

A PAGAN TALKS A PAGAN (W)RITES

The Waterboys' Mike Scott Confesses

And in the beginning there were garages.

Mike Scott's first rock 'n' roll experience was with a garage band in Ayr, Scotland, a far cry from the mansions he's tried to inhabit with the Waterboys' *A Pagan Place*:

"Well, like everybody else I came out of the garage and I came down to London and started finding my fortunes and they didn't have much to do with garages. But the things I believed in when I was in the metaphorical garage are still the things I believe in. I still believe in every word of the Clash's 'Garageland'.

Another Time

It's midday Waitangi Day in NZ. Mike Scott is 13 hours away, sitting in his London flat. He's soft-spoken, a refugee from Edinburgh who's been at the receiving end of some very flattering press ever since the release of his band's second album, *A Pagan Place*.

Yet Scott's first recorded moments date as far back as 1976, when he did a disastrous version of Dylan's 'Like A Rolling Stone'. Cale's 'Fear' was the next song to get the treatment



and after Island Records told him that his version was awful he formed a fanzine called

Jungleland. From there he was in three bands, Another Pretty Face, Funhouse and The Red

and The Black.

"I learned so many things during those years. I thought I knew more than I did so the first thing I did learn was that I didn't know very much at all."

The Waterboys appeared in 1983. It was Scott's band, his vehicle for transporting and recording the songs he'd been writing. I was serious about the name:

"When I thought of the name it seemed to speak to me, it had colour and character but it doesn't really mean anything. Since then I've learned that it's an American word referring to those people who used to bring water to the thirsty workers on the chain gangs. I believe these days they bring water to tennis players."

The same year saw the release of the Waterboys' first long player, although it was never pressed here. Scott has fond memories of the album.

"I like it a lot, although I've got more of a fondness than an enthusiasm for it. It's full of old material, stuff I'd written and recorded in 1981 and 82. But there's some good songs on it, particularly 'Savage Earth Heart', which we still play live. It's a very rough record."

Another (Pagan) Place

Last year *A Pagan Place* was released to a consensus of critical excitement. Scott was hailed in some quarters as a potential genius, a man not afraid to tackle life's greater issues.

The album, initially, brushes aside reservations with the titanic urgency of Scott's music. But after the deluge some of the songs don't emerge from the wreckage. 'The Big Music' is a hollow destiny; 'Rags' is a frantic and futile exercise in self-flagellation; 'Red Army Blues' only escapes pure corn by virtue of Scott's impassioned delivery and 'All the Things She Gave Me', which could have been scintillating, gets dragged down by a dreary vocal arrangement.

Talking major songs, that only leaves 'Church Not Made With Hands' and the title track to take Scott's message to the world. And they succeed, despite his cavernous, over-the-top production:

"Yeah, sometimes the production was too big. If I happened to write 'The Big Music' or 'A Pagan Place' now then I'd use fewer instruments. The record was right for the time and the way I was feeling at the time but I don't feel like that now."

All up, *A Pagan Place* is like standing under an avalanche. In physical terms the album doesn't let up. Was this assault deliberate?

"Not really, as I didn't record those eight songs in one batch, they were done over a period of 16 months. 'A Pagan Place', 'Big Music' and 'Rags' were all recorded together in the autumn of 83 and I was well aware of the mood of those songs. But the others were all recorded at different intervals along with a lot of others that haven't been released, some of which have quite a different character."

As the title suggests, the album rubs shoulders with a variety of religious images.

"I've always found religious language to be very powerful. It's like a huge storehouse of strong imagery and it hits the deepest parts of human emotions, it's in all of our souls and some of the subjects I write about are best described through that language. They're serious songs but they're not fundamentally religious."

Are you a religious person? "No, I don't think of myself as a religious person but I think a lot about life. I never had to go to church or read the Bible."

One of the riskiest songs on *A Pagan Place* is 'Red Army Blues' — risky because it's hard for a Scotsman in the 1980s to sing about Stalin's

purges of the Red Army and make it sound plausible, never mind convincing. Vocally, the song tugs at the heartstrings although he might have got his message across more effectively by using a lower key arrangement and a narrative more in line with his experience. So what prompted this delving into history?

