

SHOOTING COVID-19

As soon as the words 'pandemic' and 'Australia' appeared in the same sentence, thoughts of the 1918 Spanish Flu flashed up like spotlights in my eyes. If Covid-19's impact on our shores was to become as big as I thought it might, it would be my biggest and most important shoot since my Vietnam Moratorium days. Having seen neighbours die in front of me from the previous global pandemic of HIV/Aids in the mid-eighties, I needed no convincing about what could happen.

As it turned out, I was right. Capturing Covid-19 took me to Queensland's and South Australia's border lockdowns, through the Alpha, Delta, and Omicron variants, and all six of Victoria's lockdowns - right up to the screaming crowds on Victoria's Parliament steps in the final seconds before the controversial Andrews' Pandemic Bill was voted on in the Upper House at 3 pm on Dec 2nd, 2021. At times, I felt just part of the landscape. Other times it felt as though I was on a giant theatre stage – a part of the scene with the actors surrounding me following an unwritten script fuelled by hyper energy, fear, anger, and raw passion. It was my job to look, listen and photograph, nothing more.

This article will give an insight into how I documented some of the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia, showcasing the reality of what life was like during this time, so that we, and future generations, never forget - even after it's replaced by the next big story.

2020 - Early March.

Early March 2020 was the last time I saw Melbourne's CBD looking anything close to the 'normal' we all once knew - a vibrant 24-hour city. But this changed, and so fast.

There were still people at Melbourne Central when I stopped by to shoot, and the only reality check for me that something was amiss was that around half of the people were wearing protective face masks - possibly university students and definitely not tourists. Were they aware of something I didn't yet know about?

My shoots began in earnest, capturing long queues snaking their way impatiently into my local supermarket, and the fear-fuelled panic buying inside. The empty shelves reminded me of what it might look like during a mice plague - stripped bare. In just one day all the supermarket staff were hidden behind face masks.

Panic buying was followed by panic selling. Suburban High Street stores bore signs declaring 'Everything \$15' and 'All \$5, no offer refused' - but there were no people in the street to buy anymore. A sign on a shopfront read 'Hospital grade sanitizer - kills 99.9% of germs,' and a suburban chemist's sandwich board advertised iodine nasal sprays. An outer suburban store had moved its tables out onto the roadside selling protective gloves, face masks, and hand sanitisers, with a sign that read 'No cash sales, EFTPOS only'.

Over the next two weeks, during my many visits to the CBD, I started to see the city emptying of people and vehicles a little more each day, rapidly becoming colourless and a much, much quieter place.

A sign outside the State Library read 'State Library temporarily closed.' Crossing over Swanston to the Church of Christ, I read about Zoom Church. 'What did online and Zoom mean to a church?' I asked myself. I met the last remaining street artist - a barefooted young woman working on a large portrait in oils on canvas. I wondered who the client was, if they would call back to pick it up and, more importantly, pay her for her work. There were still a few homeless people keeping the city company, backs against the walls, heads bowed with their cups at their feet. Were they the last to be told why there were no longer people in the street and coins in the cup?

My next discovery was that the Stock Exchange was closed, and I was told they were working from home. This required a giant leap of my imagination to process as I walked back down into the street over a chalked message on the pavement that read, 'Who killed the world?'

I, like many, was continually struggling to absorb what was happening and trying to reprocess what I thought I knew yesterday.

Each day I visited the CBD, and every day it became more and more deserted. My photos began to focus on faceless people hiding behind masks, sunglasses, and hats - their heads down and their pace fast. You could forget about Big Brother's facial recognition and CCTV surveillance back then. Federation Square was occupied exclusively by resting seagulls, whilst a giant picture of a seagull looked down on them from the electronic sign saying 'Square Closed.'

2020 - March 23rd

My next shoot showed long queues of young and old, including families with babes in arms, lined up for hours at Centrelink offices all over Melbourne. This, for me, was a chilling insight into what the stock market crash of 1929 might have felt like - not knowing what tomorrow would bring.

Next came my first encounter with a new Covid-19 Screening Clinic at the Alfred Hospital, where a line of eight people stood queuing. A plea of 'Please Stay at Home' (still appearing wet) was crudely painted across the back windows of an ambulance pulling into the hospital.

My third stop was the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital grounds. With rows of whiter-than-white pop-up tents and not a person in sight, my thoughts instantly went back to when it was the Heidelberg Military Hospital, set up to accommodate returning WW2 injured soldiers in 1941. I questioned if this was, in fact, the beginning of an emergency hospital or a quarantine station. Was there something our government wasn't telling us?

LOCKDOWN No. 1

2020 - March 30th

'Stay at Home' signs appeared on many of the roads across town as Easter approached. Police patrolled the sands at Middle Park Beach to enforce compliance with the health order to 'stay at home.' As defiant bathers argued with officers they provided the perfect foreground to two super-sized cruise ships at the Port Melbourne Pier. A little further down the sand at Brighton Beach, I found two elderly men perched on their fold-up chairs in the centre of the empty beach having their picnic lunch, despite the 'Beach Closed' order plastered over the entrance. The bathing boxes were the perfect backdrop, as the men looked out at the featureless flat bay. Shades of Neville Shute's 1959 post-apocalyptic film 'On the Beach' sprang to mind.

