

MADE
IN NZ

But will it sell?

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Last Char

Whipping boy, ravaged innocent, misshapen midget, *infante terrible*, neglected duty, lucky dip — all these epithets might be applied to New Zealand recording. As a race, New Zealanders are healthy consumers of those little round miracles of captured sound known as records. According to a 1976 National Business Review article our *per capita* purchase of pressed vinyl was in the world top six. That rating may have slipped, but the fact remains that we play host to branches of most of the world's multi-national phonographic distributors and they show no signs of quitting. Yet if New Zealanders are high on the global list of record buyers, they must set



Nigel Sandiford

"Minimum local content should be there as a reminder"

some kind of world mark as devotees of other nations' music. It is nearly impossible to put a figure on imported recordings relative to locally made product, but they constitute over ninety percent of our purchases. Besides that of most nations, New Zealand's recorded output is woefully small.

Thus the multitude of cynical descriptions given the tiny N.Z. industry. Local recording is a subject of frequent and acerbic debate. As one major record company executive says, "It is virtually impossible to say anything on the topic without offending somebody somewhere." Regarding the bitterness that hangs around the entire question, there is some truth in the description of the industry as stunted and unhappy. Suspicion seems to surround easy appraisal of the situation like the smell around a brewery on hop-burning day. Distrust exists between musicians and record companies, between one record company and the next, between both companies and musicians and commercial radio stations, and between the government and absolutely everybody.

If accusing fingers are to be pointed, then the first must be at our government's attitude towards the music business. Many would agree with the image of the wronged maiden. The major act of brutality occurred on May 22nd 1975, budget night. The, then Labour, administration doubled an already high sales tax on records, to impose a staggering 40 percent levy, the stiffest in the world. The answer given to inquirers was that the moneys were needed for welfare.

Even accepting the government's social concern at face value, there was a logical, and desirable solution. Overseas records could remain taxed whilst locally made items should be exempted. The musician's union and some of the record companies made overtures to those responsible. Having argued with some success that a distinction must be drawn between recordings originating here, and not just pressed here as all releases are, they were stone-walled. New Zealand, it was pointed out, is a signatory to various international agreements, including several like the GAT tariff agreement which prohibit protectionism or selective taxes on imported, but not homemade, products. Ironically such trade policies are encouraged by multi-national organisations which, of course, include most of our record companies. Since then little progress, despite extensive efforts, has been made.

Neil McGough, secretary of the musicians union, explains that several moves are underway, but when asked whether a change of government has made any difference he simply states that where the Labour party at least had a policy, National has none at all. "Once Labour had taken all the kicks in the shins, National were quite happy to accept the tax as a source of revenue." The only lamp in the administrative gloom is that government might be persuaded to make the money from record tax available for recording subsidies. In many ways this would be admirable outcome because it would defi-

nately benefit the industry here. To just wipe the tax completely would mean more money to distribution outfits with no responsibility to do anything for New Zealand performers.

What chances there are of real moves to set up funding for homegrown music is an exercise for punters. As McGough says, "it's one thing discussing this — it's another getting those in control to produce the money and put it in a special bank account." A better metaphor for the industry than the ravaged maid might be the neglected spinster.

No-one is willing to take responsibility for her. Everybody, bar none, thinks that more local recording would be a grand idea. Few, it seems, will initiate it. For those with an eye to excuses, they are large and abundant.

In defence of the people who decide when and where records are made, difficulties arise. Because capital expenditure is so high on imported equipment, studio costs are high. "Gear," maintains Tim Murdoch, chief of WEA records, "once you have brought it into the country and paid duty on it, can be up to twice as costly as in other countries. You're starting behind the eight ball."

