

American Guitars 'n' Bars

Jason & the Scorchers Interview

The Anglo Invasion is dead. Long live American rock 'n' roll. That is the clarion call of young bands across the US, bent on administering the kiss of life to the sleeping giant of roots rock — and the patient's recovery is no longer going unnoticed.

Just ask Jason and the Scorchers, four good ole

(well, not very old) Southern boys whose high-octane brand of country-laced rock is being sniffed up faster than they can pump it out.

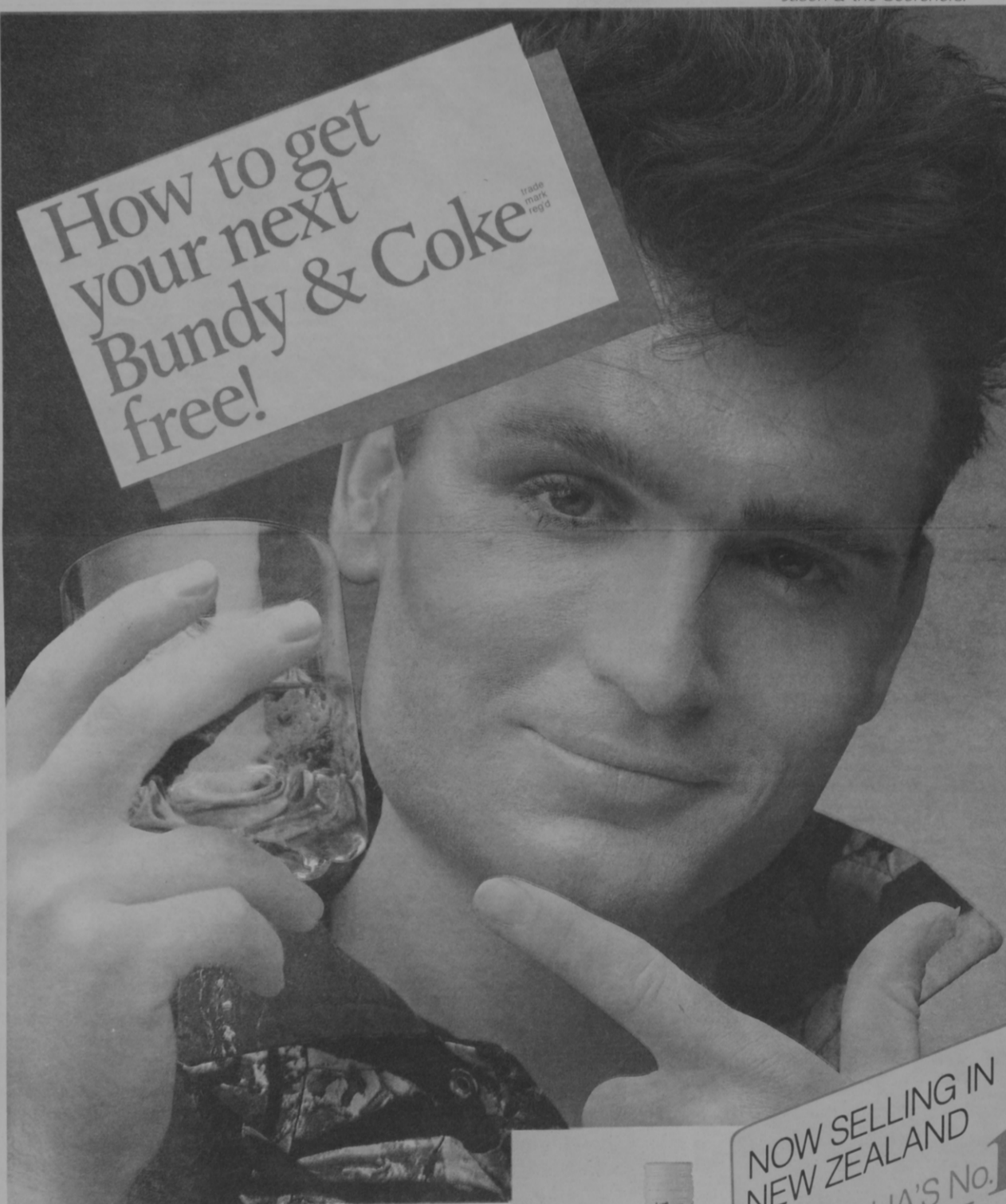
"Yeah, the whole guitar thing is really coming around now. You've got the Fogerty LP, Mellencamp, Springsteen, Los Lobos, the Blasters, R.E.M., Rank and File, a

bunch of great bands. Radio in the States is playing our album, so we're now seeing new faces at our gigs. College kids, preppies, punks and 50-year-olds in cowboy hats. If they wanna listen, they're all welcome," laughs Scorchers' guitarist Warner Hodges, just prior to helping sear the stage of a Toronto disco with the raunchiest rock it had seen.

The Scorchers' reputation to date justifiably stems as much from their concerts as their vinyl. Certainly, the sight of these guys in full shit-



Jason & the Scorchers.



This is the scene.

You're down at the local, checking out a couple of bands and having a few drinks with a few friends.