As the lockdown continued, all beaches and waterways, including the Surf and Otway coasts, were closed. A giant notice, hand-painted in fluoro pink in the centre of the road into Portsea declared 'No Holiday, Stay at Home' – making it clear to any arriving visitors (who may have arrived from another planet that is). Red and white tape with the word 'DANGER' was strung across all public amenities, including BBQ seating and toilets, in all the seaside towns.

2020 - April 13th

I packed my bags and headed north to photograph the highly publicised infected Ruby Princess cruise ship. I made a quick stop in Albury just before dark, to take what was to become an iconic image of Latrobe University's red billboard announcing 'The world is reshaping, So are we.' As I headed up the Hume, night fell with virtually no traffic behind or in front of me for the entire trip to Wollongong. The feeling was surreal - like driving into a very long time tunnel. It was unsettling. The feeling was surreal and unsettling – like driving into an endless long time tunnel.

My early morning shoot of the Ruby Princess was rewarded with good light. With my shots in the bag and on my way back to Melbourne along the Princes Highway, I passed through the Gippsland towns and saw the same terrible desperation in their business world as there was in Melbourne. Motels, shops, car-yards, fairs, and exhibitions all wore signs saying the same thing - 'Closed' and 'Closed until further notice,' as the towns fell into darkness with nothing open and not a soul on the street. Despite all this, one total optimist displayed a sign saying, 'Dear customers, sorry we are closed for a few days.'

2020 - April 15th

Back in Melbourne, and before I headed back to the studio, I returned to the Alfred Hospital to photograph the animated light show on the face of the hospital, singing praise and thanks to our frontline carers. Little did I, or anyone else, know then, that this was only the beginning.

2020 - April 22nd

With the announcement of the closure of the border into South Australia, I headed straight for Mt. Gambier. With shots in the bag of the South Australian Police vehicle inspections and

border closure signs, I hit the Great Ocean Road, and once again I saw that 'For Lease' signs had spread like the virus all the way from Portland to Geelong. Camping grounds, reserves, coastal and national parks all saying closed, closed, closed – including the Twelve Apostles. As I drove, appearing to be the only car on the road, I thought of those shop owners and their families in those coastal businesses, missing out on this essential Easter tourist income, that so many relied upon.

As I arrived at my old favourite stomping ground, Lorne, there was not a single person or car in the main street, Mountjoy Parade. Every shop was shut, and red and white danger tape was wrapped across outdoor seating, playground equipment, and across the pier entrances. It was a sight that shocked me to my core, and it's one I doubt I'll ever forget. Just for a moment, I felt as though I was the only person left on planet Earth.

2020 - April 25th Anzac Day Ceremony canceled

With no intel or research staff backup, I left home at 4 am to find a suburban dawn service, armed only with my confidence and my cameras. In the dark, I stopped anyone I could find to ask if they'd seen any signs of a street dawn service being set up. I was directed to a certain street by a friendly early morning jogger and, in total darkness just as the sounds of Canberra's Dawn Commemorative Service started to fill the streets through a loudspeaker, I set up. Very quietly, I focused on a family standing in their driveway around a fire in a cradle holding candles in their hands. As I looked down the street I saw every home had people with candles standing at their entrances in the dark. No flashes this time, only the sound of my camera shutter set on quiet mode. As the ceremony concluded and dawn broke, I explained my unexpected arrival and apologized for gate-crashing. It was accepted and understood. I later returned with prints to remind them that regardless of everything and anything, 'We will remember them'.

With my bags already packed, I headed off to Sydney. I stopped at Benalla just in time to photograph a father and daughter and two decorated servicemen at the War Memorial paying their respects, despite the total ban on Anzac Day services. For me, that image serves as another powerful reminder that yes, we will remember them – no matter what.

2020 - April 26th Bondi beach and Queensland borders closed

To slow the spread of the virus, Bondi Beach was officially closed for the first time since 1943. How could I not be there? My shots focused on the people walking along the promenade at the iconic foreshore, with an empty beach, clubrooms, and the 'Beach Closed' sign as my background. The only other time Bondi had ever been closed to the public was during WW2, due to it having been fired upon by one of the Japanese miniature submarines. In 2020, the threat was coming from a different direction, this time without the need for barbed wire and trenches on the beach.

Traveling further north, I was stopped by Queensland Border Control, and declared I had been to Bondi which was considered a 'hot spot'. I couldn't cross the border, but was turned around to get my shots from a bridge on the NSW side, overlooking the checkpoint heavily manned by SES, ADF, and Queensland Police on the freeway into Queensland. That was all I

had come for. I'm still trying to work out how the Coolangatta Queensland Border Control worked - smack bang in the middle of the shops on Griffith Street in Coolangatta. My final Queensland border closure shots came from south of Warwick at Wallangarra.

2020 - May 1st The changing face of Melbourne by night

May 1st was Melbourne's night of tribute in response to the tragic loss of four police officers on the freeway, with many of the city's buildings lit up in blue. I was able to get a good shot of police officers taking photos of the all-blue Flinders Street Station, shot from behind, just before we were all drenched in a rain shower. Later that night, with the roads wet, I headed to the West Gate Bridge to shoot it without any vehicles. The next night I captured the Eastern Freeway midweek at 6 pm with hardly a car on it, with a city skyline backdrop, without the lights that make a city, a city.

