

# Stardom & Hutch

## A Chat with Michael Hutchence of INXS

Michael Hutchence, the lead singer of Australian pop-rockers INXS, sips his iced lager and distractedly fingers a huge red welt on his lower neck. The band and their entourage have just returned from playing "war games" in the Riverhead State Forest — an activity which sees different teams stalking each other armed with guns which fire dye-filled projectiles.

"Huh, bloody stupid games, more like," grunts Michael. "Those really hurt," easing his body into the hard-backed dining room chair. He seems vaguely embarrassed, but whether it's at having let himself be roped into the event by the roadies, or being sprung as to what he does on his days off, he doesn't let on.

So how has it been coming back to play in larger, concert-style venues?

"Great. We didn't really know what the reaction would be like, and only recently did we think that it was worthwhile to come, as far as bringing all the big production and everything. You have, like the show here (Logan Campbell Centre) people in the upstairs that are really into just sitting there, really carefully watching. I've never seen an audience watch so carefully, and downstairs it's all chaos and the usual sort of thing."

If New Zealand audiences are alternatively observant or chaotic, what about our rock 'n' roll? Have you had a chance to hear any NZ music?

"Not much. I saw a promo for a band called the Mockers. I haven't really heard any of their songs."

That's interesting you should mention them, because their singer



(Fagan) is quite similar in manner to yourself.

"Yeah," he says laughing. "So people keep saying. No, they said I was similar to him, actually."

"I like the Herbs, they're a good reggae band. I'd like to hear some of the Drongos — they sound pretty interesting. I remember Hello Sailor and Dragon when they came to Australia, I used to go see them. Really, in Australia, the only New Zealand music you hear about is what's making it in Australia, you don't get too much picture on what's happening in New Zealand. Which is a bad thing, probably a prejudice in Australia against NZ music. Bands from New Zealand tend to get to Sydney or wherever and go into a rapid sort of burn-out rate. It's frightening, just terrifying. Whoosh! In one year's time they live 10 years. It's mainly been drugs ... and getting into a rut. I think Australia and New Zealand suffer from being too patriotic towards British and American music — and we don't really understand our own."

I'm guessing, but would Australia be your favourite place to play?

"Yeah, it's the place where you have your friends in the audience, thousands of friends from all over, the old inner audience."

Where is INXS's favourite foreign gig?

"It's getting a lot more exciting in America, we're starting to do our own big shows there, arenas and so on. Apart from that, France is good, Japan's pretty funny. I dunno, there's certain areas, little pockets here and there."

Do you still operate from an Australian base?

"Yeah, we all live in Sydney and it's all done from there."

Is being Australian important to you?

"I grew up in Hong Kong. I came to Australia as I was edging into my teens. When I first arrived I guess I despised the place, in fact to be honest, it just seemed so crass ... such a really different lifestyle. But it's really changed a lot since."

Around the time that Australia won the Americas' Cup yacht series, Men At Work were hitting the big time in the States. Suddenly there was this groundswell of interest in things Australian by the Americans. Were you able to pick up on that?

"Kind of. We still get asked if we're English. We didn't do a big flag-waving thing like Men At Work did because we knew what would happen in two years' time. There was a backlash against bands that were doing all that flag-waving because at the time there were lots of great American bands who never got anything. And the journalists there are really indignant about that sort of thing happening."

Would INXS rate as the most prominent New Australian band in the world marketplace?

"I guess if you look at facts, maybe. There's a bunch (of bands). I'm really just conscious of the fact that it would be great for a band other than somebody who's going to patronise American tastes to get somewhere from Australia. 'Cos really, most people just think of Air Supply, LRB, Men At Work. Somebody from the pubs would be a good change — although all those bands have done the pubs."

