



Top row Leigh Redhead recalls a free and nomadic childhood. Clockwise from right Musician and inventor Hoya Trebilcock says his idyllic existence inspired creativity. He has "fond memories" of living in the bush, hanging out with friends and playing his guitar.



Photography: Russell Shakespeares; David Showler; courtesy of Trebilcock family; Leigh Redhead and Sharon Strosiak

Conceived in teepees and born into a brave new world, Australia's first generation of "hippie kids" have come of age. But for all the freedoms associated with life on the commune, it wasn't all peace, love and mung beans. Some still bear the scars of their unconventional upbringing. By Claire Scobie.

Children of the

It was May 1973 and in Nimbin, a new era was dawning. Several thousand young people descended on the emerald hills of northern NSW for the Aquarius Festival. There was dancing, dope smoking and free love. Under the full moon, festival co-director Graeme Dunstan conceived his first child in a teepee. "She was named Softly Sigh and my second daughter wHolly High," he says. "We were hippies; we could have strange names."

After the festival, people bought the cheap dairy land – blocks of 100 hectares were selling for \$20,000 – with a vision of having babies and raising them in paradise. "We saw ourselves as building a community for the future," says environmental activist Dunstan, 63. "It was about getting people to live their dreams."

Thirty-three years later, those "children of the revolution" – brought up on alfalfa and date sandwiches, their early memories suffused with patchouli oil and incense – are coming of age. For some, childhood was a love-filled utopia. For others, freedom came at a price: dysfunction, tragedy and mental illness. Whether the path has been easy or not, children who were encouraged to "follow their bliss" bear the indelible marks of their unorthodox upbringing long into adulthood.

Often, they become creative individuals, like Hoya Trebilcock, a musician and inventor of 3-D games such as Catapults and Trapdoors. Trebilcock, now a short-haired 30-year-old with a goatee, lives near Apollo Bay in Victoria and has "fond memories" of living in remote valleys around Bellingen in northern NSW. "We would get flooded in for weeks at a time and then take a boat back to civilisation," he says.

In 1973, Hoya's parents, Ross and Bel, turned their backs on Melbourne to live with other like-minded families cheaply, self-sufficiently, in vast tracts of bush on the mid-North Coast of NSW. A decade later, they



Best of both worlds Sharon Shostak (top) on her property in Main Arm, NSW, and with her palomino (above) at age 11.

moved south; in 1986, the Trebilcocks bought a derelict cheese factory in Victoria's Nalangil, west of Colac. The property, surrounded by high walls, set on

two hectares and with studios, private living quarters and rehearsal spaces, became Wolfgang's Palace.

When the family arrived, recalls Hoya, "lots of dreadful rumours were spread – that we were satanic worshippers." Locals would "watch us walk barefoot down the street," says Ross. "We were scary in this ultra-conservative part of Victoria." Bohemian friends would come for extended stays to help work on the factory and to put on performances, an annual winter solstice party and then entire festivals. "Now it's more a venue than a home," says Bel, 54, with a laugh.

Hoya moved out nine years ago but his two brothers still live there with their families. International travellers working in exchange for board and lodging pass through. The Wolfgang Theatre Company now puts on at least one production a year, plays with mythological or environmental themes. "My daughter-in-law writes the scripts, the boys write the music," says Bel. "We've worked with local groups, including the Freemasons and the Lions, and we're respected. We've put our bit back into the community."

Not everyone has such cheerful memories of their hippie childhood. A 33-year-old Melbourne solicitor who grew up in the Byron Bay hinterland in NSW, and prefers to remain anonymous, views his parents' lifestyle as "intensely selfish. The ironic thing about the whole hippie idea is that those who choose to live in a community tend to become so self-absorbed that they don't do anything for the common good."

His parents stayed together until he was 16 but had an open relationship that he found difficult to cope with. Home life was "uncomfortable"; they lived in a basic wooden house with an outdoor shower. His parents told him to go to school only if he wanted to and at his primary school, he was bullied. "It was fierce, full of rednecks, and I didn't have the social conditioning to assimilate." Then at 18, in an effort →

Revolution

Right Asia Allison, 3, with mother Jennifer in India and (below right) today. Far right Paedor Stirling has made the short film *Commune Kids*.



to build structure into his own life, he studied law. He pauses over his latte. “Now I do yoga, then go to the office. It’s taken years to get my life back on track.”

Shortly after the Aquarius Festival ended, Sharon Shostak’s free-spirited mother, Helen – a flamboyant figure who wore flowers in her hair – left her husband, home and swimming pool and drove from Melbourne to Main Arm in northern NSW, with Sharon, then 9, and Darryl, 11. After Helen had a short affair with a Harley-riding musician who burned down her first house in a jealous rage, the Shostaks moved in with a neighbour who lived, hobbit-like, in a shingled dome.

