

"I think people who haven't heard us at all, or who don't like the raucous nastiness of live rock music, could quite happily like it. I think we'd probably be a bit rugged live for some people ..."

He comes back and apologetically serves up a feed of macaroni cheese. Jo bemoans the frequency with which they eat macaroni cheese but it's willingly consumed. After the dishes have been cleared away, it's time for the interview with Graeme and Verlaines' bass player Jane Dodd. Jane's companion and the designer of the album cover ("He badgered us into the title so it would fit his artwork. *Hallelujah's* also a good word written down," Graeme explains.) Charlie Stone, and his dog Blues, listen intently. Well, Blues' attention wanders a little.

"That's not to say that if something turns up when we're doing it that we think is good we won't do it," notes Jane. "Some things we haven't had very clear ideas on — like 'Don't Send Me Away.'"

"Yeah, that was fairly open ..." Graeme agrees. "But the songs were all there and there wasn't

The Verlaines Interview by Russell Brown



The Verlaines (L-R): Graeme Downes, Robbie Yeats, Jane Dodd

anything to be done to them and all the bits that required other instrumentalists and things were all written out and arranged before we got there. So it wasn't leaving too much to chance."

Most bands don't seem to be able to prepare themselves that well for the studio.

"Yeah. I think it's important — because it costs a fuck of a lot more money if you can't!"

One of the features of *Hallelujah* is the preciseness of the singing, especially considering that it's not (and shouldn't be) ever note-perfect on stage and has been, on Graeme's part, more of a melodic shout on previous records. The two singers put it down to having more time and getting better at singing in the studio environment. But what about mustering the mood for an emotionally intense song like 'Lying In State'? Graeme looks a little sheepish and Jane answers:

"The vocals I seem to remember being quite an event. It was quite strange because it was the first time we'd seen Graeme *really* ripping into vocals without a guitar on. Because usually when you're in the studio you're holding back on the vocals quite a lot but Graeme really got his act together and just went for it. And it was one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my life."

It's interesting that the record shows such a different side to the band and the songs.

"It's just control isn't it? Physical and mental control," Graeme explains. "I think a recorded ver-

sion should be the best possible thing that songs could be. Well, there's the odd song you take in and ..."

"But it's still the best," Jane continues. "Like 'Lying In State' would not have suited a clean sound. That song was a live song and the only way it could be done in the studio was to try and reconstruct a live atmosphere as much as we could."

Graeme: Doug (Hood) said to me about two years ago that you've just got to forget the live thing when you go into the studio, because if you try and do anything like what you're doing live it's a pale reproduction of the real thing, because it hasn't got the power of the visuals and the volume and all that to make it work in a powerful way. So you have to totally forget about that and reconstruct the song almost, as far as how many instruments you use and what you do to get something like the same effect as a live performance."

Jane: "I think once we've recorded a song we play it better live. Even songs like 'Lady and the Lizard' that we've been playing for a long time, you get to know so much better when you're recording them."

Graeme writes all the Verlaines' songs and he can toss them about for months, sometimes years before bringing them to the band — the usual stumbling block being getting a lyric he's completely happy with. Sometimes there'll be

some leeway, things for the band to try out, but structurally complex songs like 'Ballad of Harry Noryb' come precisely mapped out.

One of the reasons for the Verlaines' lack of activity this year has been the time demanded by Graeme's music study at university — he's looking forward to a lighter academic season next year. His studies have had an obvious effect on his writing — much of the album could be broadly termed "classically influenced". Jane's musical knowledge is less heady than Graeme's but she did learn piano. It's interesting to speculate on how the Verlaines would have turned out given the same musical bent and no formal training ...

"That's a tough one ... alternative history," Graeme frowns. "I don't know — you see a lot of the differences in terms of structure and things are apparent in earlier songs and I didn't really know a hell of a lot then. Like 'Crisis After Crisis' and even in 'Death and the Maiden'; changing key in the middle, which was sort of the beginning of trying out different structures instead of verse-chorus-verse-chorus-middle eight-verse-chorus, the normal structured song. The idea of doing it was making a song more narrative, I guess. Unfolding a plot, rather than a structure, which some of them are. But I don't think I'd be able to write 'Noryb' and 'Burlesque' and 'It Was Raining' without training."

