking new members on more than one occasion. The club first closed its membership rolls in mid-July 1968, having reached some 2,500 members. This decision was based on overcrowding and difficulties in effectively administering such a large number of members. Membership was again closed in August 1968 when the numbers reached around 3,200.

FOCO published a weekly newsletter mailed to over 3,000 members, advising them of the upcoming Sunday's events or 'happenings'. Each newsletter featured interesting, often humorous, cover designs and graphics, many created by the talented artist Bob Daly. It costs over two cents each to print and mail a newsletter to every member. It took about 100 work hours each week to fold and sort them into post-code order (a requirement for bulk mailing). This work was done by a large working bee every Wednesday night at *The Cellar*, with the bulk of the labour provided by the CPA youth from the YSL.



Cover page of a FOCO newsletter (Publication: FOCO Collective)

SDA's headquarters, *The Cellar*, was already established in the former Roma Street Markets prior to the launch of FOCO. *The Cellar* became the organisational and promotional centre for FOCO. It was also a more intimate venue hosting events such as drama groups, film nights and folk sessions. It was promoted as an extension of FOCO's activities in an environment "*unhampered by noise and great crushes*" to distinguish it from the main venue.

Next door to *The Cellar* was the SDA-financed *The Red and The Black Bookshop*, which was periodically damaged in police raids and Neo-Nazi attacks. On one occasion, police broke into the bookshop while pursuing demonstrators who had taken refuge inside. The break-in caused \$6,000 worth of damages. In April 1969, a suspicious fire also caused significant damage, mainly from water damage. An issue of SDA's newsletter (*Student Guerrilla*) described state police "*paying almost daily visits*" to the bookshop "*usually without giving any reason for their appearance, and always without a warrant.*"

On 27 May 1969, after the bookshop had moved to new premises in the Elizabeth Arcade, police seized fifteen posters from the shop. Thirteen of these were reproductions of a drawing by the 19th-century artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872 - 1898) called '*Lysistrata Haranguing the Athenian Women*'. The proprietors of the bookshop, Brian Laver, Mitch Thompson, and David Guthrie, faced obscenity charges for displaying this print in public. In a Brisbane Magistrate's Court hearing on 7 July 1969, the prints were declared obscene. Despite an appeal to the High Court, the bookshop was forced to pay a substantial fine.

Five months after the launch of FOCO, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen became the premier of Queensland on 8 August 1968. From the outset, FOCO was regarded with suspicion by the reactionary forces that ran Queensland. During a late-night sitting of Federal Parliament on 12 September 1968, M.H.R. Don Cameron, Liberal backbencher for Griffith, delivered a speech attacking the FOCO Club. The following day's *Courier-Mail* gave in-depth coverage of the address under the headline "*Drugs, women claim on Foco*". The article reported Cameron saying that "*Marihuana and Methedrine are procurable for the asking*" at FOCO. He added that its "*communist or almost-communist*" leadership could "*arrange a young woman for a whole night in a matter of seconds*" for a standard asking price of \$10. He further proclaimed that FOCO was "*Australia's most evil and repugnant nightspot*".⁵

According to Alan Anderson:

*The Cameron allegations did have an effect on FOCO, and numbers did drop off. His allegations were like the attacks on the Moratorium, hysterical, crude and untrue, but like the Goebbels lie technique, some of it sticks.*²

The FOCO collective responded to the attack in their newsletter, assuring parents that their teenagers were perfectly safe attending FOCO events. Attendances, however, dropped to as low as 200 per night when a minimum of 300 patrons was required to break even.



In response to Cameron's ridiculous allegations, posters and stickers were displayed all over Brisbane reassuring patrons that "*Foco Lives.*"
(Publication: FOCO Collective)



A FOCO newsletter promoting the second appearance of Lobby Loyde and The Wild Cherries. The band played to reduced crowds at the regular FOCO Sunday night event at the height of the Cameron controversy (Publication: FOCO Collective)

'Politicos' in SDA were expressing concerns that the political intention of FOCO was being lost. For them, FOCO was no longer "*aiding the revolutionary movement*"; instead, they saw FOCO as "*channelling potential revolutionary people into non-revolutionary activity... of a cultural, unorganised nature*". This theoretical dilemma saw SDA mostly pull out of FOCO activities by the end of 1968. The newsletter of 26 February 1969 (Vol. 2, No. 9) announced, "*FOCO Is Dead*". While this did not mark the end of FOCO, it was part of its final decline.



