



GOLDEN DAYS OF GRUNGE

IT WAS A CREATIVE EXPLOSION IN CULTURE AND MUSIC. AND ONE PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURED IT ALL

By Ross Bilton

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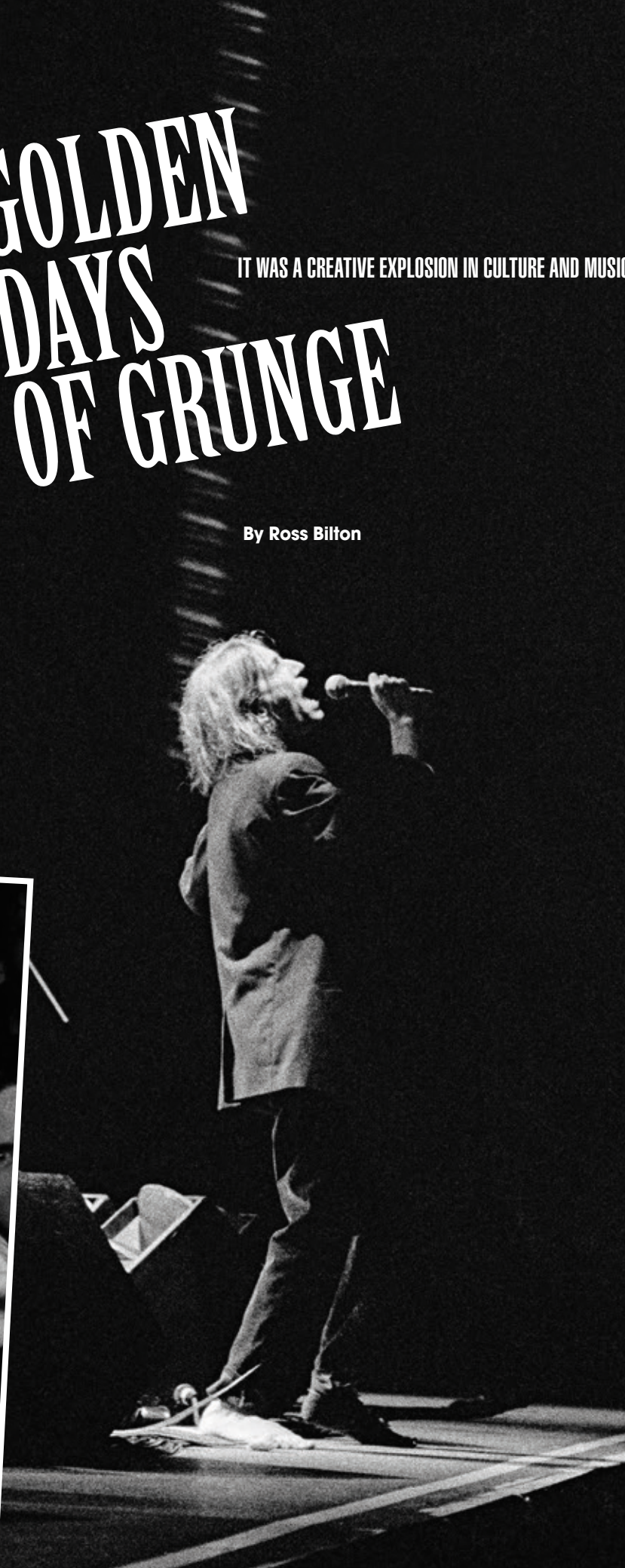
ophie Howarth calls it *Homage to Chicks*. It's a collection of 126 images from her career as a rock 'n' roll photographer in the 1990s and 2000s. These were golden years for music in Australia, and for Howarth personally: in the early '90s she was fresh out of the National Art School in Sydney, and the music

scene was *her* scene: at gigs and festivals she was among her own tribe. Howarth was the official photographer for the Big Day Out, she worked for record labels and toured with bands, and she turned her camera on it all with a forensic, insider's gaze, to document this slice of social history.

Homage to Chicks is presented as a single artwork, stretching across 17m of gallery space in a gigantic visual narrative. The idea for the piece, which riffs on the subject of female empowerment, came to Howarth during lockdown in Sydney. She picked the 126 images from her archive, and arranged them together in an aesthetically pleasing way, in a creative flurry that took merely one day. "I just turned everything off, sat down and went for it," she laughs. You can see the entire artwork at Sydney's Head On photo festival, which opens on November 4. Here, we're showcasing a handful of the images to whet your appetite. Perhaps you'll look at them with nostalgia as you recognise the faces and fashions of that era. Perhaps you'll like the fine-art aesthetic – the use of grainy, black-and-white film, say – that Howarth brought to rock 'n' roll photography. And no doubt you'll feel the energy and youthful joie de vivre that are captured in these images, and sigh, and think, *Yup, I was young once too*.

Why focus on festivals, in particular? Because a strange kind of magic happens at events such as the Big Day Out, Splendour in the Grass and Homebake, Howarth says. For a day or two, punters step out of their ordinary lives and into this other world, an alternate reality ruled by great

Joy: PJ Harvey moments before going on stage, top; Silverchair fans; Patti Smith





Top row, from left: crowd-surfing at the Big Day Out in Sydney, 1999; backstage with Bardot; Charlotte Hatherley of Ash; Courtney Love; Jessica Mauboy at the Arias; Alison Galloway of Smudge
Middle row: Triple J interviewing Screaming Femmes and Powderfinger, 1999; Sarah Blasko; Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill at Summersault; Fergie from the Black Eyed Peas

Bottom row, from left: Beth Orton; Big Day Out on the Gold Coast, 1997; The Grates; Shellie Morris and Yin Yin in the Top End; The Grates' funky shoes; White Stripes drummer Meg White at the Big Day Out in Adelaide

Social history: from top, Crowded House's farewell concert, 1996; Kim Bowers of Spdfigh; audience members at the Crowded House gig



music, hedonistic pleasure and the camaraderie of thousands of like-minded, up-for-it strangers (let's conveniently forget what the toilets were like, though). Howarth was especially interested in the dynamic between the performers – international stars like Patti Smith, Courtney Love, Fergie and Beth Orton; homegrown heroes such as Sarah Blasko – and the crowd. “There’s a binding energy between them,” she says. “The audience are co-creators, absolutely.”

The live music scene, shut down by the pandemic, has now awoken again. But Howarth, 51, has long since turned to other subjects – including Mongolia, which she has visited many times in recent years to photograph the ancient practice of hunting with golden eagles. “I started to transition out of music photography in my mid-thirties,” she says. “I always thought, ‘I don’t want to be a 40-year-old shooting music festivals, it wouldn’t feel right.’” But looking through her archive, she can’t help but wonder. Perhaps, in her fifties, she might have a unique take on today’s rock ‘n’ roll scene? “It wouldn’t be my own generation, but still...” She pauses, thinks about this. And just for a moment there’s a twinkle in her eye. ●