“I remember walking up this snaky path through the forest to the dome,” recalls Sharon, now 42, a yoga teacher and filmmaker. “For the first three years, there was no electricity or running water.” And a toilet? She sighs. “It was 30 metres down the hill. The fantasy of a flush toilet became a bit of an obsession.”

Now, Sharon recalls the “incredible chaos” of the time. “People were falling apart,” she says. “There was so much stuff I had never seen before, walking into someone’s house and people were having sex, freaking out on drugs.”

At home, her mother kept “everything functioning” – regular bucket baths with rainwater; she bought Sharon a horse and encouraged her creativity. At the local barter markets, Sharon mastered her own puppet show. And with her brother, she would roam the hills and swim in creeks for hours. Sharon regards this side of her childhood as “idyllic. It was a small community, very safe.” But Sharon was devastated by the break-up of her parents. “I closed down on some level,” she says quietly. “It was survival.”

Then, when Sharon was 12, the Shostaks returned to Melbourne, where for three years Sharon attended Mount Scopus Memorial College, a Jewish co-ed private school. They returned to Main Arm and Sharon finished her education at Mullumbimby High School. “I was quite depressed for most of my 20s,” she says. “Partially because I hadn’t seen a functional relationship. My big journey was understanding that. There was a feeling of insecurity; a lack of trust.” At 26, she moved back to Main Arm from Melbourne: “I pieced my life together with mosaic work and yoga.”

Eight years ago, at 56, Sharon’s mother died of cancer. Sharon now lives on her property at Main Arm. “The death of a parent brings terrible loss. It also brings this incredible freedom – to create a new

reality. This doesn’t look like my mother’s world,” she says. Sharon lives in a house built from recycled timber. Inside her kitchen-cum-lounge are both a television and a glass-fronted cabinet filled with fresh fruit – Sharon and her husband are “raw foodies”. Their compost toilet is tiled with mosaics. Sharon smiles: “I wanted to give my daughters [Leelah, 5, and Cherimoya, 11] what I didn’t have.”

While Sharon has embraced some of her mother’s ideals, she has rejected others – like Helen Shostak’s pot-smoking habit. “I chose to live life with all the feelings – not to get stoned – and have a stable relationship. I live in harmony, consciously, with solar hot water, and feel part of a creative culture.”

Asia Allison, a 28-year-old lawyer who grew up in a commune called Elands on NSW’s mid-North Coast, found her background and pit toilet “mortifying” as a teenager. “I wanted stuff – a BMW, a nice house, beautiful clothes and make-up,” she says. Her reality could not have been more different. Elands was founded in 1975 around a “bearded guru” from California called Gladney Oakley, who envisioned a community to nurture a connection with the earth. There was a primary school, a co-op shop and bush houses. Brought up by her mother, who dressed “like Sienna Miller”, and stepfather, Allison then attended the nearby “conservative” Wingham High School.

“People were aggressive, writing ‘hippies stink’ on chairs,” says Allison, who as a 10-year-old had a bowl cut and wore homemade bohemian clothes

but is now elegant and manicured. “I responded by turning into a competitive freak.”

She was “cynical” when she left Elands in 1996 and after studying law at the University of NSW, entered a Sydney law firm. “At first I was hesitant to tell Mum my shoes cost \$400 and that I had spent \$280 in the hairdresser getting my roots done.” Even though she was earning about \$50,000 a year, she always had “a high credit card debt ... went to nice restaurants and partied fairly hard every weekend”.

About two years later, Allison started visiting Elands again. “After kind of despising it throughout my childhood”, she began to appreciate it. “I can’t be painted as an earthy type or a hippie,” she says. But now, “I don’t like to shop. It feels like a brain fog – a madness because it never stops.” She pauses. “At some point I got less ashamed. I realised that mainstream stuff is just middle-class mediocrity and my family, with all its kookiness, is very close.”

Juliet Lamont, 35, whose play *Strange Fruit* won the 2002 Mick Young Play Award and whose film *Burst* took second prize in this year’s Tropfest, divided her upbringing between Elands and the new-age Findhorn Community in Scotland. In 1972, when Juliet was 18 months, her Scottish parents, teacher Frances Lamont and mountaineer Jimmy Graham, first arrived in Australia. Four years later, they moved to New Zealand and lived in a city community in Chippenham for two years, where everyone was into “gender deconstruction”, recalls Juliet. “Men and



Left, top row Leigh Redhead today and as a budding novelist. Bottom row Playwright and filmmaker Juliet Lamont as a toddler with mother Frances, father Jimmy and brother Sean and today.

women lived in separate houses but all I remember is the smell of sex and baking bread.”

