

It's half ten. Out the back of some hotel, past the crates and an overflowing drain, a van stands with its rear doors open. A lanky character with a two day stubble or pimples (take your pick) swings his guitar case in and pulls the doors to. Meanwhile three other young men clamber in up front. They all project a studied absence of expression and are determinedly incommunicative.

Probably they have a right to be dull eyed and weary. They've just played a two and a half hour set, being paid on a doortakings basis. Tonight no-one much came. The forty bucks they cleared will hardly pay for the blown mixer channel that packed up on them. Still things are not so bad. They're off to play the second bracket of a student union dance, winding up at two.

Actually this is still pretty much a romantic cliché. The fledgling musician paying his dues and all that rubbish. The real picture is even less appealing. Imagine writing "8pm., June 1st, \$1.50" on two hundred posters, or sweeping the cigarette butts out of a hall you hired because you were enterprising enough to promote your own gig. Or trying to wheedle the promised fee out of some blubber-headed bar manager.

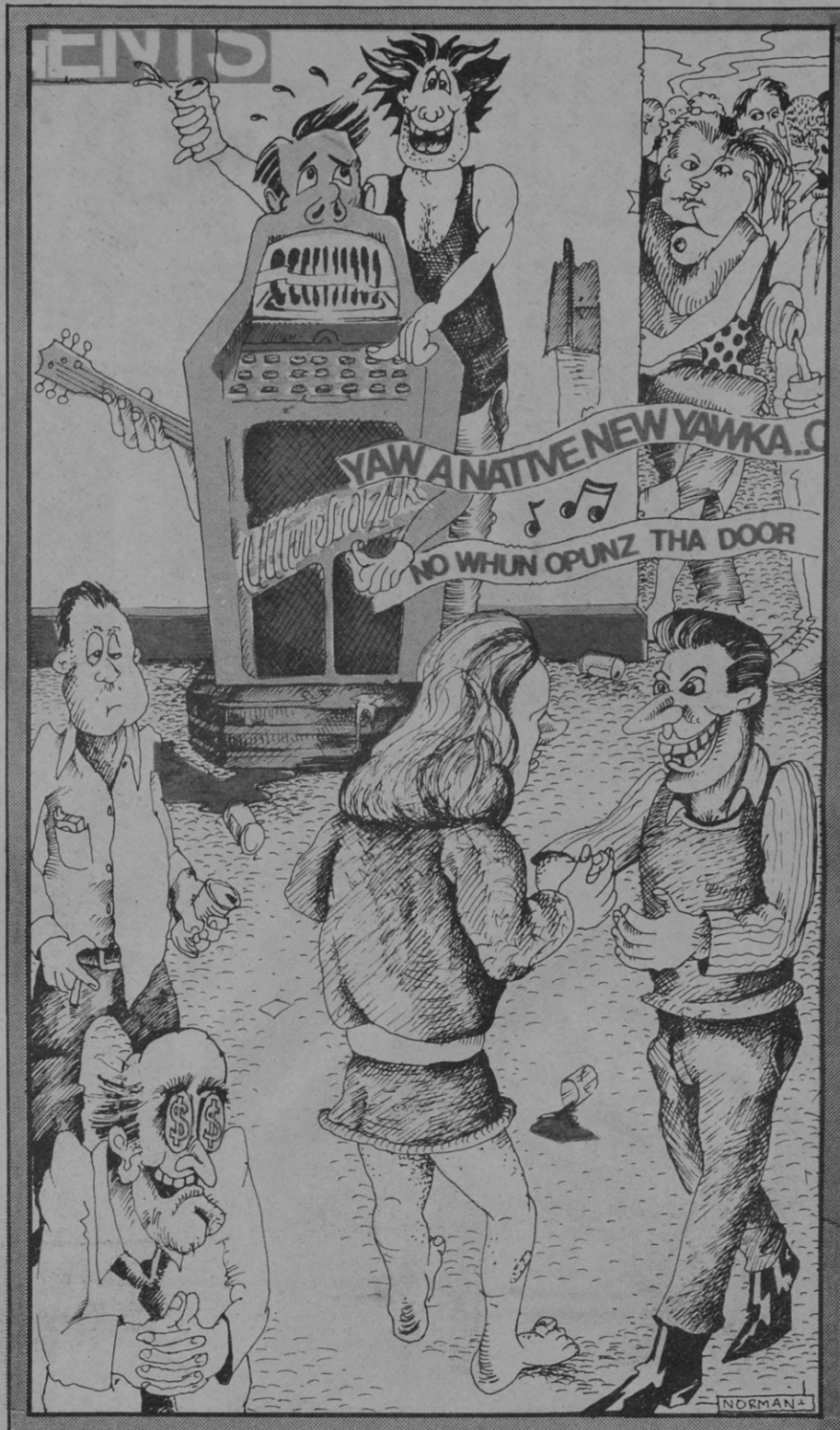
To be a popular musician in N.Z. involves all those things and half a hundred more extra-musical tasks. Besides that your girlfriend, boyfriend, spouse, bitches because they never see you, except when you are sallow faced and bad-breathed in the morning.

