

Sold out? Ticketing policy under review

BY TANYA DEWHURST

As the post mortem on Mardi Gras begins, one of the issues the Board will be dissecting is the membership and ticketing policy.

Due to the unprecedented early ticket sell-out this year many members were left out on the streets at party time.

Tickets sold out at 3pm Friday — eight days before the party. In past years the party sold out only two-three days beforehand.

Throughout the week leading up to the party, the Mardi Gras office and both Newtown and Oxford Street Toolsheds were inundated with members desperately trying to obtain tickets.

However, 50 tickets per day were made available only to overseas visitors able to prove entry into Australia within the preceding two weeks. Each morning over 200 people queued at the Rushcutters Bay office from as early as 1am in an attempt to secure tickets. These included Sydney members who were unaware that tickets were reserved for international visitors.

Chaos reigned as the crowd surged forward when the doors were opened and tempers frayed as latecomers — some of them straight — pushed ahead of lesbians and gays who had queued for hours. People were further angered and frustrated by “apathetic” office staff who refused to administer any kind of system. Many queued in vain, some for two days running.

One Wednesday two Brits resorted to organising a list system themselves, collecting 50 names on a first come first serve basis and then checking off people’s passport entry dates. This allowed over 100 people to leave instead of waiting fruitlessly about for hours. When the two Londoners offered the list to Mardi Gras they were told to “Keep your big ideas to yourselves. We’re not interested in your list.”

“I went over to them and said this is a fair list and people have been here

since two in the morning,” said London banker, Colin Kirkpatrick. “You can’t just hand out tickets to the first 50 who come up to your door.”

Security staff confirmed that they weren’t organising any queuing system and told the *Star Observer* that there was no point in telling new arrivals or people who were not on the 50 list to go home.

“There’s been loads of publicity overseas, they obviously want us to come and spend our money here. Their [Economic Impact] survey proves that,” said Bob Sweet of San Francisco. “But when we get here Mardi Gras treats us like shit.”

Mardi Gras President, Susan Harben, said that it was up to international visitors to organise their tickets before travelling to Australia.

“For an international event the size of Mardi Gras, with the level of international renown there is, it’s insane for anyone to think that they can travel half way round the world and not make sure that they’ve got a ticket,” she said.

