

Let There Be Rock: The AC/DC Phenomenon

Volker Janssen

APAS Publications Officer

draccadacca@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In a successful career spanning more than 45 years, AC/DC have persistently ignored trends in popular music and resolutely stuck to their bluesy, stripped-to-the-bone brand of high-voltage rock 'n' roll. This paper investigates the AC/DC phenomenon by examining song lyrics and connotations, the band's work rate, and the vocalist debate (Bon Scott vs. Brian Johnson). Furthermore, a group of 82 hardcore fans is examined to get a better understanding of their passion for the band, and it is outlined how the AC/DC brand is increasingly being marketed to a larger consumer base not limited to music lovers. It was found that the word 'rock' is by far the most prominent in AC/DC song titles but lyrically almost half of all AC/DC songs revolve around sex. While the frequency of album releases slowed considerably over time, the band generally played 150 live gigs following each studio album. Bon Scott material continues to account for at least 45% of the songs included in typical AC/DC live sets. Analysis of a questionnaire revealed how committed the cohort of hardcore fans is. They generally became serious fans in their early teens, prefer the older material, experienced their first gig during early adulthood and enjoyed up to 124 gigs since. This paper also demonstrates how one can collect, analyse, interpret and present data.

KEYWORDS: AC/DC, rock music, popular culture, hardcore fans, brand marketing.

1 INTRODUCTION

AC/DC are arguably one of the most uncompromising rock 'n' roll bands of all time (Motörhead and the Ramones also come to mind). "Let there be sound... there was sound. Let there be light... there was light. Let there be drums... there was drums. Let there be guitar... there was guitar. Let there be rock!" This biblical line of lyrics from the song 'Let There Be Rock' summarises the essence of what AC/DC are all about: rock 'n' roll in its purest and simplest form. Another anthem that epitomises the band's philosophy is 'For Those About To Rock (We Salute You)'. Traditionally the closing number at AC/DC's live shows, it features big cannons on stage, saluting the fans and everyone else who appreciates the power, enjoyment and volume of rock music.

AC/DC stands for 'alternating current / direct current' and has proven to be a fitting name for their electrifying brand of rock 'n' roll (Figure 1). Dressed in his trademark school uniform, lead guitarist Angus Young quickly became the focal point of the band, owing to his never-stand-still stage antics that include his unique style of full-body headbanging, duckwalking and madly rolling around the floor without missing a lick on his Gibson SG guitar. Headbanging is a type of dance involving rhythmic movement of the head synchronous with music, most commonly associated with hard rock and heavy metal (Patton and McIntosh, 2008). The duckwalk is a stage element of guitar showmanship invented by Chuck Berry.

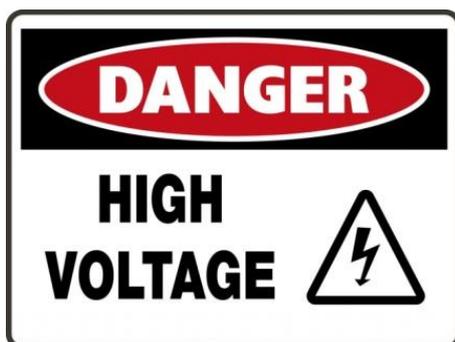


Figure 1: Two electrifying AC/DC songs on one sign.

From playing the rough, tough and often sleazy pubs and clubs of 1970s Australia, the band has made it onto the big stages of today's arenas and stadiums around the world. After 45 years, AC/DC have sold more than 200 million albums worldwide and still display sheer energy, charisma and prowess on record as well as on stage.

This paper examines the AC/DC phenomenon by investigating various aspects contributing to the longevity and continuing success of the band. Mainly focussing on the 16 studio albums released to date, the analysis includes song lyrics and song connotations as well as the band's work rate and live shows. The ongoing vocalist debate (Bon Scott vs. Brian Johnson) is briefly discussed, and a group of 82 hardcore fans is examined by means of a questionnaire to get a better understanding of their passion for the band. Finally, it is outlined how the AC/DC brand is increasingly being marketed to a broader consumer base not limited to fans and music lovers.

2 AC/DC HISTORY

Covering more than 45 years, the history of AC/DC is extensive and has been the topic of several well-researched books. Some of these concentrate on the early years, often referred to as the Bon Scott era (e.g. Walker, 2007; Daniels, 2013). Others also encompass the years since 1980, generally known as the Brian Johnson era (e.g. Sutcliffe, 2010; Engleheart and Durieux, 2015). None of these is an official biography of AC/DC. However, interesting insider accounts of life in and around the band have recently been provided by vocalist Brian Johnson (2009), former bassist Mark Evans (2011), former manager Michael Browning (2014), Bon Scott's ex-wife Irene Thornton (2014) and Bon's close friend Mary Renshaw (Renshaw et al., 2015). Consequently, this section can only provide a brief summary.

AC/DC were formed by Scottish-born brothers Malcolm and Angus Young in November 1973, took their name from the back of a sewing machine and performed their first official gig on New Year's Eve 1973 at the Chequers nightclub in Sydney, Australia. The first line-up included the Young brothers on guitar, Dave Evans (vocals), Larry Van Kriedt (bass) and Colin Burgess (drums). In February 1974, AC/DC already recorded their first single 'Can I Sit Next To You, Girl' (backed by 'Rockin' In The Parlour'), which was released on 22 July 1974. Harry Vanda and George Young (Malcolm and Angus's older brother), former members of the Easybeats (Australia's answer to the Beatles in the 1960s), produced the single and started a very productive association with AC/DC. In fact, George contributed immensely to the band, particularly in the early days. He was their mentor and additional band member, often helping out on bass (e.g. on the first single) and having significant involvement in 'bashing' the songs into shape.

AC/DC went through several line-up changes in this early phase. At the beginning of October 1974, Bon Scott (another Scottish-born immigrant) replaced singer Dave Evans. With his charisma, charm, powerful voice and lyrical talent, Bon fitted into the band “like a hand in a velvet glove” and would become instrumental to their worldwide success at the end of the decade. Only a month later, the debut album *High Voltage* was recorded and then released in February 1975. The line-up finally stabilised with drummer Phil Rudd and bassist Mark Evans (no relation) joining in January and March 1975, respectively. It should be noted that regular appearances on Australia’s popular music television show *Countdown* (hosted by music guru Molly Meldrum) played a major part in promoting the band to a national audience in the mid 1970s.

