

# The Rites of Ranfurly

## CHRISTCHURCH IN SPRING by Russell Brown

The best way to get a perspective on any place is, of course, to move away from it. From high in the air, the Canterbury Plains is a skewed patchwork quilt, the patches getting bigger and greener as you head towards the Southern Alps. It's further out from Christchurch that the big holdings lie — land is wealth, especially when it's fertile and the first-in-first-served early Canterbury settlers have become the closest New Zealand has to a gentry.

Auckland's moneyed are positively *nouveau riche* in comparison, and Christchurch snobbery is like no other. But the difference has its payoffs for citizens. Periodic visits over the last five years would have revealed that while changes in Auckland happen increasingly for the sake of business, the face of Christchurch has changed predominantly for the benefit of people.

In Christchurch the city council closes off major inner-city streets to form expansive pedestrian malls, dotted with seats and small gardens and free of noisy traffic. In Auckland, more old buildings go down and rigid glass towers rise up in their place. "Prosperity" isn't everything ...

### Wednesday Sept 11: Rock On and Time Off

The words above and those below aren't intended to be part of the progress towards any vital conclusion, but are more composed in the name of cultural observation, highlighting people and places and events of interest, unrepented opinion, sheer whimsy, and whatever else might creep in. Not so much what-I-did-on-my-holidays as what-my-holidays-did-on-me ...

First stop is the Christchurch Town Hall, where the final preparations are being made for the Christchurch end of TV's 'Rock On New Zealand' live TV production. The title's dubious but the idea of getting local music on prime-time TV is laudable and the charity (as most charities are) is unquestionably deserving.

A TV concert lightshow and a lightshow at an ordinary concert or pub gig are very different things. Much of the difference is due to the extra light requirements of cameras, but there's a



certain glitziness that is unique to a TV rig. 'Rock On NZ' is no exception, and a huge tree of lights which fill no other function than to flash on-and-off-on-and-off forms the backdrop to the Town Hall stage. It's something the bands' individual lighting people don't quite know what to do with.

With Wellington's city fathers apparently deciding that the Michael Fowler Centre is too good for the yobbish youth of the capital, the Christchurch Town Hall is without doubt the best major concert venue in the country. Provided the sound engineer remembers that the hall's acoustics themselves have been designed to amplify, the sound will generally be first rate.

Indestructibility seems to have been the only consideration in the design of the huge concrete barn that is Auckland's Logan Campbell Centre. Optimistic audiences continue to trek there in the hope that *this time* the sound from the speakers won't be a boomy mess; which of course it generally is. The Christchurch Town Hall had a problem with damage for a while — until they learned to remove the seats from the auditorium floor where appropriate.

This night's production is pretty much faultless; the crowd can hear and see the band and the band can hear themselves play. The overwhelmingly young (school age) audience seems to mightily enjoy the occasion (they also enjoy

sitting around smoking cigarettes outside the auditorium), but from this perspective there's something a little depressing about it.

When I was at school and went to see NZ bands at the Town Hall, I'd see the Swingers, Citizen Band, the Dudes — even Toy Love and the Androids. On this night, Netherworld Dancing Toys are without doubt the star turn, but I think they'd be rather surprised to find themselves the relative radical fringe. The Back Door Blues Band are pub showbiz — enthusiastic and likeable, but rather ham-fisted and less than original. The Narcs sounded HUGE, ungracious and closed-fisted. They smiled a lot, I didn't.

When you're young, a live performance can have a major effect on you — especially so now when there's barely a regular under-age venue in the country (there used to be a lot of them — where did they go?). It can be inspiring and provocative. There's not much that's inspiring and provocative about conservatism.

### Sept 12: Nun the Wiser

Roger Shepherd's a pretty big rugby fan, but he's not staying in Christchurch for the big Ranfurly Shield challenge against Auckland, he's going to Dunedin. If he stayed in Christchurch he'd just end up doing more work up at the Flying Nun office and he's sick of that. He gets paid for his full-time job managing a record shop (don't worry, he's not allowed to do his own chart returns), but not by his record company. His flatmate Gary is employed part time — they'll hold out as long as they can before taking him on full-time, but that will probably happen before the end of the year. A lot of other people help out for nothing, or the occasional free record.

The previous Flying Nun office was almost too spacious, light and comfortable to be true — they could certainly do with it now. The office they found after the previous building was sold is two small rooms; the floor almost completely covered with boxes of records, the walls with an array of posters, ones for individual bands and some great ones Lesley MacLean has produced to advertise the records.

As he gives and receives gossip, Roger (he generally isn't thought of as having a second name) does what he does most lunchbreaks, puts records in boxes. Flying Nun releases a lot of records these days, and others are distributed by the label. On the wall is a schedule of projected releases, week by week up until December. It's a far cry from the situation where records came out whenever they could be pressed — which generally meant when there was enough money to pay for them.

It'll be interesting to see how the Flying Nun structure, which operates on a lot of love and not much wages, changes to cope with what seems certain to be a big increase in the volume of

records sold over the next six months. With records like the Verlaines' and Tall Dwarfs' albums, standards are being not only maintained but pushed even further and new bands of the calibre of Goblin Mix and Bird Nest Roys will soon release records that prove the musical depth in this country (and not just Dunedin).

This isn't to belittle the efforts of other indie labels, who, particularly Jayrem, do much to get local music out on vinyl, but the overall standard of Flying Nun Records simply makes it by far the most exciting place to listen. That's been reflected in the increasing overseas success. The reason is possibly that rather than existing to be a record company, Flying Nun is only a record company because that happens to be the best way to make great music available. Make sense?

Maybe soon they'll be able to afford a bigger office. But this one will do for now — and anyway, it has a nice view of the Square.

### Friday the 13th: Sing If You're Glad To Be Gay; Just Be Careful ...

It's a glorious spring day in Christchurch, "a crystal day" as my host Peter puts it. He's taken the day off and so we set off on what might ungraciously be called a pub crawl, but it's more a look at some places with community, culture and character; three pubs.

The first is the newest, although it's housed in an old building (part of the old university site, adjacent to the Arts Centre). The Dux De Lux bar is a fairly recent extension to the vegetarian restaurant of the same name. The restaurant began in fairly rootsy fashion (it even played host to bands like the fab Vauxhalls for a time, before noise became a problem), but it has prospered over the years and these days is rather more swish.

The bar itself is very Christchurch. By virtue of its attachment to a restaurant, it can stay open a little longer than most and is a popular place to go after the theatre, films, music, or other pubs. The crush sees arty types, young students with well-off parents, young professionals, musicians ... There's no official dress code but the patrons generally dress casually, conservatively well.

The night-time atmosphere can be as oppressively "social" as a crowded cocktail party and it's a far more pleasant proposition during the day. Large windows admit plenty of light and, in fine weather, the garden bar is lovely and spacious. A few glasses apparently go missing from the outside tables and sometimes not all the drinks being consumed have been bought at the bar, but the management probably figures relaxed goodwill is worth more than strict policing.

Nobody loves a beachfront town in wintertime, CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

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