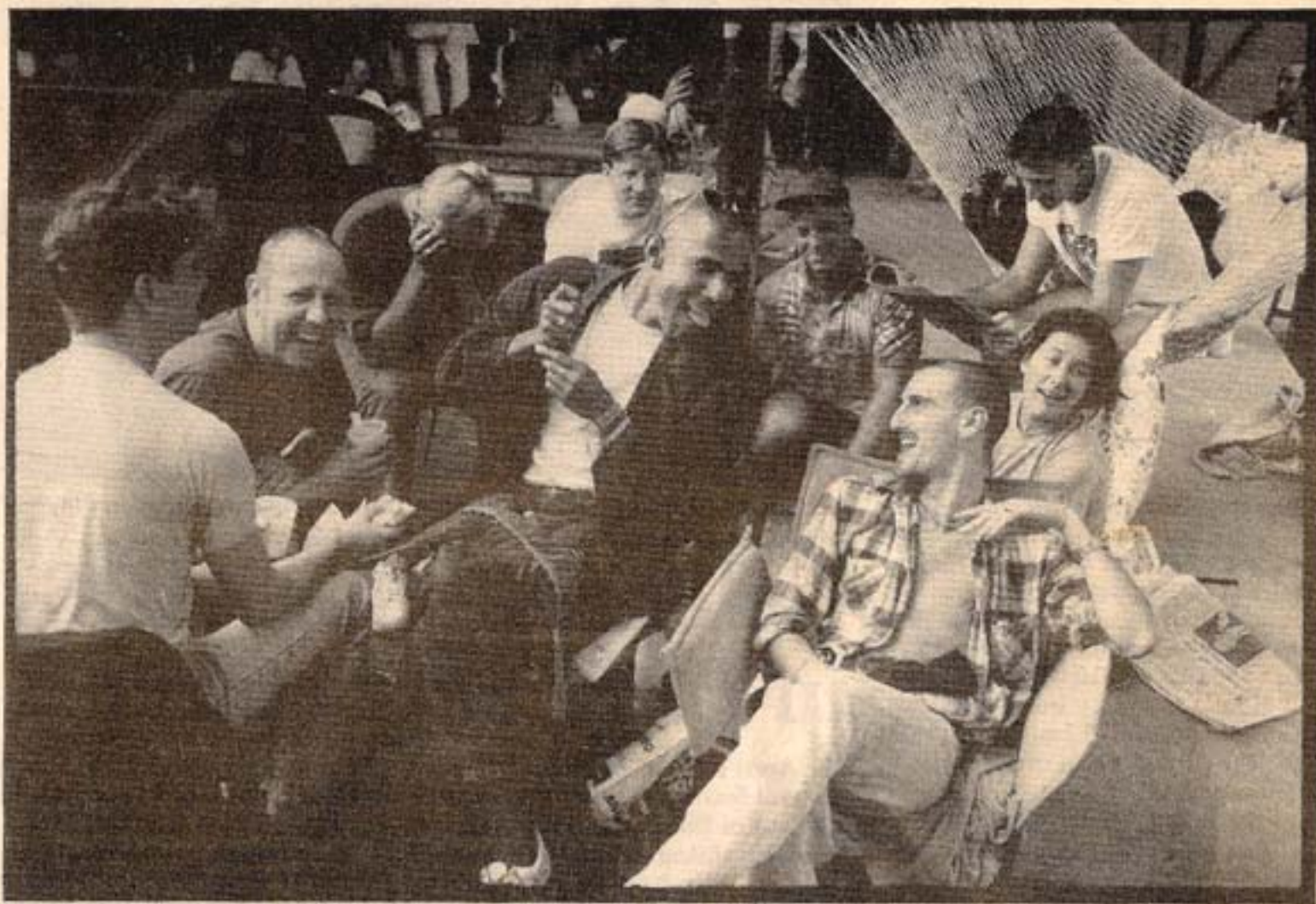
However, many of the visitors queuing said they had tried to obtain tickets before leaving home and that Mardi Gras staff either told them not to worry, plenty of tickets would be available on arrival or that the party had already sold out.

“I faxed them three times and heard nothing,” said Sweet. “About a month ago I finally rang and they said it was all sold out.”

“Now we are spending the first two days of our ten day vacation queuing for tickets,” added his partner, Andy Anderson.

Mardi Gras members were also up in arms that they were unable to buy tickets. “Why wasn’t there an allocation for us?” asked Peter Smith of Erskineville. “We’re the ones who’ve paid our \$35 to become members.”

Harben told the *Star Observer* that tickets had been on sale to members since last December and that being a member did not automatically guarantee a ticket.



CAMPING OUT In the carpark at Mardi Gras, world travellers join local members in queuing for hours for a party ticket. Many were disappointed. PHOTO JAMIE DUNBAR

Mardi Gras’ ticketing and membership policy was introduced in an attempt to deter straights from coming to the party. As was expected, a significant proportion of last Saturday night’s 19,000 crowd were still made up of straights. “We’re our own worst enemies,” commented one gay Mardi Gras member. “We bring along our straight girlfriends and they want to bring along their straight boyfriends. If we want it to be a gay party we should leave our straight friends at home.”

Harben said that policing the distribution of members’ five tickets was not up to Mardi Gras. She denied that computer problems had enabled some

members to buy up to 19 tickets. However, she did confirm that a list of people was drawn up who were allowed to buy tickets after they had sold out after many people made appeals to Mardi Gras based on “extenuating circumstances”.

“This board have been considering issues around the membership policy anyway,” said Harben. “One of the things that does concern me is that straights have now learnt how to become members. Regardless of that, I do think that the party was still overwhelmingly gay and lesbian.”

“If we were to start looking at some way of restricting membership to

lesbians and gay men and people had to sign on the bottom line to being homosexual, then we’d have to get some sort of exemption under the anti-discrimination act.

“There are some people who think perhaps it’s time we reduced the number of tickets available to a member from five to three. I know there’ll be many people who will scream about that because that means many more people have to become members to get tickets and it will cost more to people living on benefits and people who can pool membership.”

“However, I don’t think that these circumstances will ever happen again.”