Following their second studio album *T.N.T.* (also released in 1975), relentless touring and increasing success in Australia, AC/DC moved to England in April 1976. The band arrived in London on April Fool’s Day and played their first official gig outside Australia at Hammersmith’s Red Cow on 23 April 1976. Constant touring followed, and the band’s fourth studio album *Let There Be Rock* (released in 1977) cemented the unique AC/DC sound.

Just before heading to North America for even more touring on the back of this record, Mark Evans was replaced by Englishman Cliff Williams on bass in May 1977. The band continued to win over audiences all over the globe, and their sixth studio album *Highway To Hell*, released in 1979, is generally seen as marking AC/DC’s breakthrough to worldwide success.

However, tragedy struck as the band was working on material for their next studio album. On 19 February 1980, just days before he was due to start work on the lyrics, Bon Scott died after a night out drinking in London. The official cause of death was stated as “acute alcoholic poisoning – death my misadventure”. Obviously, this was a shock for the tight-knit band, but with the blessing of Bon’s family it was decided to carry on with another singer.

Englishman Brian Johnson (born only about 70 km from the Scottish border) was recruited as the new front man, and the news was made official in early April 1980. In a quirk of fate, the paths of Bon and Brian had already crossed before. In 1973, prior to joining AC/DC, Bon and his band Fraternity (then called Fang) supported Brian’s band Geordie at a gig in England, and Bon was very impressed by Brian’s voice and performance.

The band went on to record *Back In Black* (released in July 1980), the entire album including its title and black cover being a tribute to Bon. It turned the band into global superstars, becoming the second most successful record of all time with some 50 million copies sold to date.

The departure of drummer Phil Rudd just before AC/DC’s ninth studio album *Flick Of The Switch* was released in 1983 did not slow the band down. He was replaced by Simon Wright, who in turn was replaced by Chris Slade for the twelfth studio album *The Razors Edge* (released in 1990), until Phil returned onto the drum stool in 1993. The band headlined the iconic Monsters of Rock festival at Castle Donington, England, for a record-breaking three times in 1981, 1984 and 1991 (later returning a fourth time to headline the first night of the Download festival in 2010).

While the work rate slowed considerably in the second half of their career, the band now received recognition for their contribution to music. AC/DC were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003 and had streets named after them, e.g. ‘Calle de AC/DC’ in Leganés

near Madrid in 2000 and ‘AC/DC Lane’ in Melbourne in 2004 (Frost, 2008). It should be noted that ‘AC/DC Lane’ is located in close proximity to where the iconic music video for ‘It’s A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock ’N’ Roll)’ was filmed on 23 February 1976, featuring the band playing on the back of a flatbed truck travelling along Swanston Street. Statues of Bon Scott were unveiled in Fremantle in 2008 and near Bon’s birthplace in Kirriemuir, Scotland, in 2016. Since 2018, a sculpture of Bon also graces a house wall in ‘AC/DC Lane’. Many critics, who had originally shunned the band for being primitive and repetitive, now praised them for their uniqueness and longevity. However, the band was never particularly interested in such awards – for them it had always been about playing live and entertaining the fans.

Released in 2008 after a hiatus of more than eight and a half years, AC/DC’s fifteenth studio album *Black Ice* became their most successful record since 1980’s *Back In Black*, charting at number one in 21 countries. The subsequent world tour was their biggest and most successful to date, incorporating 168 shows and lasting for 20 months between 2008 and 2010. The audience now comprised three generations of rock fans.

Following another extended break, the band returned to the studio in May 2014 to record their sixteenth studio album *Rock Or Bust*. Malcolm Young was unable to take part in the recording sessions and had to cease any further involvement in the band due to ill health. Dementia would eventually claim his life, aged 64, on 18 November 2017 – just four weeks after the passing of older brother George. Nephew Stevie Young filled in on rhythm guitar, just as he had done during the US leg of the *Blow Up Your Video* tour in 1988. The album was released on 28 November 2014, charted at number one in 10 countries and made it into the top five in a total of 25 countries, showing that AC/DC had not lost any of their momentum. At around the same time, drummer Phil Rudd got into trouble with the law. In January 2015, he was replaced by former band member Chris Slade.

The *Rock Or Bust* world tour started in Europe in May 2015, following two headliner appearances at a US festival a month earlier, and continued into 2016. In March 2016, Brian Johnson was forced to discontinue touring due to severe hearing problems, and the remaining 23 shows were completed with a guest vocalist (Axl Rose of Guns N’ Roses). After the last gig of the tour on 20 September 2016, bassist Cliff Williams retired from the band.

Somewhat surprisingly, the band (Angus, Brian, Cliff, Phil and Stevie) returned to the studio in August 2018 to record once again. According to rumours, the new album is to be dedicated to the late Malcolm Young and based on compositions that Malcolm and Angus worked on in the past. A release date has yet to be announced, and it is not clear whether a tour will follow.

3 EXAMINING THE AC/DC PHENOMENON

This section examines the AC/DC phenomenon by investigating song lyrics and connotations, the band’s work rate, live shows, the vocalist debate and hardcore fans. The analyses mainly focus on studio albums containing entirely new material (e.g. Popoff, 2017), i.e. ignoring best-of compilations, movie soundtracks, live albums, box sets and DVD releases (Table 1). If not specifically related to studio albums, a dozen non-album tracks are also included for completeness.

Table 1: AC/DC studio albums to date.

No.	Album Title	Release Date
1	High Voltage	Feb 1975
2	T.N.T.	Dec 1975
3	Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap	Sep 1976
4	Let There Be Rock	Mar 1977
5	Powerage	May 1978
6	Highway To Hell	Jul 1979
7	Back In Black	Jul 1980
8	For Those About To Rock (We Salute You)	Nov 1981
9	Flick Of The Switch	Aug 1983
10	Fly On The Wall	Jun 1985
11	Blow Up Your Video	Jan 1988
12	The Razors Edge	Sep 1990
13	Ballbreaker	Sep 1995
14	Stiff Upper Lip	Feb 2000
15	Black Ice	Oct 2008
16	Rock Or Bust	Nov 2014

3.1 Song Lyrics and Connotations

Lyrically, AC/DC have always favoured primal rock 'n' roll topics that complement their toe-tapping music rather than trying to present a deeper meaning or message to punters. AC/DC songs are about partying hard, conquering women, catching venereal disease, getting "beat up, broken boned" and an unshakable commitment to rock 'n' roll itself.

