

Mike Chunn Interview

ENZ IN USA AND BEYOND

Interviewed by Alastair Dougal

To play in the United States is the dream of many a rock band in Britain. Few get the chance and even fewer make any great impression. It's a common fate for a band to tour the States 6 or 7 times before they even begin to show a small profit on their work. But it is undoubtedly the largest single market for music in the world and all that hard work can pay off. Ask Peter Frampton.

In February, Split Enz were booked to play a 6 week 'showcase' tour of the US dotting about from city to city. The aim of the tour was definitely not to be profitable, but rather to try to arouse interest in the group and, thereby, in the album, *Second Thoughts*.

Since the Jack the Lad Tour of Britain in September '76, Split Enz had been touring almost constantly and for some in the band this tour was to be the last. Two of the founder members were to quit after this, the most bizarre tour in the group's history.

"We were met at the LA airport by two huge limousines, thanks to Chrysalis, who were greasing us up, and we were taken to stay on Sunset Boulevard and all those magic places which was, of course, very exciting. I was sharing a room with Phil and our balcony looked out on the city, the street outside's covered in those huge billboards and the Roxy's right across the street. It's a real musicians city.

"After 2 or 3 days in LA we drove up to San Francisco where we were booked to play 3 nights at a club there called the Boarding House. Chrysalis took us out to lunch on a point that overlooks the harbour, the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz and all that sort of hoo-ha. They had hired photographers going all the time; it's all very showbizzy with hired limousines again, of course. But it was a free lunch and quite a lot of fun.

"The Boarding House was excellent. We were headlining because Chrysalis had bought the show out and so it was very cheap to get in. We played there three nights; two shows a night at 8 and 11.30, but the club only holds about 280 people. I'm sure it's a good place to see a group but it's not such a good place to play. Everybody kept

"Consequently all these Southerners who like to boogie along to Lynyrd Skynyrd, stayed away in their droves."

banging into each other because it was so cramped. I'd go out of tune because Tim would whack into the neck of my bass.

"But the reception was very good. For things like 'Another Great Divide' they'd give us a standing ovation and that wasn't even the end of the show! It was the first time we'd ever had anything like that. If you got 280 New Zealanders in one room nothing would happen, it's hard enough with 2,000 of



Mike and Nicholas Chunn

the buggers. All the first shows were sold out and the second shows were about half full. So, in actual fact we didn't play to that many people, but the reaction was just so good that we were relying on word of mouth to spread the good word.

"One night at the Boardinghouse this long-haired guy came backstage and said 'You guys are good. I want you out of town by midnight.' So everybody went ... uh, ha, ha ... what a good joke. Then the guy said 'Do you know who I am?' and Noel said, 'You're not anybody unless you've got our record.' So that's how we met the bass player in the Tubes."

However, their next gig in Los Angeles at the Roxy to an invited audience of record industry and press people was less successful. "There were quite a few big people there and it was a big event, but they were very reserved. In LA you've got to be cool and they seemed more concerned about what other people felt than what

"By then fatigue had hit everybody pretty hard."

they actually thought of us. It was a bit of a chore but a necessary one."

Another part of the tour was also to become a chore, albeit a necessary one. "Everyday we had to go to these stupid record shops. You'd walk in and they'd blast through the shop 'Acme records welcomes Chrysalis recording artists Split Enz,' and everybody's looking at you and you feel so conspicuous! Then you had to parade around and get introduced to the people who run the shop because that's the object: to get them interested in the record. We'd have to go to two or three of these shops every day. It was extremely boring."

From the West Coast, Split Enz headed into the heart of America, the South and Texas. Here, the promotion was less effectively handled, the interest slacker and the band's morale began to go down.

In Houston, they were booked into a

years free haircuts. It was just so gross.

"The guy who won it looked like me. In fact, he looked more like me than I do and he was the only one who entered. They'd had heats every night we played, and on the third night they still had only one guy for the final. So they got two characters who worked in the place, put make-up all over them, and shoved them in to take second and third prizes. Shit it was hopeless, just so bad.

"Consequently all these Southerners who like to boogie along to Lynyrd Skynyrd stayed away in their droves. They thought we were another Kiss. We probably averaged about 20 people a night. There were almost more people on the stage than in the audience on some nights.

"I remember Tim thought up the idea of calling out on stage 'Are you having a good time?' And everybody would shout back: Naah, we want to boogie! So Tim was going to say, 'That doesn't matter we're having a good time and the majority rule.'"

It was after the infamous Atlanta dates that Phil Judd decided to quit. "One night he decided he'd had enough and he had in a way. He doesn't like playing live much and he told us then that he'd be leaving but he'd do the rest of the tour which was good, we couldn't have done it without him."

So just why did Phil quit? Mike explains it as best he can, "Phil never says much so I really just have to speculate. For one thing, I think he had an inferiority complex about his guitar playing, and he missed his wife and kid whom he hadn't seen since December and that's very hard. He was probably just sick of the whole mindless existence of touring and of being constantly at the mercy of whatever the agency tells you to do."

"I'd just had enough of the pace of the whole thing."

Even with the news of Phil Judd quitting, the tour carried on regardless. From Atlanta to Boston and onto New York, where they were booked to play the prestigious Bottom Line Club. "It might be prestigious but it certainly doesn't look it. We were supporting a 50 year old comedian Henny Youngman who does all these Jewish and Polish jokes. I used to have one off pat ... oh yeah 'Have you heard about the latest jigsaw puzzle from Poland? It's got one piece! Of course, everybody's killing themselves laughing because they're all Polish and love laughing at themselves. Very strange. But the reception we got was very good considering most of the crowd was quite old and had come to see Henny Youngman."

Through Chicago and Philadelphia the tour continued. By now the band had gone under to fatigue and being advertised as Split Enz in Chicago probably didn't help. But even with everybody feeling ordinarily "knackered" they all realised it could have been much worse. "We were in Philadelphia for radio interviews and press and saw Genesis play in an ice hockey stadium. Afterwards we went backstage and ate all their food because they weren't hungry. They were half way through their American tour of 2½ months and they looked anaemic. They looked shithouse and I've been complaining about the 5 weeks we'd been on tour.

"But we were pretty tired. By then fatigue had hit everybody pretty hard. I was coming back to New Zealand for a holiday, the others were going onto London and Tim and Eddie were going to Baltimore to write songs. It seemed just like that last period in class before the end of school when it doesn't matter what the subject is, you're just so keen to have it over with and get out. By Chicago we were just sick of the whole thing."

Continued on page 14

Photos by Murray Cammick

club called the Texas Opry House. As Michael tells, "it was just as you'd imagine it. They'd all got ten-gallon hats, boots and jeans. There weren't that many people there but the show went

"We were still playing 'Stranger Than Fiction' ... and I was extremely sick of it."

well and the ones that were there liked it a lot."

From Houston to Dallas, and then onto Atlanta, Georgia. Here the promotion was particularly ineptly handled. The main promotion was, wait for it, a Split Enz look-a-like contest! "The first prize was a free trip to see Jethro Tull play anywhere in America, the second prize was 50 free Chrysalis albums, and, because the contest was co-run by a haircut shop, the third prize was a