Naturally such things are not endemic to N.Z., but at least elsewhere, even in Australia, there is the vague illusion of possible success and then of managers and roadies and nice folks like that who do all the hard work. What musician can afford roadies here?

So why do musicians persevere in a limited market? Are there advantages to being a pro in a small field like New Zealand? There must be compensations for lugging gear, pasting bills and phoning promoters.

The answers several fulltime musicians give to that query vary. Tony Backhouse, guitarist with Spatz, and a man who has been playing pubs in N.Z. a few years says flippantly "There aren't any," then, trying to be a little more balanced in his answer, is serious and is still unable to remember any. Murray Grindlay, ex-working rock-and-roller, now involved in the ad game and producing, says bluntly "None at all." Perhaps most damning is the comment of Julian Lee, the exceptional N.Z. jazz pianist, arranger, composer who left a comfortable position with Capitol Records in the States to return, trying to make a go of New Zealand. Asked if the young musician has any advantages breaking into the professional circle here, in comparison with his American counterpart, Lee answers, "The problem is really that there is nothing to break into."

The very sad fact is that Julian Lee has given up his struggle to make a living in N.Z. and is flying out to Sydney in a week or so. He labels himself disappointed. He praises local musicians, both rock-and-roll and jazz players, but clearly he is disillusioned with those who pull the strings in the entertainment business. He is critical of record company people and promoters. It



Life as a Human Jukebox

The Plight of the NZ ROCK'N' ROLLER

is their business to try to open up, in the interests of all, the market. "Somewhere along the line the record companies have a debt to local entertainment. But it's not honoured."

Lee cites his own case. "I was a producer with Capitol. I thought I could get something here, but it didn't happen. I went to Sydney for a fortnight and already I've got three albums to produce." He subscribes to the theory that recording interests must chance their arm before they'll ever record at a profit. "But the trouble is," he says, "the people at the top have accountant mentalities. The local industry suffers."

Julian Lee launches further into the business world of popular music by countering the timeworn and plaintive cry "New Zealand is too little to sustain local recording". He calls it "the great New Zealand cop-out". Promotion and public education through exposure to indigenous product mean a market.

The woeful failings of our recording company policy seem to be corroborated by an astounding story told by Murray Grindlay. Grindlay worked on the soundtrack to the movie *Sleeping Dogs*. "The company obviously put some money into it," he explains, "but they completely refused to promote it. They paid, as far as I know, for one ad in the N.Z. Observer. I mean that movie was a big hit. And Mark Williams was all over the album — but they hardly put a cent into it. I knew one or two people who went into a record shop and asked for it and even the shop manager

said "What — I didn't know there was one". I don't know. Perhaps it was a tax write-off."

