## Diamonds A Narcs Best Friend?



The Narcs (L-R): Steve Clarkson (foreground), Tony Wayne, Liam Ryan, Andy Dickson.

"I find the Narcs bloody hard work intense, hard work."

So said Liam Ryan, keyboardist for the Narcs, relaxing on a recent sunny Sunday afternoon, Liam and Narcs' vocalist Andy Dickson are back in Auckland to marshall their energy and gather their wits about them in a brief respite from the latest round of Narcs activity.

The band has returned from a two month excursion to Australia where they spent a period of 30 days recording their second album and taking the first steps at assimilating themselves into the Australian music scene.

"We recorded at a studio called the Music Farm at a place called Mullimbimby, which is about three quarters of an hour south of Surfers' Paradise. It's a typical Australian farm, really rural, says Dickson. "The accomodation and recording complexes were linked up by intercom, which made it quite good. If you didn't want to hang around the studio you could go ride a horse, or walk in the bush or play the piano up at the house. It was very creative - a really wellorganised place."

By all accounts an environment geared to relaxation and productivity and one which in the past has attracted such luminaries of 'Oz Rock' as Midnight Oil, Australian Crawl, Mondo Rock Mi-sex and Cold Chisel, most of whom are bands

to which the Narcs owe more than a passing nod. Did you go into that studio with any preconceived ideas on how you wanted to sound, knowing the studio's history?

Ryan: "No. That's the real reason we went

there. The reason we didn't record here, without slating local studios, is because we knew the sound we'd get here. We'd worked in Harlequin, we'd worked in Mandrill, we knew that short list of production people, engineers, and it's just a predictable sound. We went to a studio where parts of it had a stone floor, other parts were carpeted, where you could fold the walls down and move them around. You'd be playing over your keyboards and looking straight down a lush, green valley — this kind of thing. Acoustically, it vas really experimental, especially with Tim's at-

titude, which was an attitude of first takes."

Tim, of course, is the Narcs' producer, Tim Kramer, a Brooklyn New Yorker now resident in Sydney where he's formed a production company with ex-Beach Boys session drummer Ricky Fataar. Kramer's past credits include working as a studio engineer for the likes of Levon Helm (of Band fame), Herbie Hancock, Bonnie Raitt and Keith Richards and Ron Wood, as well as coproducing an album for Renee Geyer. He had become acquainted with the Narcs through remixing the Australian version of their single 'Heart and Soul, and had expressed interest in working further with the band.

"We sort of half expected," says Dickson. "That because Tim was an American, maybe everything was gonna be really tight, you, know, like Toto or something. We were a bit worried about that, about becoming Americanised, but the guy was just totally unpredictable. A really off-the-wall

character, still young and zany."
Ryan continues: "He came over here for a couple of days and he pretty well amazed us. At Montage Studios we had set up to go through the numbers with him. We thought he would have quite a high-tech approach but he just shoved two microphones in the room and said 'Go for it.' We went to Australia with these 'roughs' that were so rough — a true sketch if you like. In fact it blew the whole idea of high-class demos right out the window and that was his attitude all the way through. Even on the album sessions, after you'd done a take you'd expect him to say 'Let's do it again,' but instead all he'd say was 'Is it in time? That's fine, let it go then,' which was great because the album's got some rough edges that we just didn't expect to be there

Both Dickson and Ryan seem well pleased with the finished album — to be simply titled *The Narcs* — and enthuse at length over the production techniques and atmosphere generated by Kramer, in particular his emphasis on experimentation. I ask them what bearing this has had on the content of their new material

Ryan: "Musically, a lot. Tim spent heaps of time

setting up the gear looking for 'that' sound, as he put it. We spent time trying to find nice bright and sharp sounds. They were new sounds for us and that's contributed to the more contemporary sound we've achieved. As far as the actual songs go, there are different angles

"Some of the songs are straight-out love songs, some, like 'Our World' are political songs. Stranger In A Strange Land' is a political song. They're dealing mainly with the nuclear issue and New Zealand in the world kind of thing. I'm quite adamant about writing from personal experience. I like to know that every line I write, lyrically particularly, is true. That it's got some basis in reality; even if some of the lyrical ideas do sound like flights of fancy, they've always got a basis in something that's happened."