"I've always been very interested in the Second World War. I don't know why, but anyway, two or three years ago I'd been reading a lot of books on the subject and from there I wrote the song. I hope it works because it's an old song so I've since lost contact with the way I was feeling when I wrote it and it's strange singing it live as it feels as if someone else wrote it."

'A Church Not Made With Hands' is probably the album's best marriage of imagery and music. Another spiritual point?

"Yeah, but I don't think I got the message across with the song. I think it's ill-focussed but I think I'll put that right with the next record."

Another (Pretty) Face

Most of the photographs taken of Scott seem to emphasise his frail, mournful looks. They hint at artistic depth and of a sensitive, thoughtful nature within. The shot on *A Pagan Place* is pretty typical; the high cheekbones and the black shock of hair suggest a photogenic Ian McCulloch. Is that the intention?

"No it's not and the press won't succeed in portraying me that way at all. So it dgot nothing to do with each other."

Does the idea of being a pop star appeal to you?

"Not at all. I don't think we do pop music. Ever since I heard pop groups like the Sweet pop has been a dirty word for me. I've never really recovered from them so I don't like our music being described as pop."

Do you see your music as being above or apart from pop?

"Apart from it. There's great pop music, people like Prince consistently make make wonderful and brilliant pop, but then I see him as being somebody away above that term and I intend my group's music to be something a lot more than that as well."

The grandeur and larger-than-life peaks of *A Pagan Place* have lead to comparisons being made with the music of the likes of U2 and Simple Minds. Scott believes the comparisons have no foundation.

"I don't want to be thought of as the same as them just as they wouldn't want to be the same as me or anyone else. I think all of the groups, the Waterboys, Big Country, Simple Minds, U2, Echo and the Bunnymen and the Alarm, whether they're good or bad, get tired of seeing their name constantly linked in the press. We're all very different groups."

"There is no comparison between Big Country and Simple Minds other than the fact that they're Scottish people and they're heroic groups but their form of music is quite different. If all of these groups had existed in the early 70s

then I don't think people would have lumped them together, but these days there's so few good successful rock groups that they tend to get associated and I don't think that's right."

Lyrical, Scott has been accused of being too introverted and self-analytical. He is a very serious 25-year-old who's decided that his music and personal predicament are important:

"Yeah, I'm much too analytical. I shouldn't think about myself but I catch myself doing it and that's bad. The Waterboys isn't so much a group as for the last two and a half years it's been mainly me on my own and I've had to do most of the work — interviews, photographs, writing songs, producing the records and dealing with the record companies."

"So it can be a bit isolating at times and it can lead to an insular existence which I think I'm escaping from now. But it resulted in some unpleasant songs like 'Rags', which was a bit of an exorcism and I've never had much pleasure from singing it live. I love the music and I like the words to but they're just too close to the bone."

A Pagan Place may have its fair share of faults but it has the sort of aural drama that could fuel a few videos.

Another Garage

"I'm not a great video fan as I often think it's bad to disturb someone's impression of a song. When someone hears a song for the first time it creates a film-track in the mind and to put something on video and make people see it almost violates their imagination. So if we do videos then they'll be more performance than story or imagery videos."

So a picture emerges of Mike Scott, virtual solo artist, whose dreams and schemes are translated into music, excesses intact. Are there no checks on his indulgence, doesn't the band get a say in the songs?

"No, I just tend to present the songs. When the songs are new and fresh and I'm excited about them I have no problem. It's when I've been playing a song live for three months that I lose a bit of bite and then I'm fortunate that I've got a good lot of friends in and around the group who keep me straight about things if I get a bit freaked out."

I've no doubt that Scott has got what it takes, because beneath the layers of *A Pagan Place* every song dances with good skeletal melody and when he doesn't try to sing and write like a cross between Dylan, Edwyn Collins and Ian McCulloch then he's got the makings of a winner.

Maybe he realises this, because at the time of this phone call he was preparing music for the new album and it promises to be a different beast:

"I've got a lot of songs and they're all good. There will be fewer instruments, not so much brass on the next album. So it should be more basic, more spartan and garagy."

George Kay

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