

'SAM HUNT' FROM PAGE 14
thing we're trying around home, experimenting with videos of a few poems, because I don't want to put a barbed wire fence around it. I'd scrap the idea of videos if that started to happen. But the analysis stuff, good analysis is exciting and I know poems I've read *about* and gotten lots of other insights into, but that can never for me equal the first rush of a poem; the poetic rush in this case, for all our smack friends out there ... but very similar, not unlike the rush of smack, or the rush of orgasm. And nothing can equal that, not all the analysis in the world.

You're often labelled as anti-academic ...

Yes, but I'm not. What I'm anti is when poems aren't given the space that they demand. Because poetry for a long time seemed to almost be the preserve of the educated few up on the hill. When Dylan brought out *Highway 61 Revisited*, in 1966, for me at a party on the North Shore, lying drunk in a house on Castor Bay beach and listening to the songs pounding out, suddenly there was this *poetry*. And for me, that day a few bookcases fell off the wall. And poems tumbled out, all over the place. I knew from my own background that poems didn't have to be that way, but here was something that other people were listening to too. Then a few years went by and Van Morrison left Them and started working on his own and coming up with songs like 'Madame George' and 'T.B. Sheets' and, again, faaark. And then in later years you come across things like Richard Strauss's four last songs, which have always been around, but who ever thought of the poetry of them?

And I think that the day *Highway 61* came out university English departments experienced a major fuckin' earth tremor, because they were threatened. Poetry was coming back on the streets — it had withdrawn 400 years ago when they invented printing presses and poetry entered the universities. And it wasn't taught in schools, because it was an elitist thing, the preserve of elocution teachers and other cock-suckers like that ... don't get me wrong, I'm not saying all speech teachers are cocksuckers, but that general sort of cocksucking mentality.

But we're getting away from the question. So it's good that despite the hangover of 400 years of believing that poetry belongs in books, poetry is out on the streets. And people who live out on the streets have always known that and I've always known that, but it's good that it's happening in a big way. New Zealand musicians are starting to drift back to New Zealand — I know of quite a few good, big names, like Fane Flaws in Sydney. I think it's a good place. I saw on TV the other day Paul Reeves being invested as Governor

General and I thought, shit, this is a different day from when some boring arsehole like Keith Holyoake was up there pounding on a kauri stump calling himself a statesman.

So the state of the nation's okay by you?

Yeah, I think New Zealand's in a very healthy state of mind. I mean, I know a lot of people have got a lot of problems — like the farmers; no subsidies any more boys, we're just going to pay you what it's worth. I've always wanted to get paid what it was worth for what I do. I mean, you can't expect subsidies. I've never wanted grants — I've had a few rewards and they've been gratefully received, but I've never been one of those peo-

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ple who feels that the world owes me a living. And a lot of writers do think that. So they have these scholarships and things like that, but I've always worked more on a street level, I don't want awards like that. I'm lucky to have both sides — a lot of writers are very private people who obviously couldn't go out and tell their stuff. But I'm able to do that, I'm very fortunate. I can sing for my supper and make sure I get my supper when I've sung.

I talked to Tim Shadbolt a couple of months ago and he was quite frank that in today's economic climate he wouldn't have been afforded the luxury of being a young radical. Do you think you'd still be a young poet if you were starting out today?

"Yes I do, in my case. Obviously that applies to myself, but to quote that famous John Clare line, a poet is born, not made. Whereas you could say an activist is made rather than born, in the sense that he or she reacts to a political issue of the day or something like that. But with the parents that I had and the same sort of background, I suspect

I'd have done what I do. It would obviously be shaped by the place I was in and the sort of society and so on. So, yes, poets are born not made. That's not necessarily saying I'm a poet — let other people decide about that. I'll just continue to write poems — that's my job.

How do you feel about the fact that most people know a lot more of you and Minstrel than they ever will of one of your poems?

