

Johnnys Be Bad

In a time when Australian rock could be regarded as being on nostalgia overload, Sydney's Johnnys have always been proud to come straight from cardboard cartoon land.



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Recent times have seen them stumble, as if sober, on better and better days. They were signed by Mushroom Records late last year. With the next best thing to the Beano, their debut album *Highlights of a Dangerous Life* set for release soon, they are returning to New Zealand for the second time in just over six months. That is not altogether surprising — guitarist-vocalist Spencer came originally from Te Awamutu and bassist Graham was born in Blenheim.

Pushing the "we drink, we rock, we fall over" cliché, they were lovable and punchy enough to tickle refills of NZ pub audiences last winter. But with the album set to bring closer focus to bear on their other talents, the jug band bit was given the No Big Deal treatment by Spencer down the phone wire from Sydney recently.

They drink. "No more than anyone else. Our early press handouts said we were this bunch of scally-

wags — but that sort of thing gets overblown. A lot of bands write themselves off ... musicians are like that."

But let's not get carried away on the soft peddle PR. Spencer can't resist recounting a drunken jam with the Violent Femmes at one of the Femmes' Sydney shows. While he was up hacking away at 'Dance, Motherfuckers, Dance,' and 'Waiting for My Man,' Go Between Lindy Morrison decided to drum in with the fun. Poor old Lindy was apparently a bit pished by then and could not even come close to keeping time.

These outrageous rock 'n' rollers, "like money," he says. "They get a record advance and spend it on drugs, equipment, or flying their girlfriend over from New Zealand. I think I bought some new clothes. It didn't go up my nose or anything."

Last year's 'Buzzsaw Baby' was a skull-rattling hunk of throwaway fun, if not all that convincing at its source. This time round, the Johnnys front up with a general release for 'Injun Joe.' Said piece in its current version balances desert dust lament on a sassy kick-away chorus riff of the type favoured by the Gun Club and friends. The vocal has

more than just a drawling glimmer of, well, Hoodoo Gurusism. "Yeah, yeah, we know those guys real well," says Spencer. "We're from the same suburb and we've all got the same record collections."

Even if the Johnnys' early days were a little more simple than the Hoodoos' rock-happy mishmash of 60s fetish, influence and imitation, they dug over a similar stylistic patch. But as the market-wise Hoodoos knew, the obvious trap of such roots without a bit of self-motivation, is slavish cliché — where novelty wears thin. Like the beat clones that inhabit the hip shade undergrowth of Melbourne — where a young band, supposedly aspiring to be original, can churn out three, four, or more Beatles covers in a 45-minute set. "The thing is, you start off with a certain vision. When that starts working, you can focus on what you are doing — we are starting to develop something that is not like anything we have done before."

The Marty Robbins and Sex Pistols thing about us — that's been used so much. There are things about the Sex Pistols that I am against — what I like is the power.

For us, I prefer a John Fogerty/Ramones cross. We never claimed to be new country and western. We're just a rock 'n' roll band that wears cowboy hats so you can tell the difference between us and the Angels. There've always been bands with an image — the Beatles wore monkey suits, the Cramps wear black, the Ramones have ripped jeans. That's where we are coming from visually."

The highlights of any dangerous life go where fact and fiction get a bit blurred, and so too for the Johnnys. Like the Hoodoos who sang about the death of non-existent bass players, Maxwell Smart scenarios and the rest, the Johnnys invent, kill off and keep the personalised myths rolling in the best musical glitch tradition. "Someone said all the songs on the album are about death — I guess it's light-hearted death. There's a couple of Gary Glitter type numbers and one, maybe two, love songs. Some of it is quite personal and some of it is little white lies that we promote."

This was written prior to album release, so the mind could only, well, boggle on cowboy. Alastair Agnew

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