Graham was then sent to Antarctica and spent six months training NASA astronauts how to survive sensory deprivation in isolated conditions. “He was never sane again,” says Frances Lamont.

In 1979, back in Scotland, the doctors diagnosed him with schizophrenia, leaving Frances to bring up Juliet and her brother Sean alone. “Dad’s boundaries were pushed by living in alternative communities,” says Juliet. “He had a hard time with the freedom ... and found the whole hippie thing self-indulgent.”

Spending age eight to 14 in Findhorn, famous for its 18-kilogram cabbages (said to be grown with the assistance of “devas” – plant spirits) was “one of the best things that happened in my childhood. Real respect was shown for the potential of young people.”

But after six years, Frances Lamont had had enough and in 1985, on an impulse, booked flights back to Australia and arrived in Elands. “It felt like a dream,” says Juliet, then 14. Homework was done by candlelight; porridge was cooked over a fire in the morning. “It was an absolutely delicious experience.”

Novelist Leigh Redhead, 35, who also spent four years at Elands during her peripatetic upbringing, recalls her own mother’s “radical feminist lesbian phase” in the mid-1970s. Leigh and her brother lived in a truck on a community called Amazon Acres, near Wauchope in northern NSW. “I remember trying to be butch and pee standing up. Mum had a crew

cut and seeing her in bed with another woman was normal.” When Redhead was seven, the family uprooted. “Mum fell in love with a black [male] jazz musician and for two years we lived in Munich. We didn’t go to school but I read a lot. “

Redhead now lives in Brisbane, is married and writing her third book while studying for a masters in creative writing at the University of Queensland. Her mother has led a settled life for the past 20 years, living in Lennox Head, near Byron Bay. Leigh’s first crime novel, *Peepshow*, draws on her time working as a lingerie waitress and stripper.

“The sex industry is another alternative community,” she says. “I feel more comfortable among freaky people. There’s no pussyfooting around. It’s like in the hippie world; society thinks we’re deviants.” Grateful for her upbringing, especially the freedom, the lack of materialism and “being treated like an adult”, Leigh admits that it wasn’t all perfect. “There are lots of rivalries and petty jealousies” – and lots of body hair. “Now I’m into Brazilian waxes.”

Paedor Stirling has made *Commune Kids*, a short film chronicling life in the Robb Road community in the Nimbin hills, where he grew up. After living an “organic lifestyle” for 18 years, Paedor (Celtic for Peter) moved from “one end of the earth to the other, to middle-class America”, and studied cinema production at Ithaca College in New York.

Life on Robb Road, a 40-hectare property with a central communal house that was home to about

13 families, was idyllic, says Stirling. “The people I grew up with are like family.” Growing up in a stable, earthy environment has given Stirling a deep sense of belonging. After five years in the US, with prospects of “making lots of money”, he was homesick. The surfer now lives at Bondi and edits news at Network 10.

The yearning to come home also proved too strong for Sharon Shostak, who tried living in the city, studying psychology and film theory at Queensland University before making short Super 8 films. In 2004, her film *The Deep Pool* won first prize in the New York Short Film Festival.

While Shostak has created her own rainforest sanctuary, the co-op shop has closed down in the Elands community. “The hippie thing was beautiful in the early stages but then it just degenerated,” says Asia Allison. With children as young as eight trying pot, there was a propensity for teenagers to suffer mentally.

“There was a large percentage who had bipolar. Some of them have got through it,” she says. She counts on her fingers. “I can think of five people I knew.” Was this because of the lack of boundaries? “I think part of it is that and lack of parental structure – not love, because there was plenty of love.”

“Terrible things did happen. Parents weren’t always paying attention. I’m aware of sexual molestation in two communities [in the Nimbin hills],” says Graeme Dunstan, whose own daughters are “accomplished in the world”. Softly Sigh is a graphic designer in London and wHolly High (now known as Holly) is at Yale doing a postdoctorate in anthropology.

After having two daughters of her own, Juliet Lamont says, “This anger has come up in retrospect. At the time I didn’t feel unsafe at all ... but I think there was lots of sexual abuse at Elands. If it wasn’t extreme cases, it was inappropriate behaviour – a total objectifying of young female bodies ... the girls were the hot things on the mountain.”

These days, she continues, “everyone at Elands has mobiles, four-wheel drives. It’s a very different aesthetic. It’s not a collective mass of enlightened people who are going to change the world.”

But back then, adds Lamont’s mother, Frances, who lives with her son, Sean, and his family north of Byron Bay, “We were people of our time challenging the dominant paradigm.” Any regrets? “None at all. I’ve always wanted my kids to be part of a universal family, fighting for a just and peaceful world.” ●