



"Blah, blah blah and furthermore ... blah"

"Hang on, which way's up?"



What really goes on behind the scenes at *Countdown*? Andrea Jones takes a look at the rock stars, the film clips, the glamour and of course, Molly Meldrum...



"Who's running this show anyway?"

behind the scenes on

Countdown

Hey Mick (Jagger, of course!) this isn't Just Another Night, this is *Countdown Night!*"

As Gavin Wood launches into another episode of *Countdown*, it's estimated that coast-to-coast across Australia, around two million people are watching.

To anyone with a serious interest in rock music, *Countdown* isn't just another TV show, it's a way of life. Every Sunday night at 6pm their lives stop for *Countdown* and the next day it is the topic of discussion in offices and classrooms around the country.

So how does *Countdown* come together? Well, we decided to go behind the scenes and investigate what the fascinating world of high-drama, politics, enormous (and we mean h-u-g-e) egos and, er, of course, rock and roll.

It begins on Monday when the publicists from all the record companies descend on the *Countdown* office in a small building just around the corner from the *Countdown* studios. Armed with all the latest releases and videos hot off the presses, it's their job to try to ensure that their artists make it on to *Countdown*.

Meanwhile, the *Countdown* producers, swamped under a deluge of videos, singles, photos and press

releases, have the daunting — and very powerful — job of deciding what songs are going to be hits and which videos are going to be the most entertaining to watch on TV.

Also on Monday, the same process takes place at Molly Meldrum's house where chaos, mayhem and party atmosphere merge as records scream out of the speakers, other songs flash across the video screen, the phone rings incessantly and people wander everywhere.

Going to Molly's is an experience unlike anything else on earth. Before I started work here at Dolly I worked as a publicist for a record company and I will never forget my first encounter with Molly.

It was Monday afternoon, long after all the other reps had left. Outside the house sat Molly's scratched, bumped and battered Rolls, encased in about six months of inner city dirt and grime.

The high security gate at the front was flung wide open, the front door was open and the corridor stretched all the way out to the back where the French doors on to the pool were wide open... Open house, indeed!

There wasn't a sign of anyone about when a hunched, slightly chunky figure in a brief pair of speedos and a baseball



The Countdown crew at work



Molly and Marc strike gold



Sigh ... there's just so much to do

cap marched ahead of me through the gate, on through the house, out the other end and dived straight into the pool.

I knocked tentatively at the front door and then wandered down the hall past rooms sumptuously decorated with antiques and Egyptian artifacts.

"Hi," said a small blonde woman emerging from the sunroom. "My name's Lynne. Can I get you a drink?"

"Thanks," I said, watching Molly splashing up and down the pool. Nobody had even asked who I was yet!

Outside seated at a wrought iron table by the pool was Lawrie Masterson, the editor of TV Week and the man who ghost-writes Molly's TV Week columns. He was sitting there, shirtless, taking in the sun while a typewriter sat on the table in front of him.

I sat clutching my drink and observing through the French windows of the sunroom.

"You're lucky you didn't arrive five minutes earlier!" said Lynne rolling her

eyes in an expression that indicated there'd been a dramatic scene just before I arrived.

Molly walked in clutching a towel. "Ummm!" ... All eyes were rivetted to Molly who was stalking and scowling ... then he walked off.

Soon afterwards, he stormed back in demanding "Where's my keys?" Everyone left out of their chairs and anxiously started looking for the keys. Molly walked off again and poured himself a rum and cola. Then he disappeared.

Other people drifted in and out, poured themselves drinks and vanished. I settled back in my chair while Lynne played hostess, talking animatedly about the Australian cricketers that had been around for dinner the night before.

Lynne Randell had been a pop singer herself back in the 60s but now she was a professional houseminder. At the moment she was gardener-cum-telephone-answerer for Molly, but, she'd told him,

he'd have to increase her wage because she'd been offered more money minding houses.

Suddenly Molly reappeared again, the towel wrapped around his waist. He'd found the keys but he was still flustered. (I later realised he wasn't unusually flustered, that's just Molly!)

"OK," he said walking out to Lawrie. "... 's got a new album out and I want to talk about ... they'll be touring next month ..." Lawrie began tapping at the keys.

Finally, Molly turned back inside and fixed me with a look that wasn't brimming with warmth and said "Yes, love?"

I gave him the records and explained a bit about them and the artists. He took them into the next room where the stereo equipment sat at one end of the room while at the other end, the wall was dominated by a gigantic video screen.

He put the first record on the turntable and turned it up r-e-a-l-l-o-u-d. "He has to get 'the vibe'!" Lynn shouted in my ear.

And it's pretty important that Molly does get "the vibe" about a song, because, *Countdown* is the most powerful showcase for any artist trying to break into the rock scene. What's more, the people behind *Countdown* know this and they have an unspoken two-week embargo on a single after it has been released in which they can decide whether or not they want to use the song. During this time record companies are unable to offer the video to any other rock TV show.

"*Countdown*, as far as ratings are concerned is way ahead, you put all the other shows together and they still don't rate as much as *Countdown*," Molly maintained. "Also, we spend a lot of time and money doing live performances with the artists, so for those reasons, we don't want to come up with a show of regurgitated material that's been shown already over the weekend. We simply say to record companies we would like first use for those reasons and if you feel it should go elsewhere

first, then we'll think twice immediately about putting it in our show."