By now, Melbourne at night had completely changed. The only lights left shining in the CBD were from the few essential service take-away food shops on Swanston and Elizabeth Streets. In the suburbs of Prahran and South Yarra, a continuous line of scooter drivers lit the otherwise empty streets. Some of the brightest lights came from Little Tim Tams serving take away, wearing his recognizable bright oversized red afro hairpiece and waving to everyone and anyone who went past, including the riders leaving his opposition, Betty's Burgers.

By contrast, the Italian heartland of Lygon Street in Carlton was a confronting scene of stacked tables and chairs covered with plastic in the dark. While there, I used a lit-up bus shelter to change the batteries in my camera. Its lightbox sign said 'Hello Neighbour' and yes, you can be sure I said 'hello' back on that lonely dark night. Sitting on the cold bench, I looked across to read the bottom line of the sign - 'We're here for you - Lifeline.' That stopped me in my tracks for a moment. I imagined and hoped others, more in need of help than me, would also find it, just like I had.

On my return to the studio, I stopped to photograph a new message on a builder's hoarding. It read, 'It is the end of days,' and directly behind it was the word 'Liberty,' of the newly and still only partially built Liberty Petrol Station.

2020 - May 13th

When the virus outbreak hit at Cedar Meats, Ridges on Swanston, and the Stamford Plaza Hotel, I was right onto it, with an afternoon shoot at Cedar Meats. Later that night, while editing, I tried to imagine what it might look like as a day-break shoot. I set the alarm for 3.30 am, and was rewarded once again.

As I continued on my rounds, I next found a car park full of abandoned taxis, resting bumper to bumper. Was this industry another casualty of this pandemic? The sentiment of 'The World is changing, So are we,' kept coming back to me.

Walking through the totally empty and silent DFO shopping complex told the same sad story. Centre aisles were all taped up with red and white, shop windows were adorned with signs declaring 'Massive sale discounts 70-90% off,' - a sad reminder still there, long after the final

shutters were drawn and the owners had walked away. I dread to think of those business owners, some undoubtedly also struggling to cope with their children's online remote learning. All the time the owners of these small and medium businesses were bleeding away their savings on rent, insurance, leasing contracts, utilities, and stacks of other charges the general public was totally unaware of. If they survived this round, they would then need to cover holidays and long service for their long-term loyal employees. Family inheritances and loans, overdrafts, other borrowings - not to mention their family dreams - were all on the line. Unless you're in business for yourself it's difficult to understand the hollow feeling of hopelessness that the loss of your business would bring - I imagine it would feel like the death of a young member of your family.

Heading back to my studio, I passed the locked down Luna Park - lights off, not a soul in sight, the iconic laughing entrance suddenly not seeming so joyful anymore. The old Aussie adage of 'she'll be right mate' was taking one hell of a battering.

The next day I had my first chance to shoot the Flinders Street Station, covering St. Kilda Road and Flinders Street, without a person or car in sight through my super wide 10mm lens. I had been waiting for that shot from day one. Further up in the deserted Burke Street Mall I shot the Melbourne Visitors' Tourist booth, surrounded by piled up bright orange road bollards, and with a road sign in the centre saying 'detour'. On the other side of the booth, a sign read 'Feel the City.'

All this time there had been a shot I'd been wanting to get of a street hoarding in Chapel Street, Prahran. I had returned to it at least a dozen times, just waiting for good light and for it to be clear of cars so that the four-meter-high words 'WHATS NEXT?' painted across it wouldn't be obscured. Then, my chance finally came. An hour went by as I waited for a pedestrian to come past to give the hoarding a sense of scale, all the while hoping no cars would pull in to block the powerful question. At last, a girl who was passing saw me and my camera across the road, and spontaneously gave me a quick dance move in front of the sign. Got it. Without a word, I sent her a hand-on-heart signal of love and thanks, as she'd helped me to create an image of the optimism of the young in those most troubled of times. I hope she gets to see the picture on our website.

Next, I headed north to Keilor Downs, one of the virus hot spots, to go door-to-door with a team of young health workers in uniform. They were door-knocking homes, promoting the pop-up testing sites in a nearby street, with the message 'Feeling sick? Get tested.'

2020 - May 26th School's back!

May brought another short reprieve from lockdowns, and schools were back in full swing. St. Kilda Primary School celebrated this joyous event with its traditional St. Kilda colours splashed unashamedly across a giant banner running along the entire fence, saying 'Welcome Back Darlings.'

During the lockdown and remote learning, children's art had popped up like mushrooms across town. Their Spoonville installations, with their cheerfully painted wooden spoon faces, were enjoyed by communities yearning to stay connected. Trees were decorated and pavements turned to canvases where chalked rainbows flourished, many saying 'we are all in this together' - even though we knew, you and I that is, that we were *not* all in it 'together'.

I kept heading back to the CBD, searching for the evolution of the pandemic's impact on the city, aware that many things would be fleeting and never to be seen again. A night shot taken at the intersection of Flinders and Elizabeth Streets of seagulls resting in a silent dimmed-down city spoke volumes. Depressing signs on rows of windows shouted 'All Stock Must Go', 'For Lease' and 'Going, Going, Gone' - just like the owners, the buyers, and any sign of life left in our CBD on life support. All that appeared to be left now were piled-up letters and bills jammed in letterboxes and under the shop doors.

Driving up Sydney Road through Brunswick and Coburg, it struck me that parts were reminiscent of a gigantic film set, locked down the night before filming - no cars, no people, and shops all shut. A trip to the airport was just as surreal, like visiting a brand-new airport before it was opened - silent, no operating signs, no workers, and no lights on in any terminals.

