

times clipped and abrupt in his answers. It's tough getting to the top and that's why he's taken two and a half years to release his album:

"I decided I wanted to be able to do as much of the album as possible, and that meant not only making the record itself, but doing the cover, the videos, ads and t-shirts. Everything. And there were a lot of things I didn't know anything about, like directing videos, lighting video sets and the difference between a red-head and a blonde-head. I felt I had to go and learn about these and that's what I've spent the two years doing."

And this meant you had to move to London three years ago?

"Yeah, there's not too many graphic design schools in Ireland, and because I'd made a list of stuff I wanted to learn about it ruled out staying in Ireland. I could've moved to New York as easy as London. It just had to be a big media centre."

Despite this careful planning, Sharkey's first record was an accident.

"Vince (Clarke) had left Yazoo just after I'd left the Undertones and in the gossip column in one of the music papers it said we were working in the studio together and at that stage that was complete and utter lies, as I'd never even met Vince Clarke. But Daniel Miller, who runs Vince's record company, Mute Records, and who was a big Undertones fan, read it and thought bloody hell, that's a good idea. The next day Vince rang me up and said he'd written this song and he'd send me a tape of it and if I liked it we could do something in the studio. It was all fairly easy. Timewise I got the phone call from Vince on a Thursday, the tape on Friday, I worked on it over the weekend, I flew into London on Monday and we did it on Tuesday."

'Never Never' is a typical quality Vince Clarke ballad, spare, melodic and genuinely moving. A song ideally suited to Sharkey's vocal style.

"It's a terrific song. To be honest, at the beginning I was a bit suspicious about the whole thing until I heard the song. It's brilliant, I hate him for it (laughs). I'm jealous. The record was good for both of us as it was enjoyable because there was no pressure to do a follow-up single or album. I've a lot of fond memories of that period."

Before he tackled his album Sharkey had two further warm-ups, the first with Madness on 'Listen To Your Father' and the second the mawkish 'Loving You' with Queen's Roger Taylor producing and Sharkey sharing the writing credits with the Human League's Jo Callis (who, incidentally, wrote his best songs with the Rezillos, a band who had more than a passing influence on the Undertones).

So, three singles of no fixed approach paved the way for an album that is the result of whim and meticulous deliberation, contradictory qualities inherent in Sharkey's character.

Feargal Sharkey seems to be American in character?

"I shouldn't think so. (Pause) I'm not American so how can I make an American record?"

I must ask Costello that. But your covers are mainly American and there's an R&B feel to the songs you've written with Dave Stewart:

"For me a good song must have a little bit of blues or emotion in it but on my songs it's subconscious blues on my part if it is, it's purely accidental. I make records purely by instinct, I don't sit down with a little piece of paper and contrive a song or anything. I go into the studio and make noises on tape and when I get a bunch of noises that are interesting or pleasing to listen to I turn them into a song."

After I left the Undertones my eventual aim was to write songs and I felt that if I managed to write one or two for the album I'd be quite happy. A long term aim was to have a Feargal Sharkey album written by Feargal Sharkey. So there's six songs (five by my count Feargal) on this album and I've beaten my own target. So that's alright."

The Americanization of Feargal is further enhanced by the fact that the album was mixed by Tom Petty's engineer, Shelly Yakus, in LA. Miles from Derry.



Feargal Sharkey in Undertones days.

"Dave (Stewart) and I had been doing the backing tracks up in North London and we decided that it would be nice just to go away somewhere to do the mixes. And, quite honestly, we got a map and we picked a place where we'd both been and liked and that place was LA. It was purely because we felt that we would have a pretty good time there so there's no deep, meaningful musical reasons for the choice, it was just a whim on our part."

The reason we used Shelly was that once we got him there we wanted the best engineer and a lot of people recommended him and as it turned out he was totally brilliant. He's an amazing guy."

The Little Thief

"To be perfectly honest I pinched 'You Little Thief' and 'Good Heart'. Dave had been in LA finishing the last Eurhythmics' album and he'd gone around to to visit Maria McKee (Lone Justice) and she'd just about finished writing 'Good Heart' and so she played it to Dave on piano and he recorded it on his walkman. A few months later Dave and I were just sitting around talking and he played it just to get a second opinion and the basic song just knocked me out. It was a big challenge for me to take a song that I essentially loved and take it in a direction that Maria could never imagine it could have gone in. Originally it was a very C&W or bluegrass type of song and Dave and I just wanted to turn it into a great pop single."

By no stretch of the imagination is 'Good Heart' a great pop single, unless great means successful as it spent two weeks at the top of the British charts. Believe me, neither Stewart, Sharkey or McKee are capable of creating a Great Pop Single.

Yet Tom Petty's keyboard player Benmont Tench comes closest with 'You Little Thief':

"Ben has been a very good friend of Dave's and mine for some time and he's been getting into songwriting and so he sent us this tape with three or four songs on it. When Dave and I got 'You Little Thief' it was a slow, melodic ballad, but we felt that the basic song was good enough to turn it into what it is now, much to Ben's horror. It's a really clever lyric too."

With 'You Little Thief' you get the impression that the singer is only as good as the song, an old cliché that might cause Sharkey to send Christmas cards to the O'Neills.

A Chrissie Hynde song, 'Made To Measure', also gets the Sharkey treatment:

"I've known Chrissie for donkeys and every so often Dave, me and Chrissie and a few others get together and mess around playing songs. It was during one of these sessions that she played 'Made To Measure', a song she had written a while back but forgot she had. Again, it just knocked

me out, so I said 'give it to me Chrissie, I want it,' Sharkey concludes with mock lewdness.

Feargal Sharkey signs out with a respectful version of Womack's 'It's All Over Now', a song so well known that it's become a standard. So why do another version?

"A pure accident. My basic motto in the studio is anything can happen, and a record isn't finished until it becomes a piece of plastic and then I can't do anymore to it. Dave was playing some chords and it reminded me of 'It's All Over Now' and they weren't even the right chords and started singing it and it started to sound interesting. So then we had to go out and buy the record to work out the proper chords and lyrics. And we did it literally within 40 minutes. The verification of that is at the beginning of the song there's a thunderstorm that's well mixed in as at the time of recording there was a thunderstorm and we stuck the mike out the window."

Jaws

When Sharkey was in LA galavanting around town and waiting for the album to be mixed, NME's Gavin Martin made the pertinent observation that when "his jaws stop chopping like a speedy railway barber ... it becomes obvious that he's credibility conscious."

Credibility turns out to be a touchy topic with Sharkey, probably because he's been critically roasted since the release of his album. With the Undertones he enjoyed endless press raves and the band didn't go hungry. Now, with an album as safe as milk and a single that spent two weeks at the top of the UK charts, he's commercially entered the Young-Moyet league.

"I hope not. (Silence) For fuck's sake, if what you're getting at is the fact that I've gone and copped out and made a commercial album then you're talking complete and utter crap, okay? For the songs on this album are as good as any songs the Undertones have ever done. A song like 'Love and Hate' is as left of centre as you're gonna get. This copping out is complete and utter bullshit and I'm getting really fed up with hearing it. Why don't you go and have a listen to it and just open your ears?"

Sharkey is a mite pissed off, obviously provoked by the unfavourable comparisons between his past and present and by being categorised alongside Young and Moyet:

"I would find it very narrow-minded of people if they did, I would object to being categorised with them. I don't want to be regarded as an 'entertainer'. I write damn good songs and I want to gain respect for what I do. Can I help it that people actually like what I've done and have gone out and bought it? Should I be ashamed of that? But I don't want to be a singer. If I wanted an evening chat show on TV I would go and do it."

George Kay



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