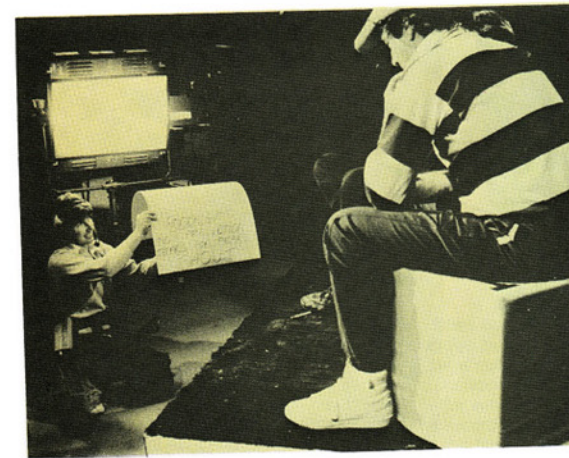
So I left Molly with the records and, like all the other publicists, crossed my fingers as I walked out the open door and open gate feeling as dazed as if I'd just been to another planet.

Tuesday morning, Molly drives down to the *Countdown* offices for the "production meeting" with the executive producer Grant Rule, the producers and director. This is where they select which bands will appear on the show.

"We sit around and fight and scream and yell and have long lists, short lists and a lot of rubbers," Molly laughed. But finally, when the dust has settled, Sunday's *Countdown* starts to take shape.

On Tuesday afternoon, the producer will start to watch all the videos that have been selected again, familiarising himself with the material and watching out for any segments that may be unsuitable for 6pm viewing. He also meets with the designer and lighting director and they start to plan the sets for any live acts.

Best legs in the business!



"Make sure you get my best side"

Marc makes up for Countdown



On Wednesday morning, the songs are shuffled into order but nothing is completely definite as Grant Rule explained. "There's always late changes. If a new video arrives, say, a new Cyndi Lauper single, then we go back to square one."

But by Thursday morning most of the show is finalised and the assistant director starts to physically assemble the video tapes together.

Then, that afternoon, John Peters, a Melbourne DJ and the scriptwriter for *Countdown*, drops into the office on the way to his evening radio show to discuss with the producers and the researcher exactly what Gavin Wood and the host will say.

Meanwhile, the producer's assistant types out the show's running schedule, a script which includes the time (down to seconds) of each film clip, all the camera angles and technical details.

Overnight, the rigging crews move into the studio and begin to assemble the sets and lighting. By Friday morning,

Countdown is ready to roll.

Normally Friday's rehearsals get underway early in the morning. But the episode we observed was simpler than usual as the producers had to scrap plans for a "live" show with a studio audience when it was discovered that Spandau Ballet, the planned hosts, were delayed overseas. So instead they'd opted for an "insert" show, which means film clips strung together with a live host but no live bands and no studio audience.

At around 2.30 in the afternoon Molly and this week's host Marc Hunter arrive at the studio. Molly dashed about chatting to people while Marc sipped coffee in the canteen with his record company publicist.

Half an hour later the pair strolled into the make-up room where a make-up artist went to work, giving them larger-than-life healthy glows.

Soon, it was time for the dress rehearsal. Inside the dark, cavernous studio, the *Countdown* set took up only a tiny

corner. Alongside the set, Gavin Wood was perched in his tiny booth which looked like he was sitting in a television set. Above the studio loomed the control room with its large windows which look down on to the set. This is where the director and the technical crew run the show, with a desk full of switches and a bank of TV monitors.

Meanwhile, Marc Hunter sauntered in and perched himself on the set, using a script to fan his face under the hot studio lights.

"OK, standby," called the producer's assistant.

The opening graphics flashed across the monitor and Gavin began . . . "Tonight on *Countdown* . . . Although the dress rehearsal is a deadly serious exercise for the technicians, for Molly, Gavin and the hosts it's also mixed with a lot of frivolity and fun. Gavin's introductions to various artists are laced with irreverent comments and Molly fires back cutting retorts from the control room. Everyone chuckles and Molly



Gavin Wood oversees proceedings



Molly makes up



Molly in a pensive mood



behind the scenes



Meldrum's Humdrum in full swing

mutters, "I sometimes wish we could have a (non-censored) *Countdown* that went to air at 2am!"

Marc Hunter, who is quite an experienced hand at hosting *Countdown*, has to race to the airport after the show and hop on a plane to get to a Dragon performance in Adelaide that night and he looks preoccupied as he reads off the giant cue cards that are held up next to the camera.

Soon it's time for Humdrum and Molly hops down the spiral stairs into the studio and perches on a block next to Marc. He runs through the news, turns to Marc and says "Hi Marc, welcome to the show da-de-dah-de-dah, blah-blah-blah." Marc responds "blah-blah-blah." With that, Humdrum is finished. (And you wonder why Humdrum always seems to run overtime!)

Soon, the show is over. "OK everyone," Grant rises from his seat at the console. "We've got a five-minute turn-around. We start taping in five minutes."

Everyone dashes out to the canteen while the technician hastily rewinds the video tape. After a quick cup of coffee everyone is in position again. Marc nervously adjusts the velvet ribbon on his ponytail and the record light goes on. No funny business this time, this is Sunday night television.

Fifty-five minutes later it's all over, another week's work, another *Countdown* is in the can.

During the coffee break I asked Molly (who'll be 40 next year) how long he can go on hosting *Countdown*? "Well, obviously I can't go on forever. I'll be with the show another couple of years, but however, I am looking for other people to take over the visual role. And I've got other things I want to do with music, with television and films."

So how long can *Countdown* go on then? "*Countdown* can go on as long as music!" With that, he leaps up and he's off. It's 5pm and he hasn't eaten all day — there are so many things in Molly's life to do . . . **D**