A Dandenong real estate board advertised a Covid-19 special deal. I tracked down an enterprising tradesman named Leigh, who had a painting of himself in Superman gear and a protective face mask beautifully painted on the sides of his electrician service van. I took a top shot of him wearing his mask standing in front of his artwork-covered van. Just as enterprising was a tobacconist, who stayed open during the mandated lockdown of nonessential businesses, making themselves an 'essential service' by placing a few packs of Cornflakes and Coco Pops in the window. Light comic relief came via a face mask on Matthew Flinders' statue, and the Premier's 'Get on the Beers' inspired artwork on a hotel wall.

2020 - June 6th

The Black Lives Matter Rally

Life and sound returned to the CBD for just a few hours with the Black Lives Matter Rally on the Parliament steps. For the record, just about all the attendees were wearing the correct face masks. The city fell quiet once again, with a minute's silence for the many Aboriginal Australians who have died in custody. I read a placard saying, '432 deaths – Zero Convictions,' and another with 'Indigenous Lives Matter.' If you collected all the posters, the banners, stickers, and messages on t-shirts from this large rally and put them in a blender, it would come out with one loud-and-clear message: HAVE RESPECT. The following weeks saw the Global Warming Rally, with the simple message, 'Covid Today - Climate Tomorrow.'

2020 - July 5th

The sudden lockdown of the Boundary Road housing towers in North Melbourne called for a night shoot, and I photographed the large police presence surrounding the towers' exits. Across the road, a giant warehouse was a hive of activity and traffic chaos. A constant flow of donated food and other essentials began arriving in the dark within hours of the announcement, lit only by car lights. Families of African and Arabic heritage knew what their neighbours needed, and were not waiting till the next day or for any official paperwork to take compassionate action. I was taken in to witness the reaction to this gift of food on a gigantic scale, but asked not to photograph. It brought to mind the kind of work we see UNICEF doing in refugee camps, but this was in Melbourne. It's something I will never forget, stored forever only in my memory bank.

Early the next morning I was at the Racecourse Road Housing Towers in Flemington, just in time to see the 'Free Food Freshly Cooked Vegetarian Sikh Community – Especially For Needy People,' bus pull into the towers with its message running along the side: 'Love all. Share All.' Pallets of dairy food and other produce began arriving, quickly unloaded by Victoria Police, who carried them into the tower to be distributed. The unseen work of the Victorian Police Force during that time cannot be underestimated.

LOCKDOWN No. 2

2020 - July 8th Entry to NSW restricted

Once again on short notice, and with just enough time for a shower and repack of food, I was off to Albury to capture the NSW midnight border closure to Victorians. At the border, every car was checked - including taxis and buses. Without knowing when and if the border lockdowns would end in these constantly changing times, I felt an urgency to cover not just Albury, but also the other border crossings at Moama, Swan Hill, and Mildura.

My best shots from this shoot were taken in Mildura, with the mighty Murray River Bridge all lit up in the background, NSW police in yellow safety vests under lights, red road barricades, and an endless parade of cars and trucks to choose from. It was a freezing -2 degrees at 9 o'clock that night. It was the first time the borders had been closed since 1919, when the Spanish Flu pandemic killed around 15,000 Australians.

2020 - July 27th Aged Care disaster

One of the most distressing parts of this pandemic was the impact it had on aged care facilities, with the deaths of so many elderly people in care. There was no early warning of the dreadful events that were to unfold, but when it hit, the impact was fast and heartbreaking. Standing in front of the entrance to Epping Gardens Aged Care, I witnessed a man wanting to take a food container to a loved one inside, refused entry by a front-of-house security guard contractor. He placed the meal on the stone bollard at the entrance and then asked the guard for the food to be delivered, but this was also refused. It was a very sad sight indeed to see him pick up the meal and slowly walk away.

As I moved around to the side of the facility, I found a daughter of a resident with a phone to her ear talking emotionally, trying desperately to make contact with her mother while right

beside her bedroom window – only a metre away, but divided by a metal railing fence and the closed window. Clinging to the railing, she peered into the darkened room through the closed window for a fleeting glimpse of her mother, moving to the window with her arm raised just as an employee drew the curtain blocking their chance to see each other, possibly for the last time. On the other side of the facility, a deceased resident was being transferred on a trolley to an unmarked white van. While I was there the aged care centre was visited by Senior Victoria Police and a Health Commander. Not far away at St. Basil's Home for the Aged in Fawkner, the cyclone fence was adorned in the blue and white ribbons of the Greek flag, beside an attached message saying 'Praying for You' – but it was already too late for so many.

2020 - Oct 23rd Vaccine mandate protests

The anti-vaxxers and their 'Ban Dan' rally against mandated vaccinations held at the Shrine of Remembrance was my next stop. As sirens echoed from all directions and police vehicles circled the Shrine precinct, protesters were held back from reaching the Shrine's forecourt by pepper spray and the long arm of the law. Banners were raised saying things like 'Media is the lie' and 'At this point, I would feel safer if Coronavirus held a press conference telling us how to save us from this government.' The rally proceeded to Albert Park Lake, and another rally was held later at Elsternwick Park, with protesters looking as though they were ready to rumble. Squads of the Public Order Response units fully equipped with the armoured protection of shields and drawn batons were in full control. Needless to say, there were many arrests, but it was clear that it would quickly become a prelude to bigger things to come in the new year if nothing changed.

