

Broken Limbs Fond Goodbyes

Join the Miltown Stowaways on tour Ben Staples suggests one night in the Windsor Castle. Band manager Johnny Green produces an itinerary for the 'Invitation' tour — four weeks round the country before the band leaves for London and learning.

The tour opens at the Gluepot with seething new material and enriched arrangements of the more familiar. The sound is strong and true, the lighting bold, the clothes new and I am excited.

Thirteen days and thirteen gigs later I plan to rendezvous with the band at the Gladstone in Christchurch. The crew—Mike Neilson (sound), Sue Hazeldene (lights) and Shane Davy (road) have set up, but the band is stuck with engine trouble five hours up the road. Four hours later, and right on show time, the band bursts out of the van, on to the stage. The early minutes are filmed by a 'Kaleidoscope' crew then the rapt crowd is wrapped in another unique Miltown's performance. Again it's the new songs that really bite. Just where did this revitalisation come from?

"Five days in rehearsal," says lead singer/saxophonist Kelly Rogers. "We hadn't rehearsed for four months, just been on the road, but individual ideas came out in very loosely structured forms. There were some strong textures and sketches. We got 'The Yard' first and the others followed."

"The older songs haven't been consciously rearranged," says drummer Ben Staples. "Mainly they've changed live. Ideas have filtered down through our live shows and they've added to the new songs, firstly the *Invitation* EP and then another five on top."

As I realise this band is stronger than ever before, a call is made on my strength. The start of my roadie career. Now let me get this straight. The band travels five hours to the gig, plays a barnstorming set, then faces a heavy lug-out before the party?

"Touring is something we've got used to," says trumpet player Grant Hughson. "There's a routine to it."

"Hell, we're just getting into it," says guitarist Sid Pasley. "This is our last tour here; I'm making myself enjoy myself."

"We've really got something to deliver this tour," says Ben. "We've put a lot of thought into it, the songs, the clothes, the backdrop and lighting, the whole presentation, the entertainment aspect. It's getting to be a real pleasure doing the show."

Thursday morning and it's destination Dunedin. The band van has a couch slung diagonally over the back which gives a funny view of the world. However, there's good company with King Sunny Ade and Aswad on the blaster and Ben has purloined from his mother.

Another five hours journey and we arrive at the Oriental Tavern in Dunedin. Everyone's happy to be here, a great town they tell me.

The gig tonight is slower paced as the band incorporate darker layers into their sound. 'Reptiles', from the first EP, is a barometer of how the band feels each performance. Tonight it uncoils round the bar and just menaces. Offset against the rejuvenated reggae of 'Acid Rain', the buzz of



Miltowns and crew (L-R): Standing; Mike Neilson, Shane Davy, Jeff Smith. Sitting; Grant Hughson, Kelly Rogers, Ben Staples, Syd Pasley.

'The Bush' and the weird 'Yard' I am once again pinned to the wall.

Next day, no travelling. Time for an early morning visit to Larnach Castle, a spa and the long drive with Mike to the airport to pick up a replacement amp. The big PA is causing a few problems. Later we visit Radio One at the university, a short-term FM station with a staff largely comprised of Netherworld Dancing Toys and Sneaky Feelings. The Stowaways return to the pub to do some recording on a Porta-Studio. They listen intently to a tape recorded off the mixing desk last night.

"We haven't been happy with our studio work up till now," says Ben. "We always run out of time before exploring all the changes. Our first strategy with this band has been to write songs and then put them down on tape so we've got them. We wanted to avoid the situation we had with the Newmatics where we wrote about 30 songs and now there's only nine on vinyl."

"When we get to London," says Sid, "we'll have all the new songs on tape so we can concentrate on rehearsing and getting them so we're happy. Then we can make demos and go and see record companies."

In the meantime there's another packed pub to play to. The Friday night gig turns out to be pure professionalism. The band know it's the best show so far and appreciate the audience knowing it too. I search for superlatives.

"You can't describe it," says Grant, "you have to see it. But we know we're doing good gigs because more and more people are turning up. It's largely been word of mouth."

Again no lug out. The band and crew meet friends in the crowd, another sardine party upstairs and later we keep late-nite cafe people up past their bedtime.

Saturday morning and still wet and gloomy in Dunedin. I realise people must die here in the winter. There's a break in the weather though and we set off to battle the Dancing Toys at soccer. We don Doc Martens and studs and Shane plays the Fall in the van to get the aggro flowing. It is a friendly match though. But at three-all the plug gets pulled. Bass player Mark Dansey and Netherworld's guitarist/singer Malcolm Black collide going for a 50/50 ball. Mark is stricken, in pain, his right leg damaged. Johnny takes him to Accident and Emergency and we hope it's a bad bruise.