Murdoch goes on to describe the further limitations of a small and sheltered market. "If you spent money on making a single and you were getting an average ten or fifteen cents a copy towards costs, you might have to sell ten thousand to really cover outlay." Those are not the sort of sales our small population supports. "It's difficult dealing with people who just don't know what they're up against," Murdoch continues. He points to a shelf-full of cassettes next to his desk. "Those are all sent to me by hopefuls — most of them garage bands three weeks old," he adds. "A record company makes an investment. It needs some kind of security. I get people who come along one week and then come back two weeks later and say — Oh we're much better now. We fired our old bass player — and then one more week they come again — hey, we've got a new piano player now — I mean what sort of consistency is that?"

Whether Murdoch overstates New Zealand's isolation, diminutive size and the naivete of its musicians or not, he expresses commonly held views. Companies are tentative about making records while contemplating small sales, disproportionate expenditure and instable performing combinations. And, naturally, because few albums or sing-



Tim Murdoch

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les are pressed, few are heard to alter public tastes and buying habits.

Somewhere, somehow, the circle effect has to be upset. Unfortunately each party points to his neighbour as responsible. Record companies wait for musicians to prove themselves. Musicians argue they need recording experience to improve standards and to educate consumers. And while people sit around, *Saturday Night Fever* directs tastes, swamps the market, and devours available consumer dollars.

Nevertheless, there are possible answers. The most obvious is some kind of legislation requiring radio, commercial stations in particular, to have a minimum of 15 or more percent local content. Minimum local content has been kicked around as an idea for some time. The theory is that Mr. Miss, or Mrs record buyer hears New Zealand material and so will ask for it at a retail outlet. Similar requirements have boosted recording in Australia immeasurably in the past five years. Nigel Sandiford of Polydor Records is one company executive who favours the concept. "Minimum local content should be there as a reminder and a commitment. They have it good in Australia. If we were in Oz we would be in boots and all." He however adds a caution, "Stations should not

play product because it's local, but because it's good." Polydor, he informs, is looking to doing a better job on a carefully selected stable.

Sadly, the old dilemma recurs. Selecting a few privileged acts does little to encourage depth in the experience of our musicians, nor does it stimulate variety — both factors required by a rapacious public.

Selectivity has been the policy of most companies who have made attempts to stimulate local production. 'Lottery' may however be a better term. We all have favourite acts we believe deserve studio time, and others we think flattered by a recording contract. Such differences of opinion rankle when the amount of recording done is so small. The inquiry of the set-up is that the band, singer or performer who receives a record company rebuff has no real measure of whether he or she is untalented or just plain unlucky. Crises of competence and confidence must be sorted out before a pool of musicians capable of fulfilling minimum local content can be established. This means that companies have to start planned cam-



Terence O'Neil Joyce

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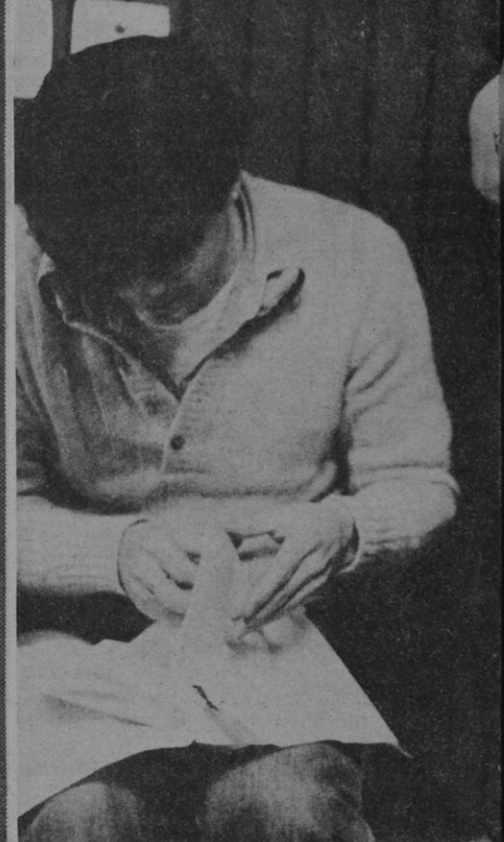
paings of recording rather than perpetuate the infamous hit and miss techniques of earlier days.

