

## REFLECTIONS ON AQUARIUS AND BEYOND

by Johnny Allen (28 May, 2013)

Katie Cawcutt and Benny Zable of the Aquarius Foundation organised a full year program of events to mark the 40th Anniversary of the Nimbin Aquarius Festival in 1973.

A highlight event timed to mark the dates of the original festival was *Aquarius and Beyond*, a two day confest created by Rob Garbutt and his team from Southern Cross University, which provided a long overdue and much needed reappraisal of the achievements and legacy of the festival.

Starting with a conversation between Lismore Mayor, Jenny Dowell, and festival co-directors Graeme Dunstan and Johnny Allen, many of the original Aquarians reflected on the festival and its impacts on their lives including songman Paul Joseph, Bauxhau Stone, Alethea Scantlebury, Katie Cawcutt, Benny Zable, Vernon Treweeke, Neville Jennings, Mareid Sullivan and John Jiggins, who read from his novel based on the festival Rehearsals for the Apocalypse.

A very moving session with original locals Daisy Stewart and Rollie Couch, interviewed by Jo Kijas, reflected on the changes wrought by the festival, with many in the audience remembering fondly the milkshakes, hamburgers and toasted sandwiches dispersed from Daisy's café, with her generous spirit embracing all comers as a warm and welcoming aunty.

Mandie Hale reflected on the challenge of creating a viable counter culture, and convened a panel of young Aquarians to reflect on growing up in the community. Michael Balderstone detailed the local legacy of the festival, Christopher Dean spoke eloquently on the shift of planetary consciousness, and Natalie Meyer outlined the considerable achievements of the Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre, including the exciting current project of the 7 Sibley Street Sustainable Living Hub.

A series of presentations by academics from various universities brought depth and rigour to topics ranging from the activist legacy of the festival, to its wider impacts on intentional communities, land use and Aquarian ideas of property.

All in all, some 40 sessions including nearly 50 speakers examined the Aquarius legacy from many of its multi-facets, providing a wide-ranging and engrossing evaluation.

A series of related events added depth and colour to the experience, including a great exhibition and book *Rainbow Dreaming: Tales From the Age of Aquarius* edited by Harsha Prabhu and published by the Rainbow Collective, an exhibition in the Nimbin shopfronts on Nimbin Innovations compiled by Graham Irvine, a welcome to the 'Aged of Aquarius' that included a screening by Mick Glasheen of some of the original Bush Video tapes shot at the festival, and a screening of the final chapter of the *Woodstock Downunder* documentary series by the indefatigable Woodstock Museum team of Nathan Koenig and Shelli Lipton.

The climax of the whole event was a sensuous Masquerade Ball in the Nimbin Hall, with a great line-up of musicians including Paul Joseph, Mic Conway who played at the first festival and has turned into the wonderful old vaudevillian that he always played, and a 35 year reunion of the Blue Skies Orchestra organised and fronted by the gorgeous Ruth Miller. Catering was done with style and elan by the *Radical Fairies*, a local gay commune. The Hall was packed to the rafters by original and current Aquarians in an explosion of colour, music and joy – proof, if ever it was needed, that Nimbin sure knows how to party!

But as ever with Nimbin, the true festival was outside in the street. What struck me was how vibrant and successful Nimbin has become, with every space in the main street renovated, decorated and buzzing with life, with a constant stream of locals and visitors – truly, a never-ending festival. The old RSL Hall that served as the Media Centre for the Festival continues to serve as the headquarters for *Birth and Beyond*. The old Tomato Sauce Building that served as our food co-op is now the thriving Hemp Embassy, alongside the Nimbin Hall with echoes of past performances and celebrations dating back to the festival.

But that is just the beginning. Scratch beneath the surface and you find grand dreams and visions – Benny Zable with his vision of the Nimbin Communiversity, Katie Cawcutt with her vision of Nimbin as the ultimate festival site, and the wonderfully impressive community centre with their newest project of the 7 Sibley Street eco house. And then the amazing Djanbung Gardens of the Permaculture Centre, quietly transforming the land as a centre for learning and celebration, alongside Robyn Francis' visionary Landscape Concept for a proposed village sub-division on the old festival grounds – surely a sacred site for Nimbin.

The event was noted by the media, led by the *Northern Star* in Lismore and the *Byron Bay Echo* and picked up by local television, and eventually relayed to *ABC Radio National*, *ABC Television* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. All good publicity, but more importantly, a repositioning of Nimbin in the eyes of the media. They tend to go back to their files as a starting point for new stories, and *Aquarius and Beyond* has placed some positive stories at the top of the files.

So, what beyond *Aquarius and Beyond*, or as we said in 1973, After Nimbin, What?

Nimbin has become a rite of passage for many young people from all over Australia and overseas, coming in their droves in search of the idealism, values and inspiration of the original Aquarius Festival. In the intervening forty years since the festival, many have devoted their lives to materialising that vision, and in the process have created a unique and very special place – as Michael Balderstone says, if it were in India, it would be seen as a holy place.

I know that the process over the years has often been a struggle, and that Nimbin, like anywhere else, has its ongoing challenges. However, I think something important happened in the town in the last week, hopefully a powerful re-affirmation and rebirth of the Aquarian values that have nourished and sustained it, so that the grand dreams and visions of the community can continue to grow and prosper as we now look forward to the 50th Anniversary of the Aquarius Festival in 2023.

Johnny Allen  
28 May, 2013