We walk to the hospital in the rain. There's no definite news only bad rumours. Back at the motel we finally hear the leg is broken in two places, a full plaster job. The band hopes he can still play. Shane finally breaks the unreality.

"I hope you guys realise you're not playing tonight."

The pub is contacted. In the event hundreds turn up to find only a sad note on the door. Johnny tells me it's the first time on tour he's felt angst. Mark arrives and says he is "very disappointed." No one has much to add.

Pragmatically Nick Samson from the Dancing Toys suggests a bass player he knows that could possibly fill-in. The next gig is the Radio One concert at the university tomorrow. We find John Dodd bemused at this sudden request on a Saturday night. The band doesn't score its

music so if John's to do the job he must learn from the two records and the tape of Thursday's show. He seems confident though.

"Even if I can't add much to your songs, I think I can at least hold the part down for you." He has about 20 hours. I marvel at the musical ability found in unlikely people in cold flats in wet Dunedin.

Late on Saturday night the band hits town to drown collective sorrows.

An early morning call from John says he's already learnt five songs but needs a practise with the band. We lug out of the Oriental, past a rueful hotel manager, and lug into the varsity. A steep, narrow ramp and a high stage. A roadie's life is tough but Mike and Sue have hours more hard work getting the mechanics right in a much bigger space than usual. The band and John rehearse in the hall and finally come up with a 60 minute set.

Gig attendance is disappointing. Kelly says this could be the last show in New Zealand. In the event though it's lots of fun.

Ben: "I start this song." Staples grimly leads the band. Sid breaks out of his familiar guitar pose and John just grooves on. It works so well we wonder at the possibility of continuing the tour. John offers to do the next weekend but I can see from the faces of regular band members that another decision has been made. The realisation of the sudden damage they've run into is fast draining the energy and commitment to keep the "routine" moving.

We will go home two weeks early, without any money, with travel plans to Britain looking dicey. Somehow though I never expected the Miltown Stowaways to stay down for very long.

Back in Auckland they recruit another ex-Newmatic, Jeff Smith, and prepare for final concerts. Another momentum has been found. All are still determined to get to London.

"It'd be really good to get Mark over too," says Kelly. "He's a great bass player. Collectively and individually we are strong enough to crack it. We've been wanting to go for so long, it's natural. But I don't think we'll be going as a New Zealand band, well we won't be taking any butter or flax skirts. We'll just be another band, but hopefully with a different vitality."

"But," says Sid, "if people don't hear from us in six months they shouldn't think we've gone down the tubes."

"We're not going to London to be pop stars," says Ben.

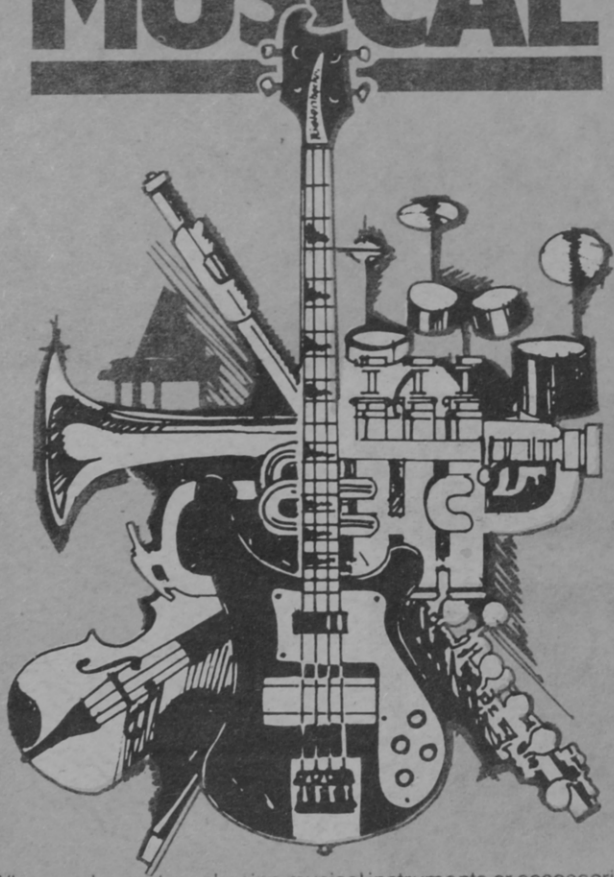
"We're going to learn. I want to learn where there's many more millions of people round."

"Everything we've done over the last 18 months has been a buildup to now, but I still think we've got a little way to go. You can always keep on learning and writing better and better songs, if you want to."

Goodbye Miltown Stowaways. It's been a great pleasure to watch you create, develop, refine and now finally own your music. You are the best New Zealand band I've seen. You're leaving the country stronger than ever. Expect major things.

Mark Everton

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