Don't be fooled by the rosy glow people paint of the late seventies. For many those were bitter years. Malcolm Fraser held the reigns of power, and Australia was in the grip of divisive attitudes. Bob Hawke was lighting his preselection battle to enter Federal Parliament and about to embark on an historic turnaround in Australian politics.

In Vietnam, the world was no longer such a comfortable and relaxed place. The decade was drawing to a close, and the brave new world of the eighties just around the corner. Australia was growing up but not without some teething troubles. We were in the grip of a recession. There were long queues for the young during the week and all manner of inconsistencies to be tolerated. Right here in Newcastle on a warm September evening in 1979, just across the road from where the Workers Club collapsed in the earthquake years earlier, rioters battled with police in King Street. Imagine if you will two thousand, frustrated and angry rock punks overturning and burning cars, tearing and pelting police with beer cans, having firehoses' rulers blazing on them and creating the commonest punks have only ever dared dream about. The riot was headlined as 'Newcastle's Shame.' Investigated and analysed by the media, studied by sociologists and discussed across the nation. Neville Wran, then Premier of New South Wales described the riot as 'a shooting, disgraceful episode' and the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, John Cummins could only offer platitudes about 'youth alienation' and the deeper issues involved. The riot placed Newcastle in the glare of international media attention.

The Heroes - Sloby By Johnnie Clott

So what the hell happened? Well... the single most popular venue in town, the Star Hotel, was being closed down and the kids, who were up, shot up, boozed up, filled up and discotting was too easy to anyone who was going to give them any more aggravation, they decided they were closing the Star down as it needed renovations. The Star had a reputation and it housed an odd mix of clientele from professionals to tradesmen. The back bar was the sort of place that was on the weird wave in plastic containers and was housed out of the numerous hot, sweaty and crowded rock gigs. Nobody dared say what sort of things changed hands in any of those bars.

Mark Tinson was in a better position than most to remember some of the events of that night. Mark is now a respected part of the music establishment in Newcastle, owning his own studio, performing with fellow ex-Workies like Peter de Jong, and has had a successful career in the music industry. He told me he was a member of the legendary seventies act Rabbit. But on that fateful night in 1979, he was performing with The Heroes, the band accused of starting the riot. The Heroes lead singer Peter de Jong was charged with incitement to riot.

"I think they just wanted to blame somebody other than themselves," Mark said bluntly, "and they blamed us for whipping the crowd up into a riot when in fact it was already happening somewhere else. We played there by coincidence. We were at our highest in terms of records and we're playing at the music festival and it seems to me they're looking for scapegoats."

I asked Mark about the riot itself. He said it was a typical Saturday night and it seemed to have been premeditated in some way. He said police were at the door telling them to wind up and leave. He said that the police were not being very helpful and that they had blocked the back door which was the only way out. He said that the rioters had been discussing it in the pub and that it was a typical rock and roll scene.

The Heroes nonetheless remain an entity in Newcastle, never really dropping from the town's consciousness. "Well that's a bit outlandish, but it is something that we have been involved in," said Peter de Jong. "We had a feeling that something was about to happen and we decided to stop it. It was a case of 'if we don't do it, who will?'."

The Heroes, DVB and Total Fire Band play a special birthday gig at Newcastle Workers Club on Friday December 5. Tickets for the night which goes under the title 'See Saw Daze' are now on sale from the Club.