Double entendres (often so obvious they qualify as single entendres) feature heavily throughout their catalogue of about 180 songs, but always with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour. Lines like "Some balls are held for charity and some for fancy dress, but when they're held for pleasure they're the balls that I like best" have become prime examples of Bon Scott's 'toilet poetry' (Bon's own phrase) in particular. Most singers tend to make up stories when writing lyrics, but Bon mainly sang about his life experiences, particularly in regards to his encounters with the fairer sex.

In the 1980s, some Christian groups claimed that AC/DC were devil worshippers and the band's name was an abbreviation for 'antichrist / devil's child'. Undoubtedly fanned by the popularity of devilish heavy metal lyrics at the time and AC/DC song titles such as 'Highway To Hell' and 'Hells Bells', this claim could not have been further from the truth.

An analysis of 178 AC/DC songs revealed that the word 'rock' is by far the most prominent in song titles (12.9%), followed by 'love' and 'ball', while 'hell' appears in only four titles (Table 2). It should be noted that only two songs (i.e. 1.1%) actually deal (vaguely) with the devil's topic. The band even wrote a Christmas song, in typical Acca Dacca fashion entitled 'Mistress For Christmas'.

Table 2: Words featuring most often in the titles of the 178 AC/DC songs investigated.

Word in Title	# Songs	Percentage
Rock	23	12.9
Love	7	3.9
Ball	6	3.4
Fire	4	2.2
Hell	4	2.2
Shake	4	2.2

It is generally recognised that most rock lyrics focus on three main topics: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Consequently, it is useful to examine to what extent AC/DC songs conform to this common conception. However, considering the frequent use of double entendres present in AC/DC lyrics, the band's output must be analysed in regards to song connotation, rather than focussing on the literal meaning of the lyrics.

In order to obtain a more detailed picture of what AC/DC songs are really about, the three traditional topics were expanded into the following seven categories:

- 1) Sex (i.e. focussing on physical affection)
- 2) Drugs and alcohol
- 3) Rock 'n' roll (including life in a rock band)
- 4) Love and loneliness (i.e. focussing on emotional affection)
- 5) Bad boy behaviour and fighting
- 6) Work, money and business
- 7) Other

The results of investigating 178 AC/DC songs in this regard are summarised in Table 3. A graphical representation can be found in Figure 2. It is evident that almost half of all AC/DC songs are about sex (47.2%), followed by bad boy behaviour (20.2%) and rock 'n' roll (16.9%). Together, these three topics account for 84.3% of all songs investigated. This is not surprising, considering the party lifestyle and rebellious behaviour that is often associated with rock 'n' roll. For punters, rock music is all about forgetting every-day life for a little while, having a good time, partying hard, letting their hair (or whatever is left of it) down and fantasising about being in a rock band (including all the perks that come with it). It is interesting to note that only six songs (3.4%) explore the topic of drugs and alcohol, although several band members have had problems with excessive alcohol consumption in particular during parts of their career.

Table 3: Connotation of the 178 AC/DC songs investigated.

Connotation	# Songs	Percentage
Sex	84	47.2
Bad Boy/Fight	36	20.2
Rock 'n' Roll	30	16.9
Love/Loneliness	10	5.6
Work/Money/Business	8	4.5
Drugs/Alcohol	6	3.4
Other	4	2.2

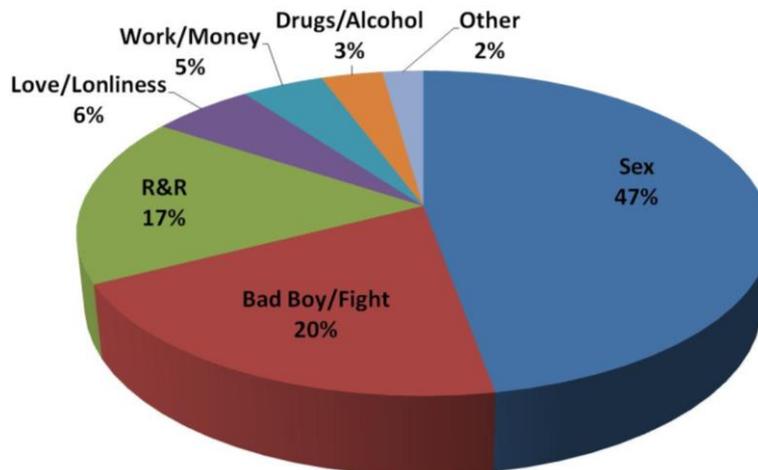


Figure 2: Graphical representation of song connotation (178 AC/DC songs).

It is also useful to investigate song connotations on an album-by-album basis (Figure 3). It is found that on each of the 16 studio albums to date, at least about 30% and generally about 50% (but up to 75%) of the songs revolve around sex. This is evident throughout the band’s entire career, i.e. the advancing age and maturity of the band members has not changed this philosophy at all.

Only on two albums the most popular topic is not sex. On the second album *T.N.T.* (1975), 55% of songs focus on rock ‘n’ roll, while sex accounts for the remaining 45%. Uncharacteristically, on the fifth studio album *Powerage* (1978), sex merely features in 10% of the songs. Rock ‘n’ roll, bad boy behaviour and work/money/business contribute 20% each, while the majority of songs (30%) revolve around love and loneliness, i.e. focussing on emotional rather than physical affection. Only the debut album *High Voltage* (1975) contains more songs about love and loneliness (37%), while this topic fades into insignificance (10% or less) on all other albums.

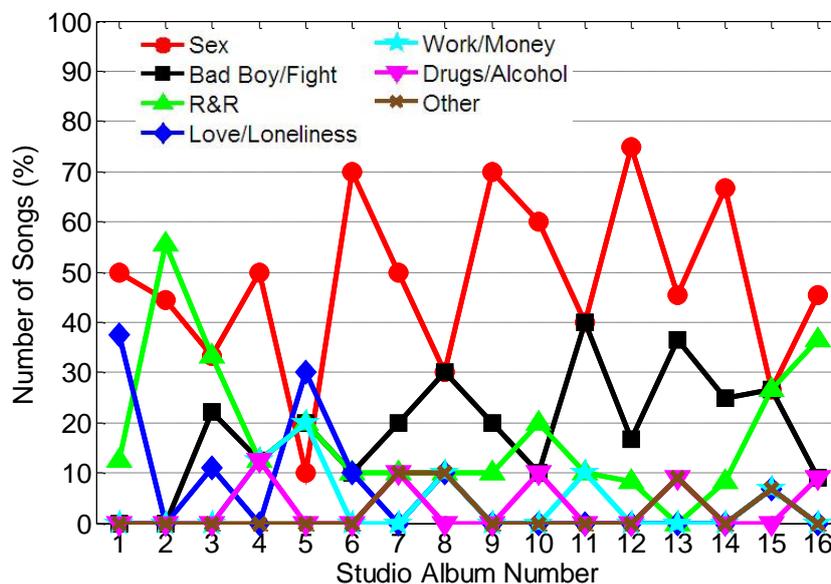


Figure 3: Song connotations in percentage per studio album to date.

