

Express Drongo

The Drongos Bounce Back from New York

Flashback to the mid-70s. Richard Kennedy, Tony McMaster, Jean McAllister and Stan Mitchell meet in Auckland and play music for Red Mole Enterprises.

They are all experienced musicians — Kennedy was in Midge Marsden's Country Flyers for three years, McMaster played with

Alastair Riddell and Hello Sailor, Mitchell was in Straight, Salty Dogg and Hello Sailor and McAllister was a well-known folk and session singer in Wellington.

Red Mole leave the country and Red Alert is formed with Jan Preston — later of Coup D'Etat.

"There were a few bright spots like Red Mole around at that time," says Kennedy. "But those were the days when if you got up and did

original material you were a wanker — I guess Hello Sailor were breaking through that. Basically it was sort of pub-cover bands."

As Red Alert they played here only a few months, then left for San Francisco and played for eight months there. ("We wanted some adventure really.") They wound up in New York and did some shows with Red Mole — Kennedy journeyed to Britain with them.

"I was there for a few months with Red Mole and then went back to New York. Red Mole went back to New Zealand with Jan and I teamed up with Tony and Jean and Stan and we formed the Drongos in a hotel room on the corner of 49th St and Broadway."

This was 1979 — and for financial reasons the Drongos hit the streets solid.

"Stan was actually the first one to go out and do it, he went out with one drum and a sign that said 'I'm A Good Chap' and 'I'm On My Way To London' and he came back with about \$80 — so instantly everyone jumped in on it. We got these battery amplifiers and hit the street — and developed a lot of connections that way."

"The street thing is a show — we don't just slop around. When we lived off it, it was a matter of putting on a short, quick, tight show that was fun, collect the money and then the crowd disperses. That was our thing when we had a hotel bill to pay — now we use it mainly for promotion, we do things like record stores and have played live on the radio. It makes us able to do things that we'd never be able to do otherwise."

The street thing really turned into something; they started writing material especially for it, but alongside that the Drongos also played clubs and colleges.

"The street thing was more stripped-down, more rootsy. the



The Drongos playing at the corner of 50th St and Broadway, Manhattan. They are (L-R) Stanley John Mitchell, Richard Kennedy, Jean McAllister, Tony McMaster.

PHOTO BY LESLIE FRATKIN



There is a curious American expression used to collectivise their majority group. And it is WASP — White Anglo Saxon Protestant. It means that you're aren't black, a Yugoslav, or even a Catholic. Which in the context of a heavy metal band who look like Kiss gone bizarre must cause everyone who thought they were safe in their values to run for a shotgun.

Shock rock is no stranger to heavy metal. Even without trying

club thing was more expansive — Jean played synthesiser and we had a full drum kit, but it got to the stage where we started including the street in the clubs. Stan would bring his one drum out the front and do four or five songs and it would give a little diversity."

The Drongos signed with a production company in 1982 and made *The Drongos* in the studio. It attracted a lot of attention, particularly from college radio and reviewers, but got great reviews elsewhere — the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

"The colleges are great — college radio is the saviour of radio in America. They have a big network, they report on the progress of your record and it's a big deal."

Their second album is *Small Miracles* — it's live, recorded on the street.

"It was recorded in four different locations in Manhattan in one day

on a mobile eight-track, and because there's very little information going down on the tape the sound is really high quality. Our producer is an English guy called John Holbrook, who's a great producer and a fantastic engineer. We mixed the record in one session and the whole thing took basically 48 hours and cost maybe five per cent of what the first one cost. And we like it better."

"The way we were going at the time there was a danger we could leave the street thing behind — the material was written for the street so it seemed good sense to do it that way."

The Drongos will be touring the North Island starting January 13. They haven't been home for about seven years and decided to extend their holiday with a tour. *Small Miracles* should be out now through WEA. Although Kennedy says they all miss New Zealand, New York is

their home — they have family and friends there and that's where their opportunities lie.

"Some people say we're a cult band, because we're not smashing into the Top 10, but we're widely known and have a rabid following. We do have people in all the major record companies who really like us but can't convince their bosses that they should sign us. What they want over here is the next Sting — these self-fulfilling prophecies. We're known for our songwriting and our bright stage show."

I really like *Small Miracles* — sort of punky-country-rock 'n' roll. It IS bright and fun and should be played loud. Will the Drongos play on the street in New Zealand?

"Yeah — we'll probably set up on Queen St some time and do a little number and we plan to play a few record stores. I can't wait to jump up there and go 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ..."

Fiona Rae

MADNESS

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★★★★½ Kevin Murphy SOUNDS

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