So you write from personal experience?

Yeah, like the first line in 'Diamonds On China'; 'There's a hole in my shoe, where the ocean runs through, or whatever, just came from Sandy Bay. Walking through a creek with a pair of sandshoes on that had a hole in them. The idea just stuck: 'Well, this whole river is running through my shoe!

Dickson offers: "We all write from our individual outlooks on life and emotional feelings, putting yourself alongside the world as it is.

Having completed their recording, the Narcs spent some time in Sydney doing "silent" gigs — unadvertised support slots for the likes of the Electric Pandas — and putting on a showcase performance at Sydney's Tivoli Room, where they were assisted by a borrowed amalgamation of road crew from the Mullanes, Rose Tattoo and Pseudo Echo. This aspect of the Australian music scene, the apparent willingness of the competition as it were to help out, completely bowled them over and begged comparison to the New Zealand scene, where the Narcs have had their fair share of detractors.

"One of the main things we noticed about Australia is there doesn't seem to be any sarcasm or cynicism towards any particular style of band," claims Dickson. "Every type of band gets a fair go — in the public eye and in the eye of the industry. Whereas over here (NZ) it seems that one type of band is getting sarcastically dug at from one end of the scale by the other.

The next item on the Narcs' public agenda is a tour towards the end of October, co-inciding with the release of The Narcs and showcasing the new songs. According to Andy Dickson, the month-long jaunt will be the most ambitious in terms of production and scope yet undertaken by the band. The usual pub and club venues around the country will be interspersed with town hall and theatre performances in some major centres. The band will be augmented for this outing by guitarist Gary Verberne, to give Andy the chance to develop his frontman role without being tied to a guitar. He stresses however that the extra guitarist is not a permanent fixture:

"We've always been very staunch about the four-piece lineup and the time we've spent together has been very much a learning experience about each other, working out how to write together and live together. It's not very easy these days to pull in another guy as an extra mu-sician, but we've only considered it for this tour, there is no one on the album apart from the four band members.

What about a fleshed-out line-up on future

recording projects? Ryan: "I don't think so. There's talk of the next album being something like using just a Hammond organ and maybe some brass, making it a real basic album. It's really getting down to being musicians

Dickson: "Yeah, we'd like to do a total acoustic album."

The fact that the Narcs are already discussing ideas for their third album when their second one is scarcely even pressed, let alone released, says much for their innate confidence in themselves and the support structure they have gathered around them. Being signed to a five-album deal on a major label like CBS releases the Narcs from the anguish faced by a large number of their contemporaries — that of having to hustle around to get their recorded music to a public.

Of their progress to date Andy Dickson says: "It's a steady pace. It's been like that for the last couple of years. There's a hell of a lot of optimism in the band about what we can achieve. The lofty ideas of, say 'Today the Wanganui Opera House, tomorrow the world,' have given way to a more mundane one-day-at-a-time attitude. At the same time the band is progressing musically and the hype isn't going too fast for the band.

Maybe not, but where are the Narcs headed

and what do they ultimately want to achieve?

"We want to write music that really means something lyrically," advises Liam. "Teach people things and communicate ideas. It's really exciting to go through Customs and set up your gear in a city where no one knows you, where you haven't got any airplay, and try to make headway. It does something to you. I'm a musician, that's the bottom line. It's what happens at the end of these fingers that dictates whether you're happy or not. We've always gone about doing things in our own way and that's exactly how we'll continue to do them, around our lifestyles, around each other. It feels like a really good way to go, because we haven't gone stale, we haven't lost ground. I'm confident this next tour will be the best tour we've done, they've always got better. The Narcs are gaining in momentum."

**Brendon Fitzgerald** 

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