"But we cried FOCO Lives" (Publication: FOCO Collective)

The dissolution of SDA as an organisation came about in April 1969. The old SDA quickly reformed as the new Revolutionary Socialist Student Alliance (RSSA), wishing to "*pass from a protest organisation to a radical or revolutionary movement*" to build a libertarian-Marxist political group rather than a social club. SDA's departure proved to be a turning point in FOCO's history, marking the start of its eventual decline.

Alan Anderson laments:

The trade union movement had remained indifferent practically all the way through. How could they fail to comprehend that something was happening, something more than words or insignificant acts, but something that many young people were absorbed in and identified with? ²

The FOCO club's alliance with the trade unions was becoming increasingly strained. The reformist nature of the old-guard institutions did not sit well with the aims and activities of the energetic, more radical youth. Moreover, the union

movement was concerned that the controversial publicity FOCO was attracting would harm what they saw as their respectable position in the community.

The 1969 Labour Day procession, traditionally headed by ALP leaders in the political and industrial arena, was joined by young radicals, many of them FOCO members. Alan Anderson explains:

*The aim was to present...a genuine desire of young radicals to transform into something effective a Labour Day, which had in the past relied upon Punch and Judy shows and ice cream for its revolutionary content. In short, put politics back into Labour Day.*²



The red-and-black flag-waving "student" contingent in the 1969 Brisbane May Day procession
(Photo: Grahame Garner / Fryer Library, Brisbane)

The young radicals marched with red and black flags and chanted slogans. Then, they sat down for dramatic effect and suddenly jumped up and ran, arms linked at full speed with flags flowing. They also harangued the then Federal Opposition leader, Gough Whitlam.

As a result, the leaders of the labour movement seized this opportunity to dissociate themselves from the radical youth movement. TLC president, Jack Egerton, decried:

*...misguided way-out individuals...subjecting Labor leaders to rude and unwarranted personal attack...responsible trade union officials have no intention of allowing a group of scrubby, confused individuals who are unable to differentiate between civil liberties and anarchy to cause dissent in the trade union movement.*⁶

Alan Anderson remembers:

*FOCO was an ideal platform from which union leadership could express their point of view. In the 15 months that FOCO lived, only ten officials attended, and only three spoke, and even then, it was on our initiative. I believe that FOCO was murdered by a trade union movement steeped in conservatism.*²



Youthful exuberance in the 1969 May Day procession
(Photo: Grahame Garner / Fryer Library, Brisbane)

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

Despite the blow, FOCO struggled on. While searching for a new venue, regular weekly FOCO events were suspended for about six weeks. Finally, through Peg Penberthy, the AHEPA hall in Boundary Street, West End, was secured. AHEPA HALL was far from an ideal venue, but it was the best option available.

Alan Anderson recounts:

In the days leading up to what became a one-night stand, we received a number of serious threats that were passed on to us by Alec Macdonald, who was always a tower of support to FOCO from beginning to end. Nevertheless, we opened with the slogan FOCO LIVES. The night at AHEPA Hall was well attended, but before the night began, I told those present that a police raid was expected and that if people wished to leave, they should. Few people left, and our resident group, The Coloured Balls, began playing. I observed a large contingent of police drilling about 100 metres further down Boundary Street. Back inside, I repeated my warning, but everyone stayed. Then the police came in and began dragging people out. The band stopped, then began playing 'We'll sing you a song, and it won't take long, all coppers are bastards'. Perhaps this surreal experience convinced me that our time had come. (Personal correspondence, 29/9/2012)

FOCO's key supporter in the TLC, Alex Macdonald, died suddenly from a heart attack on 18 August 1969. This unexpected tragedy was another setback for FOCO.