2020 - October 24th AFL Grand Final

The delayed AFL Grand Final was finally able to take place on October 24th, although away from its traditional MCG home. The television coverage beamed out all across town, and I was determined to find a good family celebration to photograph the AFL Grand Final as it was viewed in Melbourne 2020. I was rewarded once again, and was able to cover the second half in a suburban cul-de-sac. A giant screen facing out from a double garage, a fire in a cradle in the driveway, and an excited family of Richmond supporters spread out across the footpath provided the perfect shot of the 2020 AFL Grand Final.

That night, a giant illuminated yellow and black sign in Punt Road above the Richmond Train Station said 'No matter where you are, we hear your roar,' shining all night over an entirely deserted Tigerland, bound by the mandated 9 pm curfew. On the opposite side of the station, also on Punt Road, another overhead illuminated sign asked 'What are you doing? Stay home.'

October 2020 Restrictions tighten and tensions rise

This next lockdown felt like the screws were being tightened even more as further enforcements were mandated, playgrounds were closed, and skate parks were rendered unusable by sand and road barriers installed by local councils. Coloured circles to encourage

social distancing were sprayed on the grass in parks at St. Kilda, Prahran, and Edinburgh Gardens, while we were all forbidden to go any further than five kilometres from home. Outdoor exercise time was limited, and the 'Metropolitan Ring of Steel' closed the city off from its country neighbours – the checkpoint of which I photographed on Geelong Road.

It felt as though we were headed towards boiling point as people began feeling caged and scared by the Health Department's orders. People out for the permissible walks with friends considered as walking too closely to each other were being stopped by police in the Dandenong region. On a day shooting at Altona Beach, I was confronted by a large illuminated sign telling me that the police and ADF were on patrol, while a sticker pasted across that very sign said 'you have now entered a Soviet Socialist State, Victorians.'

2020 - November 10th

After the lifting of the Metropolitan 'Ring of Steel' came another respite from some restrictions. The 'Stay at Home Melbourne' message was replaced by messages like 'Welcome Back Melbourne, Good Job, Well Done' at Apollo Bay, and 'Welcome Covid Safe Visitors' on signs along the Great Ocean Road and in country Victoria.

2020 - December 7th Quarantine hotels

I was on location at Southbank as the stream of red Sky buses arrived, loaded with overseas arrivals bound for the Pan Pacific and the Novatel quarantine hotels. We (the media) were moved to the opposite side of the pavement when a bus pulled in to deliver a single passenger to the Complex Care Novatel Hotel. After the passenger had left the bus, assisted by health care workers in full PPE, I asked police safety and liaison officers why we had been moved from our previous position, and was told that we needed to be upwind of the arrival, as there was a possibility of airborne contamination.

2020 - December 18th

As 2020 closed with the unspoken hope that maybe we were through the worst of it, I chose to cover a small number of office parties on a lovely summer's day at Flagstaff and Treasury Gardens. As I photographed a group on the lawns of the Treasury Gardens with the State Offices as my background, I was asked why I was photographing that scene. Was I anticipating the work-from-home future the public servants were soon to face, leaving their government offices as empty as the city streets?

2021

The new year was welcomed with an attempt to launch the 2021 Australian Open, and I was there to greet the much smaller-than-usual crowd of arrivals, all masked up.

Heading for Queen Victoria Market, I set up safely behind the familiar red and white exclusion tape to photograph a deep clean, necessitated by a contaminated shopper's visit the previous day. As the cleaning operation went on, a stall holder's young child sat close by on a raised locker, looking on as the operator in full personal protection gear worked around him.

LOCKDOWN No. 3

2020 - Feb 12th Anti-vaxxers out in force

The anti-vax rally at Fawkner Park in Prahran was teeming with vocal young men and women rallying against mandatory vaccination. Shouts of 'It's my body' and 'I'm not a lab rat' filled the air, while signs were displayed declaring 'You've f..... with the wrong generation' and 'We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn't burn' and 'Those who do not MOVE don't notice their CHAINS'.

After all the speeches had finished, the large unmasked crowd, showing no sign of losing any steam, moved onto St. Kilda Road, resulting in many arrests. I found myself caught up in a serving of pepper spray for the second time in my attempt to shoot the scene playing out before me.

One of my favourite shots of the day showed police administering water to arrested protesters' heads and faces to relieve the effects of the pepper spray, after they were cuffed. I always carried my own water to the protests, just in case.

I and two other photographers were the only mask wearers on that day, other than the police.

LOCKDOWN No. 4

2021 - May 27th

By this stage, things were really ramping up. The Freedom Rally was the biggest defiance of the government's health orders so far, with a mass turnout of protesters, most of whom would have been breaking the 5km from home radius limit to be there. It was a three-hour procession through the CBD, stopping at Parliament as usual, and then traveling down Bourke Street - the streets filled with the acrid orange smoke of flares and the heartbeat rhythm of drums beating.

Stopping at the GPO, speakers carried on, music boomed out, and cheers erupted. As the jubilant procession moved down into Flinders Street, I followed two guys with 'Covid is a SCAM, wake up,' professionally printed on the backs of their jackets.

New media was becoming a powerful weapon for influencers and bloggers, who were having a field day sharing video footage taken on Go Pros and smartphones that afforded them instant and widespread reach on social media and other online outlets - tens of thousands of followers in the stay at home audience eagerly consuming the coverage.

