



Meet Splendour's Artist in Residence, Lee McConnell

By Vaughan Deadly

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Photos by Ashi Arizona

Lee McConnell, 31 of Byron Bay, is this year's SITG artist in residence.

What does that mean exactly? Well, it means he gets his own gold-plated caravan in the backstage VIP area, complete with a fully stocked bar and a personal orangutan named 'Pongo' who knows how to make the world's best margaritas. It also means that he is the man responsible for your entire visual experience at Splendour in 2019, from the posters to the archway to the installations to the beer cozies to you name it. Lee got the gig because right now he's one of the most prolific and recognised rock 'n' roll artists in the game, having designed covers and posters for the likes of Dune Rats, DZ

Death Rays, Peking Duck, Jack River and a whole lot more. So why don't we meet the man already?

You grew up in Foster, but then moved to Sydney to chase your dream of working in a Chinese restaurant, right?

That's right. I worked in a Chinese Restaurant called Happy Garden, smoked a bit and did nothing much else, really. I was living my dream but then one day I woke up with this strange feeling. It was a sense of being unfulfilled. So, I figured I may as well study some graphic design; I did that and, not long after, I scored an internship at Mambo. I worked for them for free for about three months before getting a full-time role as an illustrator. Not long after, they moved to the city and I went with them; stayed on for six years, and by the time I left I was the head art director. It was during that period I began moonlighting designing posters and album covers for mates' bands, and that was a lot of fun, but I had no idea it'd lead to where I am now: designing album covers and rock and roll posters for a living.

Could you always draw?

Back when I was three I used to draw Batman, because I loved Batman, but when I was going through High School I didn't draw much at all outside of art class. I wasn't that into it. I knew I could do it, but I wanted to go outside and play with my mates and chuck rocks at street signs and swing around in circles on clotheslines and stuff. Then when I started studying graphic design that's when I began to draw again. I felt like I got a lot better very fast at Mambo because I was drawing every day. The 10,000 hours rule in full effect.

Were you familiar with the whole history of the Mambo art collective right back to their early days when you started work there?

Oh yeah, of course. I've always loved Reg Mombassa and Jeff Raglus. They had a big impact on my art and style I think and I definitely copied them a little at the start (laughs). I think most young Australian artists would be in some way inspired by those guys for sure.

A lot of your work has its roots in classic cartoons. Which cartoons set you off when you were a kid?

Oh man, I love cartoons! Ren & Stimpy and Rocko's Modern life. The more off-beat and weird the more I loved them. And then Jeff Raglus released a book called Snorky the Wave Puncher, that was one of the first books I got given by my parents, and it had a massive impact on me, too: a book of rad art that was a story about Snorky... a puncher of waves.

I love how cartoons furtively introduce kids to horror, too. Like early Ren & Stimpy has some wild storylines and hectic hallucinogenic illustrations, and I think that shit is healthy for a child's mind.

Popping veins and high anxiety and beads of sweat and rotten black teeth and all that stuff... Yeah, it's so true, man, there's a really interesting contrast at play when you have something that looks childish and naïve and bold and playful and then you fuel it with all these dimension-warping situations and outrageous predicaments. They're just so accessible too, and it's for that reason I think cartoons are the first place where a young mind gets challenged to think way outside of the box. They act like fertilizer on a kid's imagination. They make everything seem possible and fun.

Well, let's talk about where you're at today. Do you think it's fair to say the rock 'n' roll poster artist is experiencing a bit of a renaissance? Not to say there hasn't been some incredible shit over the past decade, but there seems to be a community of crew whose work is instantly recognisable in the Australian music scene at the moment.

I agree with that for sure. I mean, with music there are so many opportunities to keep making stuff, and maybe there was a period where bands were touring and just using the album cover for their tour poster and all their visual roll-outs, and that gets a little repetitive; but what Jack Irvine is doing with Skegss is insane, and there are a bunch of crew all creating amazing stuff for a lot of great young Aussie bands. And then you've got guys like Ben Brown and he's still doing the sickest poster art ever.

He's the godfather, man. When I think of Ben Brown, I just have so many iconic posters in my head.

Nirvana, Cosmic Psychos, Big Day Out, Pixies... You name it he's done them all.

It must be a great feeling to compliment music with your own creations, because those elements do tie together to mark a point in history.

Well, I loved having mates in bands and helping them out with their covers and posters, and in the same way that music has no parameters and no rules about what you can and can't do or say, I feel the same way about the art that compliments that. You can push the limits and not have to be conservative with your thoughts or imagination, and then on top of all that it's just insane fun to let your imagination run wild.

What about the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, mate? Cause if there's one group of animals out there who can out-party a bunch of fucks in a band, it's probably artists.

I've been pretty lucky to get a fair bit of work with some great bands who don't mind a good time, and, yeah, you might end up going to shows and enjoying a few after parties and, sure, you might end up partying as much as they do, but the good thing for me is that my job is long done by the time all that shit comes around (laughs), so I can

pretty much send it guilt free. If you work hard you play hard, as the saying goes.

Over the past few years, Splendour has really put the foot down in terms of making sure there's a serious representation of art, artists, exhibitions, and an all-around visual experience that encapsulates the entire fezzy. What's your involvement with this year's SITG been like?

I've always loved that element of Splendour, and it's something I've looked forward to seeing every year. And you're right, the past few years have been incredible. The themes and the artists they've included have really set the tone for the week. So, to be asked to be this year's artist in residence is a huge honour. In regard to what I'll be bringing this year, I've started experimenting with photographic digital shit, and pushing the envelope to create these worlds from my dreams; I'm moving away from pencil on paper, and venturing into dimensions that might exist somewhere else in the universe.

Different dimensions, dude! That's what I'm talking about! Have you partaken in any psilocybin ceremonies to help fire up the portal glands?

I couldn't say for sure, but at a recent full moon drum circle in the Wreck car park I did somehow manage to end up on Mars, where I met some little alien dudes and we discussed art and creativity for around nine light-years. I couldn't say for sure whether any of it influenced my work—or it even happened—but it definitely felt real at the time.

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