The release in 1984 of *The Swing* album marked a watershed year for INXS. The record was a No.1 smash across the ditch there and sold extremely well in Canada, Japan, America and here in New Zealand. The material was a hook-infested commercial pop-funk hybrid — catchy enough for the radio, thumpy enough for the clubs and raggy enough for the live crowd. The band have just released (late last year) a new album, entitled *Listen Like Thieves*. It's produced by Chris Thomas, a man who (according to M.H.) used to make tea for the Beatles, but who has spent the years since producing the likes of the Sex Pistols, Queen and the Pretenders, among others. Immediately apparent on the new effort is the dumping of the complex arrangements so evident on *The Swing*. Songs like 'This Time' sound like one-take rock 'n' roll, extremely simple.

"They are," says Michael, "maybe one overdub guitar or a harmony vocal. All the technology, all the toys in the studios are starting to dictate what you actually make out of music. Some people are really good at it, and I really enjoy it myself, but

there has to be another way of doing it. Half the music you hear on the radio, you're not really hearing what was played. It's nice to have a real drum sound, a real piano sound. People have said to me 'What's that? What's that sound?', and I say 'That's the piano' or 'That's a guitar'."

All the members of INXS contribute to writing your songs. There must be lots of diverse material cropping up. How do you decide what gets used?

"Well the majority of it comes from Andrew Farriss, our keyboards player and unsung hero. I write lyrics and also write with Andrew — he's definitely the most prolific — and everybody else is allowed to put in their 10 cents worth. We just use whatever we think is gonna work out on the whole album. Sometimes we have 35 songs to choose from, but *Listen Like Thieves* was more like a workshop kind of thing. We wrote two of the songs in the studio with everybody participating. We all work on the songs, regardless. Andrew's and my royalties are split half with the band."

You performed on the Australian segment of Live Aid. What was your opinion of the whole Live Aid spectacular?

"The 'thang'? Mmmm, I would have liked to have been at Wembley or Philadelphia more than at the Countdown set in Australia, but nevertheless, it was all to do with raising money, and it certainly did that. I thought it was very worthwhile."

What do you think of rock being involved in politics?

"If you're good at it, if you're good at getting across the message, it's a good thing. I don't like sort of stumbling, bumbling political messages, vague 'Well we gotta be political so let's write a political song,' and nobody else really understands what they're talking about anyway. Bands like Midnight Oil do it really well. There are so many politics, it doesn't just concern ideology. Sexual politics, social politics ... they all have to be written about and sung about. It's a sign of the times I guess."

Could you describe your musical roots? What did you listen to in your formative years?

"What my parents played, mostly. They used to like playing old music, a lot of old Motown, Supremes, Dionne Warwick. I used to listen to a lot of black music, basically. I remember the first album I ever bought was T Rex *Electric Warrior*. I've always been 50/50 black music and white."

Do you have a favourite performer?

"I like Marc Bolan. Dunno why, actually, I saw a film clip of him the other day and he was really terrible. But no, nobody that I'd have posters on my wall of or anything."

Later this year Michael Hutchence is set to make his big screen acting debut in an Australian movie with a musical theme. It will be produced by Richard Lowenstein, who has made videos for INXS and others, including Hunters and Collectors' 'Talking To A Stranger', and his own feature-length *Strikebound*, which, according to Michael, "got extremely good notes at Cannes". The new project sounds very interesting.

"It's sort of a dark musical. It's called *Dogs In Space* at the moment. It's sci-fi, I'm a daschund! No, it's set about '76-77 and it's about a household, an infamous household in Melbourne that turned out people like Richard and all these other different people. It's an interplay of characters, you know, it's a time when you've got punks and hippies, all these different types. It's a fairly sad story. I'm looking forward to it but I'm very nervous. Richard seems to have faith in me, enormous faith in me. There's some good people in it, Nick Needles is in it, so's Joe Candy."

Will INXS be providing any music? "We might if we can write a song in the style that's necessary."

Sort of a 10-year regression? "Yes! Very much a regression. We can learn to play really badly!"

How about progression? How's the future looking for INXS?

"Ummm, bleak. We're flying to Europe — it'll be freezing. I dunno, it looks like we'll be doing a lot of touring. We tour a lot 'cos it seems to be the only way to get into a place, to

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