Although AC/DC’s music is undoubtedly rock ‘n’ roll, this song connotation was insignificant (10% or less) for two 4-album periods, i.e. albums 6-9 and 11-14, but made a resurgence on the most recent albums *Black Ice* (2008) and *Rock Or Bust* (2014).

3.2 Work Rate: Studio Albums

Understandably, the work rate tends to change as a band develops from being unknown underdogs trying to establish a following to ‘making it’ in the harsh music business and achieving ongoing success. Hence, it is interesting to analyse how this journey has affected AC/DC’s work rate.

The work rate can be measured in two ways: quantity of output (i.e. how much) and frequency of output (i.e. how often). AC/DC’s output quantity (here indicated by the number of songs per studio album) and output frequency (indicated by the time lag between releasing studio albums) are illustrated in Figure 4.

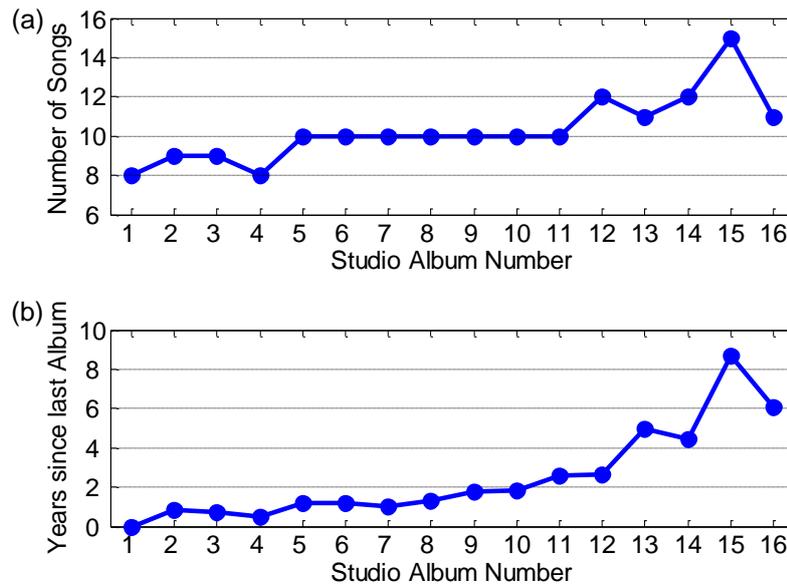


Figure 4: (a) Output quantity expressed as number of songs per studio album, and (b) output frequency expressed as years since last studio album.

It is evident that the first four albums contain 8 or 9 songs each, which represents the lower end of the norm for most established bands at the time. However, it needs to be considered that these four albums were released within only about two years between 1975 and 1977, representing a young band that did not have the resources to spend a more reasonable amount of time in the studio. Instead, constant touring was used to build a following.

The next seven studio albums (1978-88) conformed to the then well-established formula of 10 songs per album. This catered for the limitations of the vinyl record medium used at the time, generally featuring 5 songs on each side and a maximum running time of about 50 minutes. The introduction and increasing popularity of the music CD medium in the 1980s allowed album lengths of up to 80 minutes and, consequently, an increase in the number of songs. In the case of AC/DC, this is evident from the twelfth studio album *The Razors Edge* (1990) onwards, culminating in 15 tracks included on the fifteenth studio album *Black Ice* (2008).

Another factor that has contributed to the increasing number of songs on the more recent albums is the substantial time lag of several years between releases. Until the seventh studio album *Back In Black* (1980), the band released new material at least once a year. Impressively, *Back In Black* was released exactly a year after *Highway To Hell*, despite the band having to cope with the tragic loss of vocalist Bon Scott and the subsequent recruitment of Brian Johnson. In part, this can be explained by unexpected studio availability at short notice, allowing the band to enter the studio earlier than anticipated.

The landmark album *Back In Black* generated worldwide success for the band. From then onwards, over five albums and 10 years, the work rate slowed almost linearly from about one year to more than two and a half years. Increasing success does not only translate into longer tours and bigger live venues (resulting in larger earnings), but also allows the band to spend more time in the studio and relieve some of the time pressure often exerted by the record company. Following the album *The Razors Edge* (1990), the work rate slowed significantly – first to five years, and then to more than eight and a half years before the release of *Black Ice* (2008). AC/DC have reached retirement age and are in the enviable position of working just for

fun, rather than to provide for their families. This situation contributes to explaining the correlation between fewer studio albums over time but more songs per album.

As mentioned earlier, this study focuses on studio albums as the main indication of creative output. It is recognised that the release of a live album, compilation or box set also takes time and effort and can therefore influence the frequency of output (e.g. by delaying the next studio album). However, this is very difficult to measure in practice and has therefore been ignored in this analysis.

3.3 Work Rate: Live Shows

Live shows are an essential part of being a musician and provide the opportunity for close interaction between band and audience. Considering that AC/DC gigs are very intense and energetic performances (e.g. Lageat and Brelet, 2014, 2017), touring plays an important role in regards to the band's work load. This aspect of the work rate can be quantified by examining the number of live shows following each studio album (Figure 5).

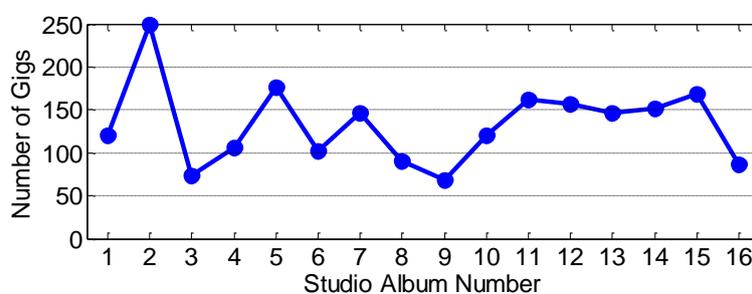


Figure 5: Work rate expressed as number of live gigs following each studio album, based on data sourced from Durieux (2019).

