

6 Anno domini 1974

I left home at age 18 in 1974. I was going away to continue my studies some five hours away by jet liner down south from the equator near which I had spent my life until then. Whilst I had been familiar with western and particularly English culture and food through schooling, books, movies and friends from the families of expatriates, this was going to be a big change as because I was going to live in a Western society.

The life I was about to leave for a great many years (thirty five as it turned out) was one where I had just completed two terms of Lower Sixth form at St Thomas secondary school where I was a Senior Prefect (and in Green Road school before that, where I was the Head Boy); was just a few months into a relationship with someone who later I was to marry and have an only son with, was more interested in extracurricular activities at school such as dramatics, photography and debating than in actual study; and I was to be the first amongst my siblings to move away from home. One felt at the time, that everything was under control as much as a youth of 18 could be who was still living at home. School was basically where one's life at the time centred around and everything there was under control (except for studies) as I was always in a group which found itself leading one thing or another.

Then, one moves to a different country all alone except for one's one friend from school. Almost everything was back to zero and one started again – from making new friends to learning how to get around and to do the mundane things of life: self-sufficiency in food, washing, budgeting and basically looking after one's well-being (who is going to make you your favourite soup when you fall sick?). I did not feel like that again until fifteen years later when I was stranded in Brazil (see "Last mango in São Paulo"). But, I have moved ahead of myself here.

When in Lower Sixth form, my parents had asked me to start applying for a place for pre-university study in Australia. Without much thought, Perth was chosen maybe because it



Downtown Perth in the mid-70s

was closest to Kuching (5 hours flight versus 8 hours flight to Sydney). It was an odd choice because my father would have been more familiar with Sydney where he went for training in visual aids in 1956. Perth, with its Mediterranean climate of wet winters and dry summers (we learnt that in geography in school, thank you, Mrs. Anita Lai) has a mild climate and it had a relatively small population compared to the other Australian capital

cities. So, it was going to be a rather tame place. Of course, at the time decisions were made little did any of us know how long my association with Australia and Perth was going to be. For all intents and purposes, I was only going there to study for a few years.

In 1974, Gough Whitlam was in his second year in office as the Prime Minister of Australia, having led his Labor Party into power after sweeping the Liberal Party off the government benches in parliament which they had occupied (and there ossified, many opine) for the two previous decades. Whitlam and the movement which supported him saw in significant economic, legal and cultural change in Australia. And so, it was an exciting time for the populace in general whether or not one supported Whitlam or the opposition. It was the time of flared trousers, platform shoes, sideburns, long hair and colourful body shirts. In another visible cutting of its bonds to mother England, the nation's road signs were switched over from imperial to metric measurement in July. There were discussions on how to pronounce the prefix "kilo" – as in whether it should be "keelo-metre" (that is how I say it) or "keelometre".



*Edward Gough Whitlam
1916 – 2014
21st PM of Australia
1972 - 1975*

The great enabler of social change brought in by the Whitlam government was free tertiary education for all who wanted it. This allowed many from different strata of life to go to university basically unbound by financial ability. For those overseas, it meant that those families which could not afford to send their children to Australia to study could now do so (we are thankful, Gough). In Malaysia, the New Economic Policy (NEP) which introduced a quota system based on race for entry into higher education had just started operating in 1973 when I underwent the selection procedure to get a place to go study tuition-fee-free in Australia. It was insurance against the coming disadvantage due to the NEP, in getting one of the few 6th Form (Cambridge A Level) places if one were a Chinese like myself. It is a great irony that racially-discriminatory socio-economic government policy as it affected me was overcome by moving to another country where socio-economic discrimination was removed.

My good friend Lim Chee Beng⁶ from Green Road secondary school and I went through the selection and shared news about the process. I remember typing my own letters to the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur using my uncle Lucas' typewriter. Finally, it was settled; we were approved for Perth and Leederville Technical College there to do what was called the Leaving Matriculation for university entry. This was a one-year course which overseas students had to undergo to be qualified for a place in a tertiary institution in

⁶ Like me, Chee Beng moved on to the University of Western Australia where much to my regret, we eventually lost touch. He married and moved to his wife's home country in Europe where alas, he joined a handful of our schoolmates in passing on much too early in life in 2010. His passing was marked by the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland which so disrupted air travel across Europe that Chee Beng's sister had difficulty in travelling to attend his funeral.

Western Australia. It was a course where two years of material normally undertaken by local Perth high school students (Years 11 and 12) was crammed into a one year.

My move to Perth finally started in February at Subang International Airport, Kuala Lumpur where I boarded a Cathay Pacific flight enroute from Hong Kong to Perth via KL and Djakarta (I would have left from Singapore if there had been any seats left on flights from there). At the departure gate, as if it was not already traumatic enough, I for the first time in my life, saw my father cry. He was always this stern but fair man and to see him cry because I was finally leaving home all by myself confirmed for me if ever I needed it, that he loved me. Our parting must have also evoked similar memories of himself having to leave his small family of wife and then one-year old son (me) to go to Sydney in 1956. Suddenly, that baby was me, grown up and leaving home.

I arrived in Perth around 3 a.m. which was the usual time for international flights into the city in the seventies into the eighties. My belongings



Dark Side of the Moon – Pink Floyd

included two suits tailored in Singapore, a pair of platform shoes, some body shirts, a single lens reflex 35 mm film camera (my first ever) with an f1.2 prime lens, a cassette tape player with three album cassette tape recordings, two of which were “The Yellow Brick Road” (Elton John) and “The Dark Side of the Moon” (Pink Floyd released the year before). My subsequent stay in Australia is the same age as the latter record.