Covering all angles with a multitude of this new media, very little was missed. The police, in turn, were also filming the protestors - and me too I expect, though I'm sure they are quite familiar with me given the decades of campaigns I've covered.

Arriving at the Flinders Street Station, the intersection became an open-air dance floor, with music from a soundbox, dancing, cartwheels, and handstands - but not for long. Protesters were met with a wall-to-wall line of police who were backed up with horses and more pepper spray. The rally was split in half, so the party was quickly over. The protestors, and I, had nowhere to go but home. On my way back I stopped off at the closed St. Kilda Espy Hotel and grabbed a shot of an overhead sign displayed on its iconic façade saying, 'I get locked down, but I get up again.'

LOCKDOWN No. 5

2021 - July 15th The race to vaccinate

Vaccination centres started blooming all over Melbourne in the race to vaccinate and find a way to begin 'living with' Covid-19. I shot the long line at the vaccination hub at the troubled Al-Taqwa College in Truganina, with the minaret towers as my background. More and more vaccination centres began to open in churches like St. David's Greek Orthodox in Thornbury, mosques, and temples, as well as at chemists, medical centres, and hospitals. A vaccination hub at Peanut Farm Reserve in St. Kilda attracted large crowds of people ready to get the jab, despite having to stand for hours in the rain, while the old Ford factory became our first drive-through vaccination hub.

In Shepparton, the announcement that it had become the latest overnight hot spot brought the residents out to testing stations and vaccination centres in droves. It wasn't long before the 'At capacity, try again tomorrow,' signs were out.

LOCKDOWN No. 6

2021 - August 5th

Communities rally

Behind the protests and the rush to vaccinate, there was another ripple effect of the pandemic playing out across our entire society as we endured the crisis. I visited Yarraville (which has recently been named one of the coolest suburbs in the world) to shoot a streetlong queue of people - families waiting for free food being generously handed out by Eleni's Greek Kitchen in Anderson Street. An entertainer in a black and white cow costume on roller skates with a loud soundbox gave light relief skating up and down the street, in what otherwise was a very dark situation.

Returning to Yarraville, I witnessed more of the same. The Foodbank Victoria depot was distributing emergency free food to families who'd been financially devastated by the pandemic. Cars queued for blocks, and the only question being asked of the drivers as they entered the giant warehouse was how many people they had to feed, and how old they were. My job was to show the line-up of cars being filled with the appropriate emergency food by tireless volunteers in safety vests, with the car boots raised to conceal the number

plates. From the variety of arrivals I saw that day, it was evident that the pandemic had robbed all strata of society. Amongst the vehicles were trade, professional and commercial vehicles – for most this would have been a new and shocking experience. On the day I was there, the demand was so heartbreakingly great that the authorities had to close the Foodbank early. The queue of cars stretched as far as the eye could see, and was causing chaos for local and freeway traffic.

2021 - September 18th CBD locked down for the Freedom Rally

The unprecedented lockdown of all roads into Melbourne's CBD was the police response to the expectedly large International Freedom Rally. After getting my shots at the blocked CBD entrances of Kings Way, Clarendon Street, and St. Kilda Road into the city, and having had no confirmation of the rally's new location, I had to work out where the crowd would gather. Richmond was my best guess and, bingo – got it.

The Richmond Town Hall in Bridge Road was the meeting place shared via text message, with the gathering planned for around noon. The general attire of the crowd was baseball caps, beanies, goggles, bandanas, hoodies, and a good sprinkling of body art. Corporate and company t-shirts were also present. Led once again by the 'Freedom' banner, the crowd meandered through Richmond's streets – even surging through fast-food drive-throughs. Progress was suddenly stopped in Burnley Street by the appearance of a wall of police. When the crowd turned around it was met by another barrier of wall-to-wall police. The long sit-down of protesters that ensued, plus the arrival of more police in buses, added to the simmering tension of the crowd. Some protestors held hands, others had arms around each other, while others sat silently praying for a miracle. I could imagine some of the younger ones wondering what they'd tell their parents if they got arrested. It struck me that the feeling of inevitability they would have been experiencing in those moments would have been shared by some of the Titanic's passengers as it started to go down.

Suddenly, Eureka! An intrepid leader of the pack found an escape! The silenced, grounded crowd instantly jumped to their feet and followed their leader through the carpark and steel gates of nearby flats, through another carpark to a construction site in Dove Place, and into Type Street - a narrow one-way street full of stopped cars where the only exit was a very narrow footpath that demanded single-file back to the safety of the open Bridge Road.

Winding through the Richmond streets and over the Yarra Bridge in Victoria Street, and on into the Barkers Road cutting in Hawthorn, I had a chance to look back from where we'd come and counted around a hundred police in a line following the marchers. Behind them another 150 or so, and behind them a line of horses and support vans. I understand over 2,000 police were called upon that day. To keep ahead of the action, I rushed ahead of the rally, in an effort not to be trapped in the narrow Barkers Road canyon.

Heading for the overhead pedestrian walkway which ran alongside and high above the cutting, I was at last in the perfect position to view the full proceedings. I was for once happy to be in a safer place – to be able to stop for a minute, take off the mask, and rehydrate.

At around 1.30 pm the line of police following the protesters started to move in on the slower moving tail-end of the rally. Quickly the muscle leaders of the front-line rushed back through the crowd and took control carrying the Freedom banner, but were quickly met with capsicum spray as the police kept moving in. From my vantage point, I saw a protester fall as the police kept advancing. To avoid being trampled, he adopted the foetal position. A senior officer grabbed his jacket and pulled him away from the feet of the advancing police, later cuffing him. It looked like many capsicum spray cans were emptied at this coal face.