Now you know how the conversation always goes . . . albums, videos, groups, that sort of thing. Casually you ask someone, "What's your favourite group?" It's a sure thing that they'll ask you, "What's yours?"

That's your cue!

"I'll have a Bundy rum and Coke, thanks!"

It works every time.



Available at all good liquor outlets.

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kickin' stride ranks very high (up there with the early Clash) in this aging scribe's book of rock 'n' roll highs.

They're tagged punks not so much for their music as the sheer manic intensity of their performance. Lead singer Jason Ringenberg leaps around as if he has a red hot poker up the rear, Hodges whirls dervish-like while dishing out licks faster than a Vegas dealer, and Jeff Johnson ain't yer typical static bassist either.

"Actually, we're kind of getting tired of people writing about the three ring circus on stage and never mentioning the music," sighs Hodges. "It is always 'God, these guys are crazy.' But we're making a conscious effort to work on the music. This is the first tour we've practised for. Last year we toured for eight months and only rehearsed three times the whole year! To play in the big leagues you have to be able to play as well."

Okay, let's talk about the music, available on the current *Lost and Found* LP and an earlier EP *Fervor*. Warner lists his loves and influences as ranging from Hank Williams and George Jones through to the Stones (he'd kill to play with them for a night) and New York Dolls, and the Scorchers' sound lifts liberally from all of them while adding the youthful enthusiasm you'd expect from Nashville cats who eat, breathe and shit music. Foot-to-the-floor rockers are interspersed with country-tinged ballads, with both Jason's pleasantly gruff voice and Hodges' guitar work at home in both pastures.

This isn't a Jason and sidemen type situation, as all four Scorchers write: "Jeff and I are associate producers and I work a lot on the music and arrangements," explains Warner. "We divide things up, so everybody is doing something, rather than saying 'you're the drummer, shut up and drum.'"

Warner is as fast with his tongue as his guitar and he wastes no time in outlining the Scorchers' manifesto.

"I'd like to think we can do for rock 'n' roll what Waylon Jennings did to country with the outlaw thing. Country had got really stagnant, just like it is now with all the Kenny Rogers formula records. Waylon shook it up."

"We're just a rock 'n' roll band that plays from a country viewpoint. Rock comes from country and the blues, it is a merger of the two. ZZ Top and J Geils approach it from the blues; being from Nashville, we get that country point of view."

"My Dad used to play guitar with Johnny Cash," he continues proudly. "I started playing in shows when I was nine years old; you had to play to be in our family!"

Jason Ringenberg is actually from a farm in Illinois, but it was his arrival in Nashville four years ago that set the Scorchers afire: "Jeff, Perry (the drummer) and I had been playing together for seven years, but we only got serious when Jason came along. He was the glue, before him we must have had 50 bands!"

Released early in 1983, *Fervor*, their second EP, landed them a deal

with Capitol and so far the relationship has been a happy one.

"It must have been strange for the record company at first — 'Here's a bunch of rowdies from the South wearing weird Western costumes. How the hell do we sell this to FM radio?'"

"But they've been cool. We're not the kind of band they could dress up and have do Duran Duran singles. We don't have the talent to do that, anyway. There's no Lillywhite stamp of production here. I hate hearing albums where no matter what the band is, you can hear the producer. We just wanted to technically record the band as well as possible while keeping that live spontaneity and energy. That's the way rock 'n' roll is supposed to be, to us anyway."

Warner Hodges certainly has no time for the glossier, synthetic pop bands around. A weird mis-match had them open for the Eurogliders in Canada, and the Scorchers claimed they were robbed of a soundcheck and stage room for the headliners.

"And people said we were too loud. Fuck me, rock 'n' roll is loud, even if that synth crap isn't!"

Yep, the Scorchers have declared war on disco and the British electro-poopers. "Look out London, here comes the Scorchers," they yelled on their debut EP, *Reckless Country Soul* (now very difficult to find), as a defiant challenge to the Anglos then clogging the airwaves. Ironically, the pommies have lapped up their sound, the band touring there twice last year.

Their electrifying set over, the Scorchers hightailed it out of the club as soon as possible and hit a more congenial setting: downing beers at record speed, listening to blues guitarist Albert King, and holding court with some tattooed fans. The apparently more reclusive Jason had retreated to his hotel, but his comrades sure know how to party.

"Yeah, Jeff and I like to drink far too much," concedes Warner. "There's nothing I like better than to hang out with my friends in a Nashville bar and have a good time."

"But that can get in the way of performing, so this tour I won't drink a drop until our show is over. People pay too much to get into a show or buy a record for me to screw up because I've had a few beers. Now, if I make a mistake, it's an honest one, I'm sorry, big deal. I can look in the mirror and say 'So what! There's no alcohol-induced mistakes.'"

Whether this growing commitment to professionalism and a hectic touring schedule will undermine the reckless exuberance that makes Jason and the Scorchers such a refreshing act remains to be seen. Staying in his beloved Nashville should keep Warner Hodges from getting too big for his spurred snakeskin boots.

"The good thing about Nashville is that you get thrown into the thick of things. I can go out every night of the week and see 10 guitar players who ain't making \$5 a night but are scary goddamned good."

"Everyone in town plays a guitar. You got to get better or get out!" Kerry Doole