Soon, I was in my first place of lodging. It was a room in a wooden bungalow at Fairfield Street, Mount Hawthorn owned by an immigrant Italian family who lived in the house next door. The other people who shared the house were Kim, a young Australian who worked in a library; Roger, an on- and off- Singaporean student at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (later to become Curtin University for whose Malaysian campus in Sarawak I worked 7 years for between 2012 and 2019); Aldo, a Yugoslavian taxi driver; and Goh, a West Malaysian student.

You can easily see that I had a sense of some bewilderment in the fact that I found myself on my first day in Australia being in the midst of people who like me were from elsewhere,



140 Loftus Street, Leederville

and being in a house owned by people who largely spoke Italian. This did not quite match my preconceived idea of what Australia might be like. I lived at Mt. Hawthorn for a few months after which I moved to Loftus Street in Leederville which was nearer to my college and which was shared by Malaysian fellow college students (Tan, Leong, Goh, Lim Chee Beng, Kiew and I).

Leederville Technical College was a vibrant place with a population leavened quite heavily by mature-aged students who had returned to studies, and by those who were having a second go at matriculation. It also catered for a large population of those who underwent vocational training for the trades (bricklaying; electrical works; plumbing). Classes were organized like in senior school and university where one was not in a class but in subject groups and we met whenever a study period for that subject was timetabled. We were free to come and go and thus, classes were sometimes missed. I was called up for an interview with the Principal Mr Cotton, once when it was noticed that I was skipping maths classes. I did not have an affinity for the subject although it was well taught by a teacher who stuttered (he was the one who pronounced my name as “kuke” during roll call). Other teachers who I recall by name were Mr Mykytiuk (physics), Mr Genovese (geography) and Mrs Segal (biology). There was a good teacher in English (he who had us read works such as O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi” and who had used the word “cogent” in feedback on one of my English assignments), and a sleepy-looking Chemistry teacher who was very good nevertheless.

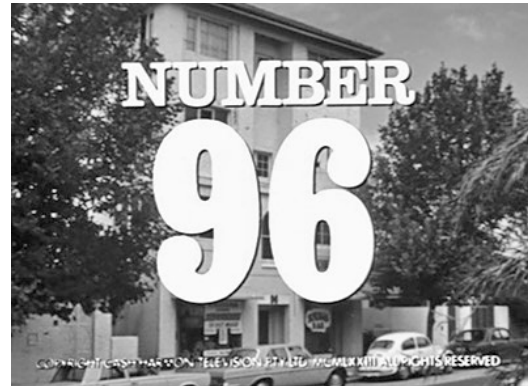
I found the sky in Perth in summer to be cloudless and possess a shade of blue I had not seen prior – much darker and consistent everywhere one looked. This would be the atmospheric effect of being about thirty-two degrees of latitude further south than Kuching near the equator where the skies are a lighter blue and always framed with clouds. It also almost never rains in summer. In my 17 years in Perth, I only saw light rain one day in summer on Christmas day 1975. My other introductions to Perth included mundane things like opening a bank account, learning where to shop, and discovering that at the house in Mt Hawthorn, unlike the home which I had just left behind, the toilet was outdoors at the back. This arrangement of the dunny harked back to the days (just like back home) when once the toilets were cleared daily by people who came and collected your output for you. In Perth in the seventies, the older houses had yet to be renovated for their toilets to be moved into the house. The rate for domestic postage was 7 cents to anywhere in Australia (in 2020 it was \$1.10) the sticker stamps for which could be bought via a coin-operated dispensing machine outside a Post Office. A family block of Cadbury chocolate was 30 cents (now at least \$3.50 for a much smaller sized family block). A large can of peaches was 25 cents. A bus ride on a Metropolitan Transit Trust (MTT) bus from Leederville to the Perth city centre cost 20 cents and the ticket could be used for as many trips on



A 70s MTT bus on Stirling Highway, Claremont

different buses as one liked within a 2 hour limit (boarding time was imprinted on the ticket).

Discovery continued into the living room where on the television (Black and white then – colour TV started in October) one could watch an Aussie soap opera called “Number 96” which was very revealing (pun intended) because it included nudity (all the naughty bits) on screen. I knew about this program before my arrival in Australia because I had read about it in my “Time” magazine subscribed back home, but it was confirmatory of the fact that I was indeed in a new culture. In 1986, at a gala dinner in Kuala Lumpur graced by the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister (it was supposed to be the PM himself but he sent his deputy) where I was to receive the 100th Guinness Stout Effort Award, seated at the table next to mine was none other than Joe Hasham, one of the main stars of the “Number 96” series (he played the role of Don Finlayson, a gay lawyer during the whole run of the series until it ended in 1977). I heard that he had moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1984, married a local and ran an actors studio there.



*Title card from Number 96
Network Ten Australia*



*Don Finlayson being cornered by Bev Houghton in
Number 96*

Perth was to be home for 17 years until 1991 when I took my family of three across the continent, from the Indian Ocean coast to Sydney on the Pacific coast, to start a new chapter in Australia when I took up a university appointment there. We went across by rail on the Indian Pacific service. It was a two-night, three-day journey and we took our car with us. This journey realized a boyhood memory of seeing “State Express 555” cigarette advertisements in the cinema screened before the main feature which showed a group of travellers enjoying those cigarettes amongst other things on their trip across the Nullarbor. As luck would have it, sometimes one gets to relive those ephemeral images on screen (I did it without the cigarettes).