It should be noted that this figure combines the 1975/76 tours supporting the second studio album *T.N.T.* (released in Australia only) and the European *High Voltage* album. These two albums feature very similar content, and the latter was released as the first AC/DC album outside Australia after the band relocated to England. This explains the large spike of 250 live gigs promoting this studio album as the band tried to generate a following in Europe. Similarly, the 1978 tour in support of the fifth studio album *Powerage* was combined with the subsequent 70-gig tour following the release of the live album *If You Want Blood (You've Got It)* five months later, generating a spike of 176 shows. The 1985/86 tours promoting the tenth studio album *Fly On The Wall* and the subsequent soundtrack album *Who Made Who* released in May 1986 (41 gigs in North America only) were also combined. Finally, the 8-gig mini tour following the band's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003 was attributed to the previous 2000/01 tour supporting the fourteenth studio album *Stiff Upper Lip*.

It is evident that the band played almost 150 live gigs following the release of the hugely successful seventh studio album *Back In Black* (1980) with new vocalist Brian Johnson. The next three studio albums were far less successful commercially, in part due to the increasing popularity of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal in the 1980s (Tucker, 2006). As a consequence, AC/DC played less live shows in support of these albums. However, the eleventh studio album *Blow Up Your Video* (1988) ended this temporary 'low', and the band has played at least 150 live gigs in support of each studio album since. The most recent *Rock Or Bust* tour 2015/16 (88 live gigs) is the exception to this rule. It is also important to mention that while the number of shows per tour has been relatively steady in recent times, the capacity of venues

utilised has grown considerably. AC/DC have outgrown large indoor venues and are now routinely able to sell out stadium and race-track shows with crowd capacities of up to 100,000 or so.

As mentioned earlier, the *Black Ice* world tour 2008-10 was their biggest and most successful to date. Over 20 months, it incorporated 168 shows in 125 cities across 31 countries on five continents (only Africa and Antarctica were not visited), and AC/DC played for about 5 million people (Figure 6). As indicated in the figure, this tour included 26 cities hosting two gigs and 7 cities hosting three gigs (i.e. Chicago, London, Oslo, Stockholm, Buenos Aires, Melbourne and Sydney), while the band played four shows in Paris. This illustrates both the globalisation of AC/DC and the importance of the European and North American markets (e.g. Waddell et al., 2007; Johansson and Bell, 2014).

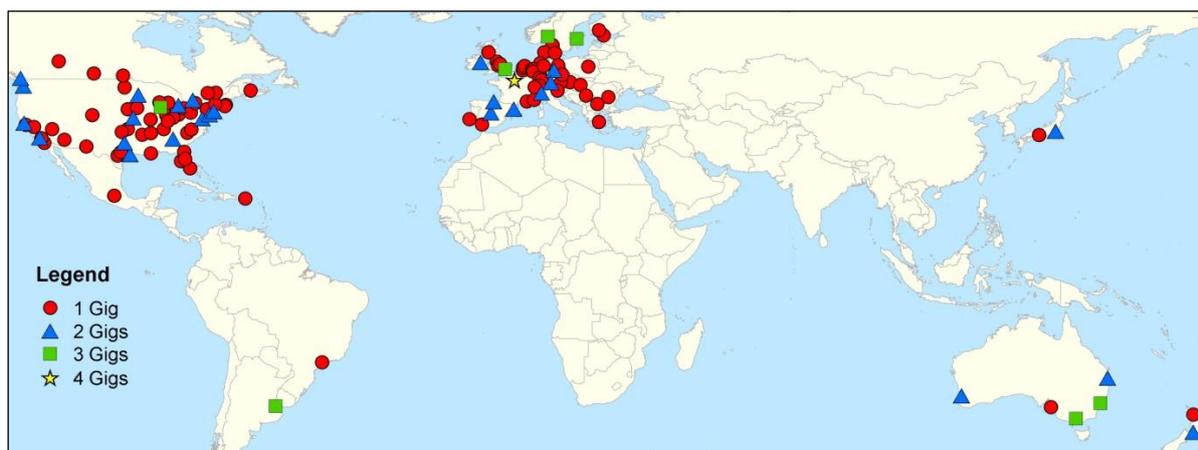


Figure 6: *Black Ice* world tour stops, indicating the number of gigs played in each city.

3.4 The Vocalist Debate

Traditionally, the singer is the focal point of a band because the vocals play a critical role in regards to the listener deciding whether the band is worth listening to or not. Consequently, the career of AC/DC is often divided into the Bon Scott era (1974-80) and the Brian Johnson era (1980-present). Not surprisingly, there is an ongoing debate amongst fans and music lovers about who was/is the 'better' singer. Given the diversity of musical taste in humans, this is obviously a very subjective matter and the question will therefore never be truly answered.

However, it is possible to investigate some aspects of this common debate scientifically. For example, Oxoby (2009) used tools from the field of experimental economics (i.e. the ultimatum game) to determine who may be the better singer in regards to affecting efficient decision making among listeners. In the ultimatum game, individuals are randomly paired and assigned the roles of either 'proposer' or 'responder'. Proposers are allocated a sum of money from which they must choose an amount to extend as an offer to the responder. Upon learning of this offer, the responder can either accept or reject the offer. If the offer is accepted, the responder receives the offer (in cash), and the proposer is given the original sum of money less the offer. If the offer is rejected, both participants receive nothing.

While the study has provided some interesting findings, the design of the experiment undertaken to arrive at the conclusion in favour of Brian was not ideal because one group of participants was treated to 'It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock 'N' Roll)' featuring Bon on vocals and the other to 'Shoot To Thrill' with Brian on vocals. In order to

rigorously determine a singer’s ability to implement efficient behavioural outcomes among listeners, the same song should have been played to both groups participating in the experiment (easily possible using live versions). This would have eliminated the considerable effect the music style or tempo would have had on the decision making process (Carpentier and Potter, 2007). Additional tests could have investigated the effects of playing a slower, bluesy song such as ‘The Jack’ as opposed to a fast, heavy rocker like ‘Whole Lotta Rosie’ – ignoring for a moment that the former is about gonorrhoea and the latter about shagging large women.

While the rhythm of music is generally the main trigger for related physiological (Bernardi et al., 2006), psychological (Lesiuk, 2005) and sociological (Bryson, 1996) behaviour in individuals, it would also be useful to study how song lyrics may influence business decisions. This is particularly of interest considering the topics favoured in AC/DC songs. Depending on the type of business or negotiations conducted, certain songs may prove to be more stimulating than others. An interrogation of AC/DC’s song catalogue reveals some potential options worth investigating in this regard (Table 4).

Table 4: Examples of AC/DC songs that may be useful for stimulating particular business activities.