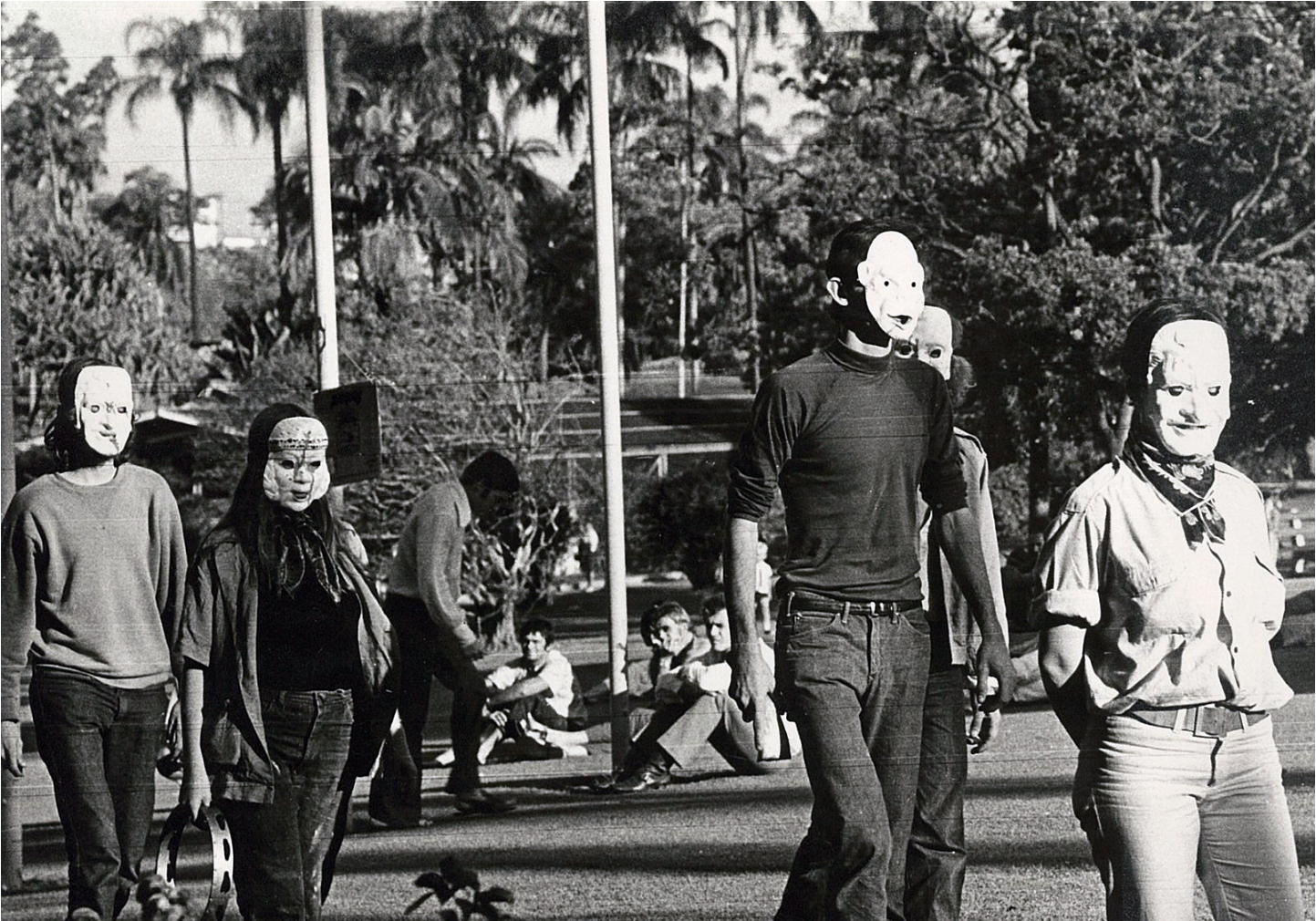
The search for a venue continued with an attempt to rent part of the Queensland Waterside Workers' Club. While the union leadership was open to the idea, the initiative was not supported at the rank-and-file level, so FOCO remained venueless.