The phenomenon of a commercial enterprise not even trying to sell its product is indeed bizarre. Julian Lee's criticism of people who cry the limitations of the market seem justified. In fact similar complaints are made by others. Mike Chunn, a founder member of Split Enz now playing in Citizen Band sees it as a part of an entire pattern plaguing musicians.

According to Chunn the bad promotion of records is in part responsible for the compulsion to play pubs. "You don't make money from records so you can't tour. Groups have to play hotels to earn any money."

But it doesn't end there. A public unexposed to local music is a public that wants what it does hear — the hit parade. Says Chunn, "Groups cater to inflexible pub crowds that insist on cover versions — then everybody gives you advice. Somebody came up to me the other day and asked why we didn't play songs with more continuous riffing. The worst experiences for N.Z. performers come in hotels where lunks sit around talking about how much piss they can sink, insisting on some faceless band that does cover versions."

Tony Backhouse makes this recurring point by objecting to being a kind of "Human Jukebox".

And Mike Chunn continues by claiming, "New Zealand is the only country out of the six I've played in where people don't seem

interested in hearing a group play their own material. Audiences overseas let a band do what they like. Here they prefer to tell a band what to do. Just another step in grinding any true talent out of the business. A group performs 100% better if an audience is behind it. By sitting back, beer in hand, never clapping you are asking for a limp performance."

The worst of it is this sort of public reaction merely facilitates the cavalier treatment bands complain at getting from hotel bosses. Tony Backhouse rates the worst thing in the business people "who can't be bothered treating you like a human being." Julian Lee simply describes a few of the several pub employers he's known as "thugs" while Murray Grindlay mentions a prevailing attitude which believes musicians to be a cheap commodity. "You always get the impression that there is some young band waiting just outside the door who will play for less."

Of course, as with many others in this long list of grievances, musicians can blame themselves for inconsistencies in treatment. Mike Chunn feels strongly as do older, more established members of the musical fraternity, that it is every musician's duty to join the union. Only by agreeing upon rates, blacking promoters who seek out young bands who play for little to nothing, will performers alleviate so many of their moans. A union can do little about a major grumble like the expense of equipment here, but it can standardise conditions of employment.

This issue of self help is one taken up by Schtung guitarist Morton Wilson. Amidst a cohesive phalanx of prophets of doom his is a cheery voice. For while admitting all the problems with record sales, promoters, and media, Wilson takes up a banner of guarded optimism. According to him there are avenues over and above the union for seeking a reasonable deal.

Wilson re-iterates the point that musicians in New Zealand often get what they deserve. "I think with the press for example, if you know what they want you can make it easy for them, and for you. You give them photos and the kind of background information they want."

Much the same thinking goes into Schtung's nurturing of an audience. "We've always found an out of the way sort of pub. People come and listen, and then when they hear us the first reaction is that they argue a lot. But people do keep coming back."

Wilson, unlike others, believes New Zealand audiences can be discerning. "I don't think an artist should blame an audience," is his contention. But, he agrees "you've got to use your brains. I wouldn't fake Schtung to a heavy disco audience somewhere."

This policy of anticipating limitations gives Morton Wilson a hopeful view to the future. "You get surprised," he says, "I think it's opening up."

If it is, other musicians are waiting expectantly. There are several responses to the question which asks "What is the most satisfying thing a N.Z. performer can do in his own country." All are wistful to some degree. "Don't know", reflects Tony Backhouse, "haven't experienced it yet." Julian Lee's answer is, "Playing for your own amazement, if you can afford it." Mike Chunn expresses his reply as SELL RECORDS... SELL RECORDS... GET ON THE CHARTS.

But Morton Wilson probably sums up the whole waiting game best. "I think," he advises, "that as long as you know you are going into this business open-eyed and are prepared to do literally everybody's job, from promotion to video-mixing, you can be pleasantly surprised to find just one or two people along the way who know what they're doing."

It's hardly Churchillian, but it reflects the best we offer our musicians.
Bruce Belsham