If the image or the impression of the person takes over ... what the hell. And the other thing is that a lot of poems or odd lines from poems do stick in peoples' heads. And I get this all the time, it's one of the most genuine bits of feedback that I do get. Someone comes up — it happened yesterday evening, this woman who said she doesn't know any poems apart from the one I wrote for a barmaid in Wellington, called 'Words For Tina'. And she's got it on the wall at home. And she asked how was Minstrel, but she knew a few lines. Obviously not everybody's like that, but what the hell, if Minstrel and I occupy a certain space in peoples' imaginings that's fine. For example, Spencer Russell, the manager of the Reserve Bank. I don't know anything about the economy, but he's got a certain style, which I admire ...

He's got a great name ...

He has got a great name, you can say it both ways round. You can say 'Hunt Sam' but it's not quite the same.

We talked about irony before — do you ever indulge in self-parody?

No. I've got enough people doing it for me! Ahahahaha! Every New Zealand town has a Sam Hunt impersonator — I can tell you, I've been there, I've listened to them! Some of them are good. The worst was in Twizel. The other nice thing is there's a Sam Hunt in the Chathams — he'd be well worth an interview. He'll tell you about fishing and a few other things. I met him a few years back, when I went to the Chathams. When I got back, on the front page of the *Dominion*, there was a photo of both of us beaming and the camera and the caption was "Sam Hunt beside himself." Muldoon went over on the same plane and he only made page seven!

Would you agree that at present there doesn't seem to be an identifiable youth literature — not in the sense there has been at times in the past?

No, I suppose there's not really is there? But then again, I think they'll look back on 1985 and say some shit-hot things were happening. One of the things Karyn Hay gave me for Christmas last year and I really love them, the Verlaines' *10 O'Clock in the Afternoon* ... good title too — really fucks up those two-dimensional thinkers. I think

it's often hard to appreciate what's going on at the time. Say a poet's producing work and he may have a bad patch and people say "Oh, he's gone to the fuckin' dogs, that one." Baxter was a good example of that — at the time a lot of Baxter's work was coming out he was getting a lot of criticism, some real knife jobs from critics. But then when his work was able to be looked at in retrospect, you could pick up his collected poems and flick from there to there and that may be 20 years difference between those two poems and all the deadwood's been cut out by that time, so it's often hard at this time. But I love that's happening in this country, in the music, in the poetry — and in the politics.

I know that at the Verlaines' end of things a lot of younger bands do seem to have taken on a real New Zealand identity.

Yeah, well it's come upon them. They're not striving for it. They're not doing this boring cry of the New Zealand poets of the 1930s — well sometimes it was great, but that thing of looking for the New Zealand identity, I mean, that's emerged, you don't try and put that on yourself, it's like trying to make a statesman of yourself, or a poet of yourself. And I think the New Zealand identity is so strong — I feel very strongly when I'm out of the country. Actually, I remember Denis Glover, not long before he died, he was made a guest of the Soviet Union. And he'd always been pretty critical of what was going on, sarcastic old bastard, but he was away from New Zealand for two months in Russia, flew back via Singapore, got on the Air NZ plane at Singapore and some New Zealander on the plane said "Goodday mate," — and Denis said he burst into tears. He was missing that thing that's a country's identity. That's not meant in a nationalistic sense like marching in goose-step or something. But there's so much good stuff happening here Keri Hulme is an obvious example. Look at Janet Frame, she's producing another novel every year and they're just getting better and better — she's writing at white heat. And I'm awestruck that I'm around when these great things are written.

Sam Hunt is a doddle of an interview; loquacious and friendly, if not quite succinct. Not so much acting the part as simply *being* it. The oratory hangs between addressing attention to the questions and charging off on favourite tangents.

He'd been holding court at the public bar down the road the previous night, now he was off to do a radio interview. Me, I headed for the local to scribble out an intro for the story and wash the words down for good measure.

Fair made m'day ...

Russell Brown

**Do da
Coruba.**
One taste is all it takes.

Y & R GSI 060 140