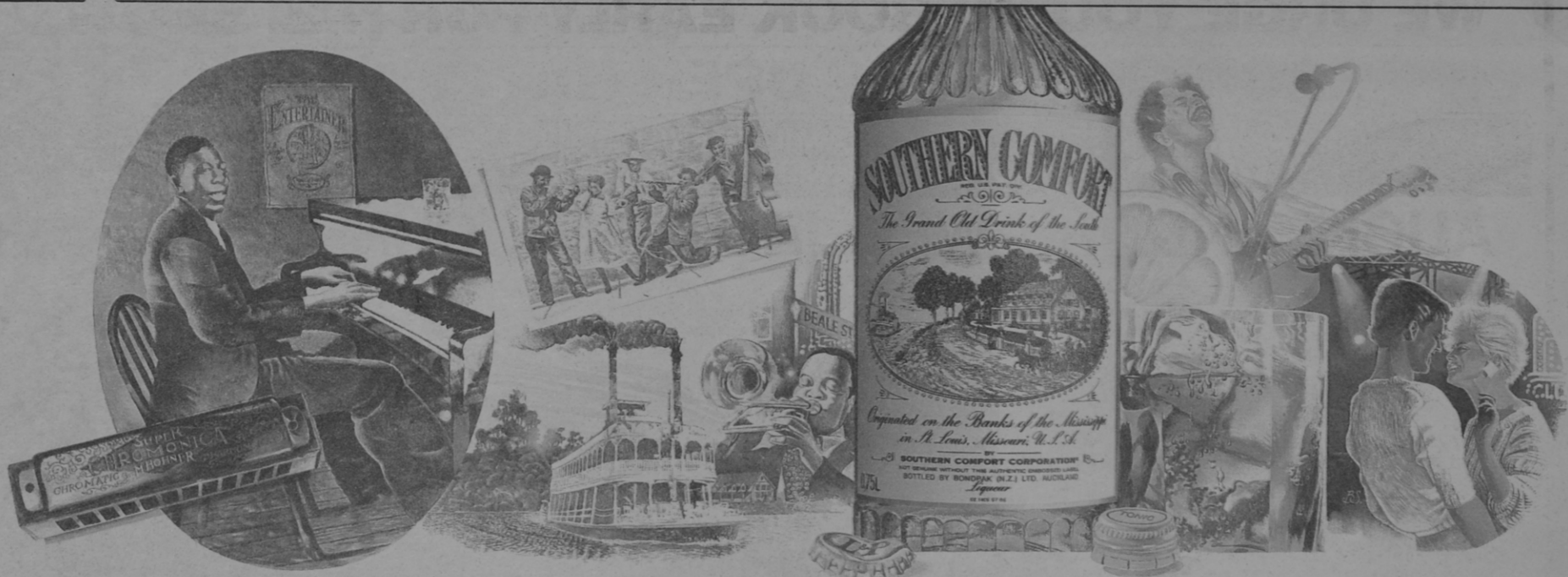
Ironically, one effect of Downes' heavy course of music study has been to make it *harder* to come up with lyrics for songs.

"That's the problem we have with my lack of churning stuff out, I haven't got time to read. I mean you feed off just processing words through your head all the time and I never get time to do it. I just get to process notes every day, not many words. It's a hassle — I'm almost getting out of the habit of thinking in terms of words."

A lesser writer might have settled for a lower standard of lyrics and a bit less pain in getting them out, but the standard of Verlaines' lyrics has been, and remains, conspicuously high. My test pressing of the record didn't come with a lyric sheet but one or two stand out. Like Graeme, not exactly known as a wild partygoer, spitting out the following words in the chorus of 'For the Love of Ash Grey' ...

And in between drinking
Impairing your hearing
Being so bloody uninspiring ...

Much of a reflection of your own thinking?
 "That's a difficult one to comment on because it'll probably mean different things to different people and to me the lyrics aren't that great in a way. They're good, they fit in the right places, but they started out by me trying to write a song about a particular idea and that was the best fist
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