Alan Anderson remembers:

In September 1969, I organised Trade Union Youth Week, as we had done the previous year, with an open-air concert held in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens. This was the last time an event was held under the banner of FOCO. (Personal correspondence, 7/9/2012)



Poster for Trade Union Youth Week, 1968
(Photo: Bob Daly, poster designer with Norma Chalmers)



Street theatre performance during Trade Union Youth Week
(Photograph courtesy Lynda Boland)

Facing ongoing financial difficulties, their base of support eroded, and their organisers exhausted, the decision was made to close FOCO permanently. In September of 1969, the grand experiment finally drew to a close. Yet the memory and the ideal lived on.

Alan Anderson reflects:

FOCO remains the most significant event I (have ever) participated in. FOCO may have been slightly ahead of its time for the Australian political and cultural climate, but it was a creative jump in the right direction with lessons that should have value for the future. (Personal correspondence, 29/9/2012)

Mitch Thompson:

Because this was a real collective effort of a loose grouping, it probably was always going to have a limited life. But what a quality life, an impact in Brisbane well beyond its short existence. (Personal correspondence, 17/12/2012)

John Stanwell, an organiser who kept many aspects of the FOCO tradition alive in later endeavours, reflects:

FOCO was an amazing confluence of art and politics, which made it both attractive to young people and a threat to their parents (which is largely why it was closed down). Most importantly, FOCO showed us we could successfully run large and complex ventures that were successful in both cultural and financial terms, which exposed a new audience to radical ideas; and which made a profit that we could use on more political activities. (Personal correspondence, 8/8/2012)

Stanwell acknowledges FOCO as the source of inspiration for the renowned 'Joint Effort' events during the 1970s and early 1980s, which raised substantial amounts of money for political activities.

The endemic corruption presided over by Bjelke-Petersen was eventually exposed by the Fitzgerald Inquiry (1987 - 1989). This ended the National Party's 32-year run as the government of Queensland. In addition, three former ministers and a police commissioner (who also lost his knighthood) were jailed for their involvement in dirty dealings, which had thrived throughout the long reign of the National Party.

Lee Walkington, a regular worker at the club every week, reflects:

We were aware at the time that it was something unique, and I, for one, worked hard to make it a success each Sunday night. It was true, though, that by the end of the period, the 'hands and feet' activists, of which I was one, were left worn out by it all. It took a lot of work to set it up and an even greater amount of work to clean up after it was over. (Personal correspondence, 11/11/2012)

Lee Walkington concludes:

Even today, some 40+ years on, I know of quite a few people who credit their interest in politics and art and radical culture to FOCO. (Personal correspondence, 26/11/2012)

FOCO LIVES!

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

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Frank Neilsen, Brisbane-born, was employed as a commercial/industrial photographer during the 1960s. He studied art and photography at Brisbane Technical College, was a member of Poets, Essayists and Novelists (P.E.N.) in the 1960s, and was a member of the Miscellaneous Workers Union. Frank moved to Melbourne in 1973, where he operated his own photographic studio. He holds the degree of Bachelor of Information Technology and is a member of the Brisbane Discussion Circle.

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The Brisbane Discussion Circle (BDC) is an online group that exchanges information and resources about the events and activities spanning the period 1960 to 1985. It was formed by political and cultural activists in an effort to develop and preserve the historical legacy of this era. The circle consists of a diverse group of individuals who achieved amazing things in Brisbane during this time. The aim is to preserve our history for posterity with sophistication and accuracy. This presentation is an example of a document arising from such a joint effort by BDC members. Requests for membership can be made via the BDC website.

<<http://bdc.radicaltimes.info>> or by e-mail <manager@radicaltimes.info>

References:

- 1** The use of the first person singular refers to the experiences and recollections of Frank Neilsen. The historical research and interviews for the article were conducted by Peter Gray in participation with the *Brisbane Discussion Circle*.
- 2** Anderson, Alan. "The Foco Story" Tribune (newspaper), 2 September 1970.
- 3** Brian Laver interviewed by Andrew Stafford (6/11/2002), Andrew Stafford Collection (Fryer Library UQFL440).
- 4** Guthrie, Adrian John. "When the way out was in: avant-garde theatre in Australia, 1965-1985" Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, 1996.
- 5** Courier-Mail "Drugs, Women claim on Foco", 13 September 1968
- 6** Courier-Mail "Student Radicals Never Again at Labor Day", 16 May 1969.