

Minutes from Midnight PETER GARRETT

It's only the first day of his national speaking tour but Peter Garrett is tired.

He's been talking all day — apart from his lunchtime speech to hundreds of students at Auckland University there have been interviews and a press conference, as well as dozens of individual queries to be fielded after the speech. And then there's another speaking "gig" with the Topp Twins at the YMCA at 8.30. The next week will see more or less the same scenario up and down the country — not bad for a singer from a Sydney rock band who has suddenly found himself standing on a stage alone as an anti-nuclear spokesman.

"Still," someone muses. "At least he doesn't have to spend hours soundchecking."

Amidst it all, Garrett has agreed to come down to Progressive Studios to contribute his face (well, his entire head ...) to the video for Left, Right and Centre's anti-tour single 'Don't Go'. He arrives up the stairs, a little late, and fairly quickly becomes the focus of attention.

As he waits while the decision is made on what he's doing first, he talks to Martin Chill, who is there loading out the band's gear. Yes, he's heard the Chills, likes them, says they're getting played on a few student stations across the Tasman, offers some advice.

He'll do the video filming first, it's decided. He and the crew and the record's co-producer Don McGlashan retire into a rehearsal room which has, on this sticky Auckland day, become like a cross between a sauna and a padded cell.

Afterwards, Garrett is keen to go to the coffee bar downstairs to talk. The coffee bar is closed. There isn't anywhere suitable nearby so it's back up to the hot, busy studio. We eventually sit down in the studio room, with Garrett ironically backdropped by Progressive's big mural of New York. Peter Garrett is as co-operative and articulate as if it is the first time he has spoken about nuclear disarmament all day.

From your speech today and the general thrust of what you've been saying here, it seems that a major function of your tour is a bit of consciousness-raising among New Zealanders to remind them of the significance of what we, through our government, are doing with the nuclear ships ban. Is that accurate?

"Yes, I think that's very true. I think it's very dif-



icult for anybody to really know what kind of affect they're having on other people and for nations to know what kind of effect they're having on other nations if they are geopolitically removed from the world stage. I think we get a feeling in Australia of being removed and in New Zealand I think it's almost one further stage down. Not in terms of isolation, but just removedness, you're not in the middle of it all. And because of that and the fact that the only picture you have of what effect you're having on the world is what comes through the straight media, it's probably very difficult for New Zealanders to appreciate just what kind of impact they're having and the way that impact is manifesting itself. And the impact is extraordinary and it's manifesting itself all over the place. And I'm very aware of that simply because I've been able to travel and pick up on it in different places — I've become almost super-aware. And so I do see one of the very necessary things to do while I'm here is to try and communicate some of that feeling to Kiwis. Just say 'Hey, even though you feel cut away and very small and tiny down at the bottom end of the Pacific Ocean, in actual fact you're exercising an influence and a presence which is considerable.'

I think there's almost a touch of unreality about the whole thing for people here.

"Yeah — well, it's happened. This is history folks and you guys are right in the middle of it, of your own doing, with a legitimate government, with a Prime Minister and a policy which has gone right up against one of the superpowers. The kind of bold steps that people in many countries would like to take, you've taken, you're the first. It's very dramatic and significant times."

Aside from the obvious moral boost to like-minded people in other countries, do you think there is much chance of concrete political action following on from New Zealand's?

"Yes, I think so. I think we'll find the fallout — if you'll excuse that word — from the New Zealand position in Greece, to a lesser extent Spain, the smaller European countries and some of the Scandinavian nations quite considerable. I think that as the awareness of what's taken place actually sinks in there I think we'll see, as the awareness of what's taken place actually sinks in there, you'll see a very real global political adjustment because of what the New Zealanders have done. And I think that in a sense it will make it very difficult for the Americans, because if they actually get very heavy and decide they want to punish New Zealand further then, for example, in Australia it brings out our sympathies and we gravitate further towards our neighbours. And if, on the other hand, they stop, which is what they should do and what we're hoping they do, then in a sense you've done it — you've won."

There's also the fact that our action is an expression of support for smaller nations like Palau, who have been having an even less equal struggle against the USA.

"Absolutely. In terms of the Pacific context, it's again significant that a smaller nation, but a much bigger nation than the one that's gone before it has started to take a step. I'm happy that it's Nuclear-Free Independent Pacific Day today and that I'm a part of it. I've stressed time and time again at home that Australia should consider itself part of this region. This is where we are — we're the big bloody flat place in the middle — so let's get with it."

There's already been one apparent political effect on Australia already with Bob Hawke's backdown on co-operation with MX missile tests — can you see many other changes in the near future?

"Yes, I think the ship visits are going to see a much stronger public concern and people getting out onto the ships than we've had before. It's also making Australians consider the nature of the relationship between their country and the United States, because it seems that Mr Hawke's in a sense taking direction from Mr Reagan to tell Mr Lange what to do. And I don't think Australians appreciate that."

Onto your Senate candidacy for the Nuclear Disarmament Party — I saw at least one article which was pretty cynical about it, questioning your motives, even suggesting your standing was a promotional gambit for the band. What was the general attitude of the press during the campaign?

"I think that one was isolated. I think a lot of the media responded in the end very favourably to the candidature. But I think there was a feeling amongst some of the straight media that this person wasn't really genuine and that they were doing it to further the interests of the band. They were people who had no knowledge of Midnight Oil at all. I then spent a great deal of time going back and explaining my case. I didn't feel I had to, I felt that the record spoke for itself and that ultimately the true reasons for what I was doing would become clear, which I think they have actually done. But of course there was a very strong feeling in Australia of who was this person, coming out of nowhere and lecturing the Prime Minister and abusing conservative politicians. Who the hell was this guy? How dare he? I don't have any problem on a one-to-one level with these people — in fact I found it easier to conduct the campaign in the face of people who had animosity towards me because that allows me to charge the arguments back at them really strongly. I've really gone out and won my case on TV and radio, but with the print media, a lot of people who haven't come and confronted me have been inclined to write this sort of stuff. But we ignore them."

The situation here has been quite interesting, with even the conservative press getting increasingly behind Mr Lange. It's unusual.

"Yeah — there's also another aspect of it for New Zealand which goes past the nuclear question and that's the question of sovereignty. And when it goes as deep as that, you are first and foremost New Zealanders and the sort of policies you want to enact you expect to be able to be enacted and articulated by your elected leader. And you don't want someone coming in and upsetting the apple cart and telling you you can't do it simply because it doesn't go along with their policy — even if they are the biggest son of a bitch in the valley. I think that's the kind of response you're seeing and I think it's healthy on-

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