At the other end of the canyon cutaway, still in Barkers Road (which was the original front), a megaphone gave the call to charge after the crowd had reassembled. An elderly whitehaired woman with her shopping bag struggled to fight her way out of the centre of the pack to avoid becoming sardined or trampled on. The stampeding front of angry protesters was being pushed from behind by more angry protesters. Some fell over as they were confronted with a single line of fourteen rookie police officers with their spray cans held out and their other hands on their batons, and a few seniors behind them for backup. Not once did I see a baton used, even as the spray cans were quickly emptied and discarded. A police officer was set upon by a group of protesters when he grabbed and held down one of the frontline protesters. The flood gate was opened as the crowd shouted and sang, taking lots of selfies on their way past the few officers left standing agape. And yes, there were injuries on both sides.

Twelve kilometres carrying my gear, in a face mask on a hot day – what a day at the office that was!

2021 - September 22nd The CFMEU protest that stopped the city

The mandated lockdown of construction sites by the Victorian Government brought the union members out in force to confront their leader, John Setka, at the CFMEU Headquarters in Elizabeth Street. Of course, I was there. As Setka tried to speak to the union crowd through a megaphone, he was shouted down by the hostile unionists and was pulled back inside the building by his security for his own safety. As they dragged him back through the door a banner inside was momentarily revealed, saying 'If you don't fight, you lose.'

The unionists were of the opinion that Setka had not done enough to prevent the two-week lockdown of their industry. It was looking as though, for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic eighteen months prior, these unionists were going to feel some of the hurt so many Victorians had lived through for every one of the previous 380 days.

My view of the entrance and speakers was soon interrupted by a sign stating 'My Body, My Choice,' as the arrival of anti-vaxxers began to blur the union protests' message.

The crowd had swollen by lunchtime and had become even more restless. Protestors turned on each other, with fights breaking out between the unionists, the anti-vaxxers, and others who'd come to just get involved. A heavy plastic crate went flying, breaking the glass entrance of the union office, and there were attempts to kick in the glass doorway - possibly to storm the building. The angry crowd continued belting the building, hurling anything they could find. Face masks came off as the revved-up crowd vented their anger and became

even more agitated. The building fought back with sprays of foam from what looked like fire extinguishers, followed by clouds of smoke from a hose poked through a gap smashed earlier by the protesters. I was at the rear of the turbulent crowd, shooting over the heads of the sea of hi-vis vests lit up by a galaxy of raised phones running hot to melting point videoing these last minutes before the arrival of the riot squad. As the riot squad advanced to clear the CFMEU entrance, I copped a rubber bullet at point-blank for my troubles. As I braced to stop myself and my lens from hitting the ground, a heavy road marker hit me across my shoulders, hurled by a protester behind me, targeted at the advancing police, but falling short of its mark.

And then, I saw it - a person, crossed-legged in all black in the centre of all the turmoil with their arms resting on crossed legs, thumbs and forefingers pressed together in meditation. Even amongst such chaos, there's always a moment to grab that rare type of shot.

After all this, the massing crowd was forced back to the Victoria Street intersection where they had first assembled.

2021 - September 21rd The CFMEU protest swarms the Westgate Bridge

The next day the rally met once again, early. The CFMEU Headquarters bore the battle scars of the previous day's beating, with a temporary timber hoarding covering some of its wounds. I should have twigged when I noticed a difference in the dress code amongst some of the protestors. Along with the sea of yellow and orange hi-vis, there were also many wearing runners where there had been work boots the day before, and tracksuit pants had replaced work trousers. Amongst this large crowd, fanning across the entire width of the Elizabeth Street intersection, I counted two women.

Banners included 'Earning a living is essential, not criminal,' which I found amusing given they'd had only one single day off work at that stage. The Eureka flag was waving, which it usually was at these events, but this one had the addition of a swirling serpent and the threatening message, 'Don't tread on me.'

Before the marchers moved off from the intersection at Victoria and Elizabeth Streets, the Channel 7 crew was given a serve by two burly vests.

The protestors moved off, charging around the city streets fronted by the freedom banner. Flares were set off, lighting the dark CBD canyons with bright orange smoke to match the high-vis vests. Smoke filled the top of Swanston Street, and explosive canisters were going off with a noise loud enough to deafen all within coo-ee. Proceeding to Parliament, the police force's anti-riot squad was ready for anything, with two different sorts of loaded guns, what looked like pepper balls and capsicum canisters, and possibly also stinger grenades. The crowd of angry protesters just kept moving without giving them a second glance, swarming down into Bourke Street with more flares and explosives.

After three hours of tramping up and down the CBD's streets, chanting 'Every day, Every day, Every day,' the procession detoured onto the Westgate Freeway, where delivery trucks and

vans blared their horns continuously in support. Having already covered kilometres on foot for three hours through the city streets, I was now faced with another long run up the West Gate Bridge and back again.

At around 2:30, with vests all over the freeway, traffic came to a halt as the police provided an escort vehicle. It wasn't long before traffic on both sides of the freeway was stopped to give way to the sea of fluoro. My aim was to shoot the hi-vis vests with the West Gate Bridge in the background from the Ingles Street Bridge, and to get a second shot from the top of the Westgate Bridge of the vests with the city in the background. At the top of the bridge, some protestors attempted to climb the raised structures to wave the Eureka flag and, of course, a take few more selfies of their conquering of Everest.

