

pinballs

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THERE WASN'T A CORNER SHOP, PUB OR LAUNDROMAT WITHOUT A PINBALL MACHINE. WE TAKE A GLANCE AT THE SCIENCE AND ART BEHIND SOME OF THE CLASSICS.

Writer *Nadia Saccano*
Photographer *Mindi Cooke*

BETWEEN 1955 AND 1970 PINBALL MADE MORE MONEY THAN THE ENTIRE AMERICAN FILM INDUSTRY. THE GAME WAS HEADQUARTERED IN CHICAGO, A CITY THAT HAD WEATHERED THE PASSAGE OF PROHIBITION, ORGANISED CRIME AND A POST-WAR ECONOMIC SLUMP TO REVEAL A NEW FOE - PINBALL ITSELF. IT WAS ACTUALLY ILLEGAL TO PLAY THE GAME IN CHICAGO AND MOST MAJOR US CITIES UNTIL THE MID '70S.

Authorities (and conservative parents) considered pinball a game of chance, not skill, which made it a gamble and a sin, and they took to machines with axes, hammers and mallets. It was serious witch-hunt stuff. (A similar thing would happen 25 years later with the release of *Grand Theft Auto*, one of the highest grossing and most 'morally corrupt' video game series of all time. Litigation was the '90s preferred 'axe'.)

The controversy turned pinball into a symbol of youth and rebellion, endearing the game to

anti-authoritarian kids across America and adding to its appeal all over the world. Pinball was a rite of passage; a part of growing up, and its fan-base stretched from dark arcades to rock arenas and the silver screen. The game's shady reputation certainly didn't stop its manufacturers who traded upon their success in hungry international markets. The big guns: Bally, Gottlieb, Williams and Stern have been producing superbly designed machines for 30-something years and shipping them across the globe.

Creatively, pinball also pushed the boundaries: flippers got longer, art got bolder (and sexier) and the designers and artists behind the machines were their own kind of celebrity. This stardom might not have filtered into backwater Aussie towns or local arcades, but most who played the game felt part of something greater. Here, *Smith* revisits a few of the machines that made our summers (and pissed off our parents).

Thanks to Stuart McBrien from aussiearcade.com.au and Brett Sullivan's excellent docu-Special When Lit (2009).