Area of Business	Bon-Era Song	Brian-Era Song
Automobile Industry	Highway To Hell	Cover You In Oil
Correctional Services	Jailbreak	Breaking The Rules
Electrical Engineering	Live Wire	Flick Of The Switch
Finance	Down Payment Blues	Moneytalks
Mining	T.N.T.	Deep In The Hole
Music Industry	It’s A Long Way To The Top	Rock Or Bust
Natural Disaster Management	There’s Gonna Be Some Rockin’	Landslide
Politics	Beating Around The Bush	Hail Caesar
Public Transport	Can I Sit Next To You Girl	Rock ‘N’ Roll Train
Space Exploration	What’s Next To The Moon	Satellite Blues
Work Health and Safety	High Voltage	Danger

This author is of the opinion that both singers are unique and a perfect fit for the band. Consequently, this paper will not explore this debate any further. However, it is interesting to show how important the Bon-era songs still are to both the band and the fans.

Figure 7 illustrates the percentage of Bon-era songs included in typical AC/DC live sets during the tours from 1980 to 2016. For consistency, the horizontal axis relates to the studio album number referred to previously. The 41-gig *Who Made Who* tour (1986) and the 8-gig tour following AC/DC’s induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (2003) are included in this analysis as separate entries (10a and 14a, respectively) because the set lists differed significantly from the preceding tours.

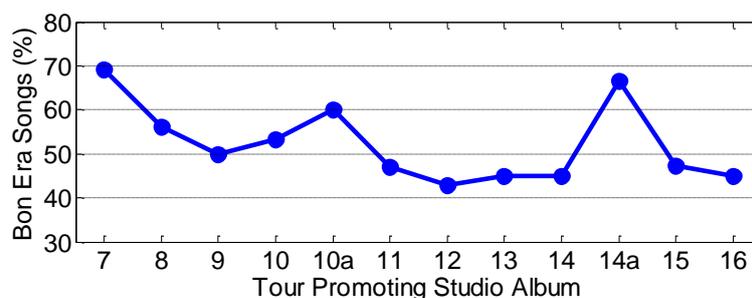


Figure 7: Percentage of Bon-era songs included in AC/DC live sets from 1980 to 2016.

Understandably, the tour promoting the seventh studio album *Back In Black* (the first with new vocalist Brian Johnson) featured the most Bon-era songs (69.2%). This percentage dropped to 50% over the next two tours as the band was able to choose from a larger pool of Brian-era material and later stabilised at around 45-47%. This is a remarkable occurrence, considering that Bon appeared on six AC/DC studio albums over 5 years, while Brian has appeared on ten (soon to be eleven) studio albums over 39 years.

Two distinct spikes are visible for the small tours following *Who Made Who* (60.0%, see 10a) and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction (66.7%, see 14a). The former promoted a movie soundtrack album that only featured three new songs (including two instrumentals), while the latter did not support a particular album at all. As such, these two tours can be characterised as ‘best of’-type affairs that include a larger number of old songs usually not played live anymore.

Obviously, both the band and the fans still enjoy the old AC/DC classics. This indicates the high quality of the early song material in particular and the timelessness of AC/DC’s music in general as old and new songs can be mixed at will. More importantly, it shows the enormous love and respect that AC/DC and their fans still have for Bon Scott and his contribution to the band.

3.5 Hardcore Fans

Lasting musical preferences or tastes are primarily formed during late adolescence and early adulthood (e.g. Holbrook and Schindler, 1989; Smith, 1994). In a career spanning five decades (1970s through to 2010s), AC/DC have become a global phenomenon and therefore enjoy a large global fan base. These fans are very loyal and passionate, originating from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds not limited to the working-class roots of the band and encompassing multiple generations.

The most passionate and fanatic of these fans are the hardcore fans, an international family of die-hard supporters and human Acca Dacca encyclopaedias going to extraordinary lengths to support the band (Figure 8). The range of activities includes the establishment and maintenance of fan clubs and social media communities, the publication of AC/DC fanzines (i.e. magazines made by fans for fans), the generation of well-researched fan websites, and the organisation of international fan meetings.



Figure 8: (a) The author during the *Ballbreaker* world tour in 1996, and (b) eCircle members sporting their AC/DC fan vests © [Timm Nüchter – www.stonebreaker.de].

No distance is too far to support the band during the filming of their promotional video clips, which generally revolve around playing live in front of an audience. Often wearing jeans vests teeming with AC/DC patches, hardcore fans are also well known for following the band across the globe during each tour (e.g. Rule, 2010a, 2010b). This type of AC/DC tourism is not only a nice way for fans to meet up, ‘rock out’ and explore the world but also very welcome by the tourism industry (e.g. Gibson and Connell, 2007; Frost, 2008; Leaver and Schmidt, 2009). For example, a recent report by UK Music (2017) demonstrates the pulling power of live music and its potential to fuel tourism: 12.5 million music-loving tourists attended a festival or gig in the UK in 2016, generating £4 billion spending and sustaining more than 47,000 full-time jobs in the process.

Germany has always been one of the biggest AC/DC strongholds and is home to many of these die-hard fans. In order to get a better understanding of this passion for the band, a group of 82 hardcore fans belonging to the German eCircle community was examined by means of a questionnaire in late 2015. While the vast majority of this cohort (92.7%) was German, the study also included three Austrians, two Swiss and one Dutch fan. Only four respondents (4.9%) were female, which is not representative of the larger number of females now embracing this traditionally very male-oriented band. Participants were asked to provide their nationality, gender, year of birth, favourite AC/DC studio album, favourite AC/DC song, the year they started to become a serious AC/DC fan, the year of their first AC/DC gig, and the number of AC/DC gigs experienced so far.

It was found that these hardcore fans were born between 1960 and 1992, with a mean birth year of 1970.7 ± 6.5 (1 sigma), i.e. translating into an average age of 49 years at the time of writing (in 2019). On average, they became serious AC/DC fans in the year 1983.4 ± 7.2 (1 sigma), ranging from 1976 to 2014. This translates into becoming a serious fan at the tender age of 12.8 ± 4.2 years (1 sigma), i.e. in early adolescence, with a range between 5 and 41 years.

The vast majority of participants (53.7%) rated *Powerage* as their favourite AC/DC album, followed by *Let There Be Rock*, *Back In Black* and *Highway To Hell* (Table 5 & Figure 9). It is interesting to note that these four albums represent the output of four consecutive years between 1977 and 1980, coinciding with a highly creative period of the band and their journey to global success. Three of these four albums were fronted by Bon Scott, and twelve albums were mentioned in total (five and seven stemming from the Bon and Brian eras, respectively).

