

Last Man Down

Ross Mullins Interview

Ross Mullins has a blazer he calls Ces. He's wearing it in the photo adorning the sleeve of his recently-released Last Man Down album, *State House Kid*. Now a pun like that (Ces Blazer — geddit?) isn't particularly remarkable in itself, but it does give some small indication of the way Mullins' songs work. On first impression you're taken with his light-hearted sense of fun. But then on subsequent hearings you realise there's obviously a conscience at work here, a mind that's concerned about the state of New Zealand society. Mullins readily admits to a political motivation.

"Sure. I'm a political person. I'm not happy about the state of the country. So yes, maybe I am writing songs in some utopian hope that things might change."

However he stresses that those songs certainly aren't "message" or "political" songs. Such songs on the album as 'Beneficiary' and the title number are only political, "In so far as they attempt to come to terms with real events. Most of my songs are about characters who find themselves losers in our society. I see my job as a songwriter not to directly condemn the forces that have defeated or crushed them but to give a voice to these characters and allow the listener to draw his or her own conclusions. You know, I'm a fourth generation New Zealander and I guess one of the main reasons I write is because I see the New Zealand of my childhood crumbling around me. I still think this country has great potential — the

70s were a bad time for this place and we're still feeling the effects."

Yet the solemnity of such songs on the album is offset by others with an overt sense of humour: "Songs like 'Goal Attack' and 'Edmond's Sure To Rise' are about New Zealand males and their inability to cope with their emotions, but they're also fun. I've always written these flip-pant 'schoolboyish humour' type songs. They're in my book from way back."

Recently an Auckland radio station began playing one of these lighter songs from the album, a swaggering ditty about an out-of-work car assembly worker who's 'Going To Australia'. While Mullins is understandably delighted to be receiving some airplay, some people's reactions to the song have left him, as he puts it, "a little worried."

"I think they see me as doing a sort of 'Give 'em a taste of Kiwi,' stupidly patriotic. I thought that I'd made it perfectly clear when I wrote it that the character is a bit of a nerd. Some people miss the irony. They think I want to give the Aussies a boot in the arse or something."

Because of this indirect, ironic approach to political songwriting Mullins wouldn't write a song like 'Don't Go', much as he admires Don McGlashan. He does have, however, a song about a character who is passing through Hamilton on the day of the aborted Springbok match in 1981. The character can't quite understand what's happening to him as he gets pelted with rugby supporters' beer cans and ends up on the ground under a policeman's boot. Unfortunately, 'Days Of Rage' isn't on the album. Nor is another favourite from Last Man Down's live gigs called 'New Zealand Party Girl', all about the exciting social whirl of a Bob Jones' acolyte. Why were these left off the record?

"I didn't consciously leave them



Ross Mullins

off because they were political or anything. But had they been on people would have seen the whole tone of the album differently. Also I guess I thought that partly I was trying to showcase myself as a musician and 'New Zealand Party Girl' is just a blues. In retrospect however, I think it was an error to leave that one off."

Musically, however, Mullins acknowledges all sorts of influences on his writing. "I guess it's hard not to hear a jazz influence and I admire jazz-influenced writers like Donald Fagen. I've also paid pretty close attention to Randy Newman, Tom Waits and Joni Mitchell, also people like Mose Allison and soul music, starting with Ray Charles. and then there's always Dylan — *John Wesley Harding* was the album I first really picked up and I still love the guy."

Surprisingly however, given the high emphasis on the craft of lyrics writing in so many of these names, they are not the main sources of inspiration for Mullins' own lyrics.

"I think I've had a very privileged background for a songwriter. In the

early 70s I picked up a scholarship that took me to France. I had nearly three years living there. France was in a very turbulent political situation then and I was a university student. So I was exposed to their radicalism which shook up my politics a lot. And the other important thing was that I started listening to French music. I was already writing songs by this time and interested in lyrics but never had I come across anything like what I found in France. Their masters of *chanson* — Jacques Brel, Brassens, Ferre. A guy like Brassens writes these really clever, witty little songs, with politics, sexual innuendo ... They make something like my 'Edmond's Sure To Rise' sound mild. So I'm drawing on a foreign cultural heritage for my lyrics, but it's something I've had a lot of exposure to. I've got over 50 French albums at home. For all the local flavour of my songs I'm drawing on a French tradition, which is weird."

But surely there must have been some New Zealand influences at work. On the album for instance you

have put Jim Baxter's poem 'The Bay' to music.

"Oh sure, of course. When I first started writing songs they didn't have any specifically local content at all but I began reading more and more of our poets, getting into what Sam Hunt was doing. Baxter. Fairburn too. I remember being blown away by people like Baxter, Hunt and Denis Glover performing live when I was a student. I caught Sam Hunt's most recent Gluepot concert and he's still magic. As for Baxter, 'The Bay' is an obvious tribute and my song 'Casey and the Pearly Gates' was influenced by his satirical style. I think 'The Bay' was my first really successful attempt to write music for a set lyric. Obviously you can't muck around with Baxter's words like I can with my own. I'd love to try some Fairburn too. I'm from Devonport and he lived most of his life in Devonport."

Last Man Down, even though it is centred on Mullins, is a band and it is the often excellent musicianship of his sidemen that gives so much life to his songs.

"*State House Kid* was actually conceived of as a project three years ago, back in 1982 when I first put together a rehearsal band to record seven of the songs I'd written. A long time went by during which I wrote some more songs. I saw all the record companies but they turned us down. Like most other bands we ended up doing it ourselves. I hope people realise the circumstances under which this album was made — like on a budget that wouldn't even pay for one side of a Dance Exponents single. But I'm proud of it and that is a testimony to Steve Garden's skill as an engineer and also to the session musicians who gave their time for a token payment. Chris Green also deserves credit for arranging many of the horn parts. I think the whole album is a tribute to the ingenuity of all concerned that an album recorded on a shoestring budget should sound so good. I mean some of the people who played on the album are such fine musicians; Chris Green of course, Paul Clayton too, who played bass and guitar, Mike Farrell, Annie Crummer's vocals ... so many fine musicians."

Ross Mullins is obviously impressed with the support he's been given by local musicians and technicians, just as he's rueful about the financial burdens imposed on anyone trying to record within the confined New Zealand industry. Ironically, it may have been the very indigenous nature of his Last Man Down project that meant he had to apply three separate times to the Arts Council before receiving the standard \$750 grant for a first recording. We public should be grateful that *State House Kid* is now available to make us laugh and think about ourselves, all set to a set of such catchy tunes. Last Man Down is unique on the New Zealand music scene. As Mullins himself puts it:

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm a rock musician at all. What I'm doing seems quite different from what's going on here generally. I'm way out of line with, say, Flying Nun or Chris Knox or whatever else. But I hope the scene is diverse enough to allow someone like me to operate."

We hope so too. It needs to be. **Peter Thomson**

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