

Speech by David O'Brien

Esplanade Alliance member and Espy musician from Loin Groin

24 June, 2001

Ladies & Gentlemen, Music industry people, and friends of the Espy!

As most of you will already know, the Espy is up for sale. For the Espy, as we know it, this could be a good thing, or a bad thing. In the right hands, there is now scope to continue a great Espy tradition -- promotion of original live music and comedy and the arts. In the wrong hands, another of Melbourne's vibrant live music venues could disappear. This, in itself, would be a shame. But it is more so because it is the Espy. It all depends on who ends up buying it. Who the Becton Corporation, its current owners, decides to sell it to.

Many of you will recall the rallies that took place on this spot almost three years ago, protesting Becton's development plans for the site. Becton's proposals then, made a clear commitment to keeping the hotel and its culture going as it is. But the pay-off they were asking was to allow a 38-storey tower to be built on the land behind it.

Luckily the tower was defeated, but the future of the hotel itself has remained in the balance since then.

The separation of the hotel building from the rest of Becton's development site now frees it from being a pawn in the development game, but still leaves its fate completely up in the air.

We're here today to say that, the Espy, as an open, live music venue, must live on!

Our city cannot afford to lose another live music venue. And Melbourne cannot afford to lose the Espy!

This place is a totally unique cultural institution! It presents live music and comedy in a style all its own, with a door policy open to all.

The Espy has been at the heart of St Kilda's music culture for well over a century. In the 1920s it was a Mecca for jazz and big-band swing. In the 80s it was rock 'n roll, blues and rockabilly punk. And in 2001 it's still packing them in, every night of every week, serving up it's smorgasbord of fresh and faded talent to its distinctly diverse audience.

For the last twenty years or so, the Espy has been the incubator of much of Australia's music industry talent. It's the only place that has consistently provided unknown bands and comedy acts with a stage and a large audience. It's been the launching pad for many bands and the home base for many, many more. Without it, I don't know where we'd be. It's a must-have on every Australian non-mainstream musician's CV. And it commands a loyalty among its performers and its punters unequalled by any venue in Australia.

This is a cultural institution we cannot afford to lose. It is an absolute icon of St Kilda, of Melbourne, and of Australia's music and comedy live performance culture.

We, who love the place, must send a clear message to all potential buyers of the Espy that it is not something to be toyed with and turned over to some extraneous commercial vision. It is not the place for another boutique hotel, upmarket pub, glitzy disco complex, pokie palace or exclusive club.

The public must forewarn prospective buyers that they should think carefully and creatively, understand the real nature and potential of what we have here, before they commit millions of their dollars. The Espy needs the right owners to nurture it, to understand it and to let it be what it really is. Buyers out there who see it just as a location, location, location are going to get it very, very wrong!

The Esplanade Alliance, which is the local group that led the protest against the high rise on this site, is continuing its fight to save the Espy. We're hoping that there are suitable and sensitive bidders out there right now preparing their tenders. The Espy needs them, and there is absolutely no question that anyone with the right vision for the future of the place will get our full support, and gratitude, if they get it right.

But to put our money where our mouth is, and to ensure that there is at least one serious bidder in there with a full-on vision to keep the Espy as the Espy, we've taken the initiative, on behalf of the community, to enter the bidding process.

The Esplanade Alliance has set up a not-for-profit company called the Esplanade Hotel Foundation, which is currently negotiating with reputable commercial operators and various community and cultural organisations, who are committed to the same vision, to work out a bid that will ensure the Espy's survival.

The fact the Esplanade Hotel Foundation is in the market as a bidder gives everybody the opportunity to have a voice in the process. You can be confident that there will be at least one bid that will do the right thing by the hotel.

At this time and in this economic climate, we need to be an active player if we want the Espy to continue as an affordable and accessible venue for leading edge, live music, comedy and art. Private operators have a key role to play in the Espy, but so do others, including the Local and State governments, the music industry and the Espy's patrons and admirers.

You can back our bid by filling in a pledge form. These pledges will not, on their own, buy the pub. The time was too short for tin-rattling to raise the money needed for the bid itself. But the pledges will go a long way to demonstrating how strongly people feel about the Espy and what it stands for.

And if the Esplanade Hotel Foundation bid is successful your pledges will go towards fixing up the two upstairs floors and opening them up to more music related activities -- such as radio, recording studios, rehearsal space and performance space.

Your voice, your participation, can be expressed today with a pledge to support the Esplanade Hotel Foundation in its pursuit of its aims.

With a little bit of luck and with your commitment and support the Espy will keep rockin'!

Thank you