Much depends on the commitment of those involved towards local musicians. When one major record company director states, "We are successful because we listen to more stuff around the world. We keep listening and sending stuff away. If we hear something that has potential internationally, the money will be found to make a record," one gets the feeling that this is not regard for N.Z. talent. If New Zealand is to be a distant outpost of a global talent quest, there is not much going to develop in the way of distinctive N.Z. musical styles for the satisfaction of a New Zealand audience. The King-Hit approach to recording will never fulfil week by week radio, T.V., and concert needs.

One man who has grasped all this is the director of one of N.Z.'s few independent recording enterprises. Terence O'Neil Joyce has run Ode records for ten years. While much of his catalogue is not to the taste of rock fans (he covers indigenous styles from brass bands to Prince Tui Teka) he is a remarkable example of what can be done for a local demand. Terence O'Neil Joyce claims to have started off with \$200 which was borrowed. "If there weren't money in N.Z. recording I wouldn't be sitting talking in a record company chair, in a record company office," he points out. If he makes one comment which damns larger undertakings it is: "the big companies don't make money on their local work because of inefficiency, they haven't had enough experience." Efficiency in studio use, in packaging, in avoiding over-production is vital in tailoring for a small market. It needn't mean a reduction in quality.

In the past year Ode records have released approximately 30 albums and 8 singles, more NZ recordings than any other single company in N.Z., multi-nationals included. They range from classical recordings, through Polynesian music to the Roger Fox Big Band. Why does this sort of output not emerge from the companies that have the backing of much larger budgets. Perhaps the answer is contained in the warning O'Neil Joyce sounds out to those in the business, radio programmers and record moguls alike, "If they wanted to know they would do something about it. They have to get away from what is the thing to do outside New Zealand. That's not creative, it's standing on the end of a very long line. Really there is no excuse."

Bruce Belsham



Dave McCartney slashes out the song's lead riff and the vocalist plays his role; Graham Brazier is David Berkowitz, "Son of Sam":
"Well I walk the streets of New York
I look but I just don't talk
I gotcha '44 in my pocket
Gonna shoot it off like a rocket
atcha!"

The song collapses two bars later and, after nine unsuccessful attempts to record "Son of Sam" live in studio with the impact it has in concert, the band gives up. Hello Sailor decides not to include the song on a new album, their second.

A few days later the album has a possible title — *Islands in the West* — and recording is nearly finished. All that remains is for Brazier to sing the vocal tracks to "Do the Silver Jive" and "Tears of Blood", and for keyboard and various percussion overdubs to be added. Thirteen songs in all, may appear on the album: Brazier wrote "Dr Jazz" and "On Parade" before he joined the band, others like "I'm a Texan" and "Tears of Blood" were largely written in the studio. While on holiday here Paul Hewson of Dragon turned up to play piano on "Blackpool Can Can", "Boys in Brazil", "Disco is Dead" and "Street Boy" are among the songs the band has recorded over the last three weeks at Stebbing Studios in Auckland.

By the time Hello Sailor's first album had reached gold, selling over 9000 copies, the band had a manager. David Gapes, a former director at Radio Hauraki, began looking for a new contract that offered Hello Sailor overseas release, with a good recording and promotion budget. He wanted a guarantee that the band would be involved in all decision-making. Phonogram met his terms with what he described as "an extraordinarily attractive offer".

Eldred Stebbing closed his studios to Hello Sailor when he realised Gapes' intention to take the group to another company. He told Gapes that if Hello Sailor wouldn't do what he wanted, he could get another band off the street and do the same thing. Hello Sailor returned to Stebbing Studios when it became obvious there were new advantages in the arrangement. Although the contract remained the same, Stebbing offered unlimited studio time with a producer who had worked with them before; Hello Sailor's first album was recorded on a 16-track, this one would be recorded with newly-installed 24-track equipment.