Table 5: Questionnaire results: Favourite AC/DC album.

Album Title	Votes	Percentage
Powerage	44	53.7
Let There Be Rock	11	13.4
Back In Black	11	13.4
Highway To Hell	4	4.9

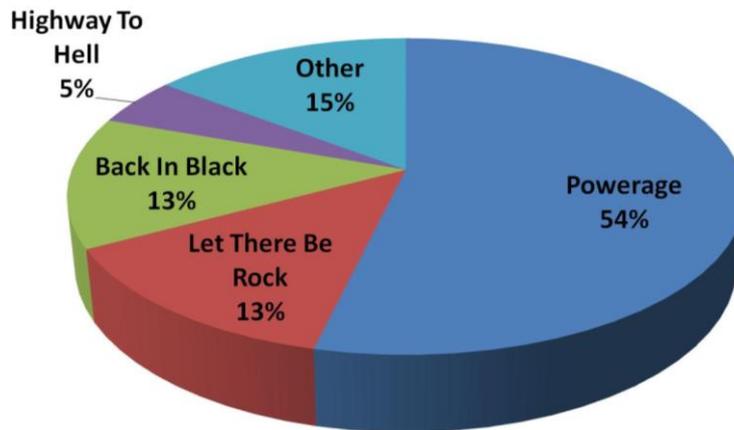


Figure 9: Graphical representation of questionnaire results (favourite AC/DC album).

As expected, the results in regards to the favourite AC/DC song were far more varied. However, it was confirmed that most respondents prefer the older material (Table 6). The most popular songs were ‘Gone Shootin’ (11.0%) and ‘Whole Lotta Rosie’ (8.5%). A total of 39 songs were named, and of these were eight from *Powerage* (1978), six from *Back In Black* (1980), five from *Highway To Hell* (1979), and four each from *Let There Be Rock* (1977) and *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* (1976). This emphasises that the cohort is very fond of the band’s output originating from the immensely creative period between 1977 and 1980.

Table 6: Questionnaire results: Favourite AC/DC song.

Song Title	Votes	Percentage
Gone Shootin’	9	11.0
Whole Lotta Rosie	7	8.5
Let There Be Rock	5	6.1
Bad Boy Boogie	4	4.9
Back in Black	4	4.9

Most hardcore fans regard their first ever AC/DC live gig as a very significant (if not life-changing) experience that has since prompted them to come back for more (and more), often following the band around for parts of each world tour. Respondents stated that their first AC/DC gig took place between 1979 (*Highway To Hell* tour) and 2015 (*Rock Or Bust* tour), translating into an average age at the first gig of 19.8 ± 6.0 years (1 sigma), with a range between 12 and 42 years old. Not unexpectedly, the average age corresponds to the period of late adolescence and early adulthood. Undoubtedly, the ability to legally drive to the show (or having friends that can) is also a contributing factor.

Figure 10 illustrates how many respondents experienced their first gig following each of AC/DC’s studio albums. The peak following the eleventh studio album *Blow Up Your Video* (1988) and the twelfth studio album *The Razors Edge* (1990) neatly coincides with the mean age of the cohort questioned. In 2019 on average 49 years old, these respondents were on average 19 years old in 1989, i.e. experiencing early adulthood. The smaller peak evident following the eighth studio album *For Those About To Rock (We Salute You)*, released in late 1981, coincides with the period most respondents became serious AC/DC fans. However, considering the relatively young age at which this cohort has developed into dedicated AC/DC fanatics, this peak represents the first AC/DC concert experience of the older respondents.

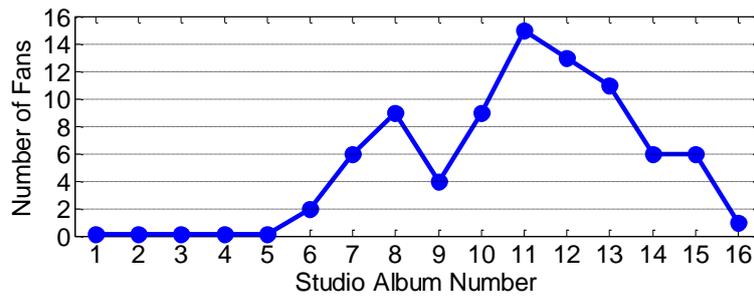


Figure 10: Questionnaire results: First AC/DC gig.

The number of AC/DC live gigs experienced (as of December 2015) varied from two to 124, with a mean of 33.5 ± 24.1 concerts (1 sigma). The histogram shown in Figure 11 illustrates that hardcore fans are committed to attend as many concerts as possible on each tour. The graph does not follow a normal distribution because the older generation is still keen on ‘rocking out’, while the younger generation makes the most of the limited opportunities to see the band perform live in recent times. This confirms that even after more than 40 years in the business, AC/DC’s style of rock ‘n’ roll is as popular as it has ever been.

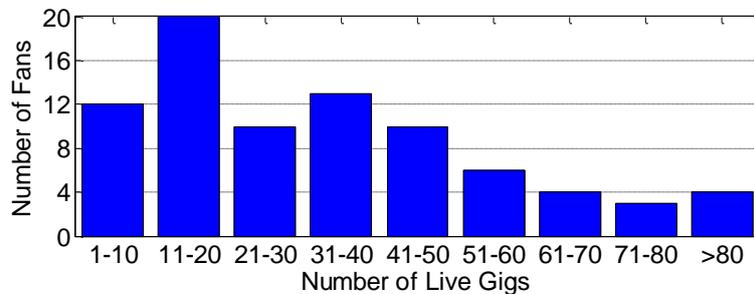


Figure 11: Questionnaire results: Histogram of the number of AC/DC gigs experienced (as of Dec 2015).

4 MARKETING THE AC/DC PHENOMENON

AC/DC (and the band logo in particular) has developed into a very marketable brand, appealing to a much larger consumer group than the band’s fans. For example, Metzinger (2013) outlined how the AC/DC machinery complies, unknowingly, with the following 14 strategic campaigning guidelines for marketing, communication and corporate strategy: polarising, profiling, positioning; controlling the agenda; concentrating forces; building on existing strengths; maintaining flexibility; tenacity and perseverance in the pursuit of strategy; impact orientation and alignment of objectives and means; utilising synergies and multiplication effects; awareness and foresight; unity of the doctrine; efficiency and simplicity; thinking in scenarios; success principles of communication; building golden bridges.