There was a somewhat carnival atmosphere on the way back, with lads on bicycles having a great ride down the bridge, and it was clear that bottled water was not the only refreshment being enjoyed. Coming off the top of the bridge, I couldn't help but think about the great shots the security cameras must've been getting.

When the assembled line of fully-prepared police ready to meet and greet the crowd at the bottom of the bridge became visible, the protestors moved off the inward bound lanes of the bridge. The exit strategy was to cross over to the opposite side of the bridge, and walk between the stopped vehicles heading out of town. My closing shot of the day was taken from the Salmon Street Bridge, when the freeway was filled to capacity with fluoro-clad protestors heading back to the CBD, and a hand-held poster in the centre of the crowd announced, 'We built this city.'

2021 - September 24th The third day of anarchy

The previous day's exhibition by the CFMEU members as they took possession of the West Gate Bridge had shocked Melbourne. On this third day of anarchy, the protest moved to the Shrine of Remembrance. It was an act that Australia will never forgive or forget, and I wondered how those young 20–30-year-old men and women would ever explain to their children, down the track, the importance and sanctity of this hallowed centrepiece of Melbourne and what it really represents.

There were still a few hard hats and fluoro vests, but the dress code was mainly t-shirts, baseball caps, and fashionable sunglasses, suggesting that the crowd had now accommodated many more than just disgruntled construction workers. A massive banner stretched across the Shrine's steps saying 'END LOCKDOWN DAN-MADE DISASTER.' The crowd occupied the lawns, the steps, the terrace, and the WW2 forecourt.

Protesters sat casually in the sun in groups, seemingly confident in their numbers, as a megaphone blasted out anti-vax messages. It wasn't hard for the police to pick the movers and shakers, instantly recognisable by their body language and dress. As one protester on his phone sat cross-legged above the steps on a giant ceremonial urn, negotiations began breaking down, with the police offering safe passage by 3 pm down the Western approach. Shouts of 'Every day, Every day,' became the response, suggesting their intention to rally every day. Some of the younger ones took the 3 pm message seriously and left with their dogs, skateboards, scooters, and hired electric bikes.

In what struck me as a bizarre moment, three returned servicemen, one a decorated veteran adorned with medals, appeared and tried to clear a space to kneel and pay their respects at the Shrine entrance. Was it oblivious defiance? Or maybe just an attempt to block out the turmoil and disrespect around them? It's just my job to look, listen and photograph.

The precinct was cordoned off on three sides, and the police continued attempting to negotiate a peaceful outcome to leave, telling protesters to leave the steps of the precinct by the Western entrance by the extended time of 5 pm. But the offer was still not accepted – 'Everyday, Everyday,' was the insistent reply. It was clear the protestors were there to rumble.

At around 4.45 pm, the riot squad advanced onto the steps with shields and batons. All the while, the eternal flame burned brightly, surrounded by police with guns drawn, ready to go. It struck me that those who had fallen in all the wars to give us the freedoms we enjoyed pre-pandemic would be turning in their graves.

A group of young women relaxed on the steps, some on their phones, others chatting and sunning themselves, sending a clear message that they weren't intimidated by the armed officers literally centimetres away. Next to them lay empty cans of pre-mixed alcoholic drinks.

When 5 pm came and the crowd still refused to move, the order was given. The riot squad charged from the front, firing rubber bullets directly at those on the steps who were suddenly on their feet and running for their lives. I was positioned well that day behind the police lines, and got the story told with one photo of the riot squad charging towards the steps, guns pointed and discharging at the protesters, with the shrine and the fleeing runners as my background.

The dispersing protesters raced across and down the west exit gardens like rabbits being shot at. Gas canisters, rubber bullets, and pepper ball missiles rained down on them as they ran like never before, down and straight onto St. Kilda Road, scrambling to avoid being hit by the passing traffic.

2021 - December 2nd The passing of the Pandemic Bill

I was on my own, without any other media, on the steps of State Parliament to shoot the final minutes and seconds of the Pandemic Bill being voted on in the Upper House. The vocal crowd, some of whom had been there for weeks, were armed with megaphones, shouting 'Cross the Floor, Cross the Floor,' – their message directed at the independents, as the sweeping powers of the bill were passed, 20 to 18.

In closing...

It's important to remember that everything that happened here during 2020 and 2021 is a result of the global pandemic, which has reshaped the world we once knew.

Coming from a lifetime working in the media, and always with one eye on our past, I am proud to report that I've covered and captured this important slice of our history freely, as an independent photographer in this great state of Victoria, with the assistance of many good people. I am also happy to report that other than the pepper sprays and the rubber bullet (which I consider collateral damage), I was never confronted in anger or obstructed while performing my work. Everything reported in this article was photographed by me, and represents solely my opinions.

It's easy to forget as life rolls on and the next big story unfolds, but we must remember that every one of us has made massive sacrifices, shown bravery, and faced hardships we could never have anticipated. Many of us have also lost loved ones as a result of this pandemic. It's for those reasons that we must never forget this time in our history, and it is my hope that this article and my photographs will help those living outside Victoria, as well as generations to come, to understand what we all went through, and how 267 days of lockdown changed life for everyone in Melbourne, Victoria, and the rest of Australia.

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Melbourne