Several decades ago, marketing a band’s output was limited to touring, providing radio airplay and generating media exposure in order to promote the band in the general public. Nowadays, a multitude of tools can be used to this effect. For example, releasing albums in various versions featuring different cover designs and/or contents is one strategy applied by many record companies. Another tool is to release remastered versions of older albums, sometimes including bonus material to provide added incentives (Plasketes, 2008). Both of these techniques have been applied to AC/DC albums. In the US, *Black Ice* (2008) was exclusively sold by the world’s largest retailer, Walmart, following a growing trend in today’s music industry that translates into increasing profits for retail giants and established acts (Christian, 2011). This section

briefly outlines how the AC/DC phenomenon is increasingly being marketed to a larger and more general customer base, focussing on music videos, motion pictures and merchandise.

4.1 Music Videos

The use of music videos as a tool to promote records started in the 1960s. However, it took almost two decades and the launch of the popular music television channel MTV in 1981 to provide the platform for developing this concept into a major medium for marketing music. While AC/DC have released promotional video clips throughout their entire career, initially these were low-key affairs that mainly showed the band playing live on stage. From the mid-1980s, AC/DC began to embrace this medium (albeit reluctantly at first) by producing more elaborate clips, starting with a short film containing five clips promoting the *Fly On The Wall* album in 1985.

Following the introduction of the DVD medium, several compilations of video clips were released in later years: *Family Jewels* (2005), *Plug Me In* (2007) and *Backtracks* (2009). This development was welcomed by fans who could finally retire their laboriously collated VHS clip collections. The band also addressed the market for video footage covering entire concerts, catering for concert goers interested in purchasing a visual memory of the experience and those who missed the tour. The strategy of releasing a live DVD after each world tour has been followed since the 1990/91 tour supporting the album *The Razors Edge*. To date, the only exception remains the *Rock Or Bust* tour (2015/16), although a concert was filmed for DVD release.

4.2 Motion Pictures

The ultimate AC/DC movie is *Let There Be Rock* (1980), a concert film documenting a particularly energetic live show in Paris on 9 December 1979, together with backstage footage and interviews. The soundtrack album, featuring the live gig, was released much later as part of the box set *Bonfire* (1997). An earlier documentary featuring live and backstage footage from the 1976/77 A Giant Dose Of Rock 'N' Roll tour supporting the *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* album in Australia has never been released (Evans, 2011, 230-231). Numerous unauthorised (and often rather uninteresting) AC/DC documentaries exist. One notable exception is *Beyond The Thunder*, a feature-length documentary by AC/DC fans about AC/DC fans for AC/DC fans that has been in production for some time. However, any band involvement is unlikely and a release date has yet to be announced.

Owing to the (understandable) resistance of the band to get involved, it is not surprising that motion pictures about AC/DC and/or their fans are extremely rare. The Australian road movie *Thunderstruck* (2004) tells the story of a group of friends devoted to AC/DC honouring a pledge given after an AC/DC concert. Several internet sources report on a planned movie called *Bon Scott – The Legend Of AC/DC*, but reliable information about this project is scarce.

While AC/DC songs have been used in various movies over the years, they have rarely been included on the soundtrack albums. However, there are a few noteworthy exceptions, illustrating how marketing strategies have been used in an attempt to tap into both consumer markets (i.e. attracting AC/DC fans to watch the movie and enticing movie fans to buy the soundtrack album). Stephen King's *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) is unique in this regard because it features music entirely composed by AC/DC. While the movie flopped at the box office, the previously mentioned soundtrack album *Who Made Who* did not share the same fate.

with a healthy dose of filthy blues thrown in) and strikes a chord with several generations. This paper has examined the AC/DC phenomenon by investigating song lyrics and connotations, the band's work rate, live shows, the vocalist debate, the passion of hardcore fans and the marketing of the AC/DC brand.

Rock songs generally focus on three main topics: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. An analysis of 178 AC/DC songs revealed that this common conception also applies to AC/DC, albeit with a major focus on sexual content and favouring rebellious behaviour over drugs. While the word 'rock' is by far the most prominent in AC/DC song titles, lyrically almost half of all AC/DC songs revolve around sex. Consequently, sexual encounters play a prominent role on almost all AC/DC albums – always presented with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour.

The band's work rate was investigated in regards to output quantity, output frequency and number of live shows. It was found that output quantity generally conforms to the norm of 10 songs per studio album, although recent releases feature a larger number of songs. This can be explained by changes in the music medium (from vinyl records to CDs, mp3 files and beyond) and the considerably lower frequency of output in recent times (partly due to the advancing age of the band members). It was shown that touring has always been an important part of AC/DC's work load, generally playing at least 150 live gigs following each studio album and now frequently selling out stadium shows.

While the author does not support the unnecessary vocalist debate (Bon Scott vs. Brian Johnson), it was shown that Bon-era material continues to account for at least 45% of the songs included in typical AC/DC live sets since 1980. This demonstrates the immense love and respect that AC/DC and their fans still have for Bon and his contribution to the band. It also highlights the quality of the early song material and the timelessness of AC/DC's music, allowing old and new songs to be mixed at will.

A group of 82 hardcore fans was examined by means of a questionnaire to get a better understanding of their passion for the band. It was found that the cohort became serious fans at the tender age of 12, i.e. in early adolescence, and is now on average 49 years old. More than half of the participants rated *Powerage* (1978) as their favourite AC/DC studio album. The most popular songs were 'Gone Shootin'' (1978) and 'Whole Lotta Rosie' (1977), showing that most die-hard fans prefer the older material. Respondents experienced their first AC/DC gig at the average age of 20 (i.e. corresponding to early adulthood) and have enjoyed up to 124 gigs since, demonstrating that hardcore fans are committed to attend as many concerts as possible on each tour.

Finally, it was outlined how the AC/DC brand is increasingly being marketed to a more diverse consumer base not limited to fans and music lovers, focussing on music videos, motion pictures and an ever-increasing range of merchandise.

This study has shown that the AC/DC phenomenon is alive and well. While the time lag between studio albums has increased considerably, AC/DC's unique style of rock 'n' roll is as popular as it has ever been. The philosophy of ignoring popular trends and sticking to a proven formula has spawned three generations of dedicated fans and turned AC/DC into rock giants. This paper is dedicated to Malcolm Young, who had the vision, determination and riffs to make it all possible – rock in peace.

DISCLAIMER

This study was conducted entirely in the author's spare time and is in no way related to his employer.

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