

## Tina Matthews

"People lose themselves in puppets"



**Ex-Wide Mouthed Frogs and Crocodiles bass player. Now a puppet-maker and performer.**

I started puppeteering the year we started the Wide Mouthed Frogs, with the drummer from the Frogs, Sally Zwartz and two guys, working on an unemployment scheme from the Arts Centre in Wellington. Then I joined the Crocodiles, and though I kept puppeteering, I didn't use it for a couple of years.

Puppeteering combines all sorts of things, music, painting, sculpting; I make the puppets as well as puppeteering. Most of the time in Australia I've been puppet-making for a company called the Marionette Theatre in Sydney. I worked voluntarily for them, and after six months got a paid job making puppets. There we made glove puppets out of rubber, making moulds and painting them with latex and paint. In the Frog puppet troupe we used mainly papier-mache, and I've started to do that again. I really like it — it's less toxic, and it's good with the baby too, you can do bits here and there.

I have this life-sized puppet I call Roscoe, he's got orange flared trouser, a 60s suit, loud wide tie and wide shoes. Arthur Baysting organises Kiwi nights in Sydney and I performed with Jane Lindsay, Katie

Brockie and Jenny Morris, we called ourselves the Sweet Kumaras. They sang backing vocals to 'The Ten Commandments of Love' while I danced with Roscoe, who mimed to Tony Backhouse's voice backstage. You can really go over the top with something like Roscoe, his character is really lecherous and sleazy and he looks at me in some disgusting way. The eyes don't move, he's a simple puppet — his feet are attached to mine and I'm holding his arms.

I did a season at a club called Kinsellas last year, billed with Sam Hunt and the Topp Twins. We used their song 'Radiation' for a piece about the French in the Pacific. We had a frog and a zodiac liferaft and Herbs songs in the background and a frog doing a commentary about coming to Club Nuke and walking along the sand picking up dead fish off the beach. Bob Hawke talked about the nuclear facilities in Australia being essential for the world and all the time his nose was growing. People respond to puppets just like children do. It's possible to get a really good rapport with an audience, probably easier than it is with a straight performer — people lose themselves in puppets.

I've been doing a puppet segment on a news programme on ABC-TV each week, plus a five minute political puppet thing on Channel 7. There quite a bit of work now, after *Spitting Image*. Recently I had to knock up a John Howard puppet very fast when Andrew Peacock got the boot — so that's quite lucrative! With the political puppets you can get away with stuff that would be libelous done in any other form.

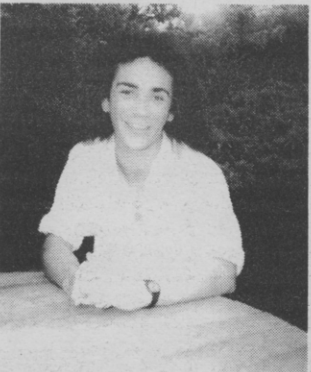
The year before last I was working with the Muppets. The guy who runs the Marionette Theatre is a puppeteering friend of Kermit the Frog, which is Jim Henson. He came over and needed a couple of puppet-makers for their London workshop. So two of us went over and worked on their movie *Labyrinth*. It was interesting but it showed me I don't want to get involved in the industry side of puppeteering. One person designs it, another paints the eyes, another

the fingernails ... by the time 150 people had made it and 10 people were operating it, you feel really removed from the actual character in performance.

Jim Henson was at the workshop a lot; he's just like Kermit the Frog — sounds exactly like him, which is slightly disconcerting. He's done some great things with the Muppets, and *Sesame Street*, but I think it's heading off in the wrong direction. Trying to make them so lifelike, so every blink is realistic, I think is a waste of time. Because what you notice on screen is what doesn't work. Also, to make a thing for kids with no message or educational value is wishy washy. When you have access to so many little children's minds, you should be doing something that makes them think a bit rather than just entertainment.

## Mark Williams

"I hated what I heard here"



**Major solo artist and television performer through the 70s; shifted to Australia 1978. Session vocalist and member of Boy Rocking.**

My contract had expired in New Zealand, so when my producer Alan Galbraith was offered an A&R job here, he said, "why don't you come too?"

I had no expectations really, which was further solidified by the culture shock when I got here. I saw bands in Melbourne that were nothing like what I was doing —

heavy, garagy, so different and so strong. I wanted to stay in pop and rock and roll, but this was a different pop and rock and roll that I was brought up on! I did make a record with CBS in 1979 — it was right at the end of the "blue-eyed soul" period, before the takeover of punk. It made no impact whatsoever.

I'm a calm person; if it doesn't happen, I'll leave it a while and try again. Financially it was hard because I had to start at the bottom. I was singing for a living, looking for a style. I couldn't see myself as a punk!

Once I got over the initial shock, I just grew with the times. I hated what I heard here, especially live, but living here I've adapted to it.

About three years ago I decided to work harder at it, so I started to kick arse. I started session work slowly, because I didn't go out and hustle, only when I was in really dire straits. Slowly by word of mouth I got more and more work until now, they're knocking the door down!

I've done some pretty interesting stuff, not only albums. When I met up with Renee Geyer I started to get a lot more work. From that several of us were asked to work with Tim Finn on *Escapade* and it snowballed from there.

Renee got the shirts. "I can't believe this!" she said. "I find the perfect band and they all go off the next week to work for somebody else!" We went back, and I got this tour and that tour offered, but I haven't taken many. I like singing with Renee, I did some stuff on her album.

Since then I've been on almost every album that's been done in Australia. I don't know where to start! Jenny Morris, Dave Dobbyn, Sharon O'Neill, The Church ... it ranges in sounds. The Church wanted a choir sound. Recently I did an album for a Japanese pop singer Miki Agasuri, plus a soundtrack for a TV play ... I'm a whore with my voice at the moment! Ads? Yes, heaps of ads!

Through Renee I met Mark Punch; he and I are the nucleus of Boy Rocking. We had a single out last year which is still being played in clubs but didn't really take off,

and we've got another coming out soon called 'Saviour'. It's sort of funk-pop. We also play live, which can be painful. In a pub, there's four or five of us, but it started with just two on stage. I used to play synth while Mark played a stand up Simmons kit, or if he played guitar I played the kit. It was a lot of fun, very free. We'd quite like to go back to that. Because the rock and roll industry is set up how it is, people would take no notice. They expect a band. But in our new rhythm section are two guys from Australian Crawl.

Before, I was just dabbling. I didn't know what I was doing. I needed those few years to find out what I was and who I was. I could have stayed on in New Zealand but at the time I just had to go. I knew that because I was a household name and easily accessible, many people would think I wasn't worth a piece of shit. They thought I was young talent time.

But I look upon those years with pride. I've seen some of the stuff I did then — I don't think I could do it again! So uninhibited. I loved it while I was doing it. I still am uninhibited, but with age you tend to get closed in.

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much proved.

"There is a certain feeling I get from musicians here, especially in Melbourne, that it makes far more sense to become a big live act in this country than to pay lip service and then go overseas. The general word has got back over the last two or three years from people that have come back that this is a basically over-rated idea for lots of reasons."

Was it a romantic ideal?

"It's got something to do, particularly in the antipodes — Australia and New Zealand — with young musicians still having this idea they have something culturally to prove and the only people they feel they have to prove it to most are the English. Something to do with our cultural identity — where we came from.

"I think we have more affinity, in real terms, with America, because

our economy is more closely linked and rock 'n' roll is originally an American form. America and Australia are not young countries in the sense that their cultures are fairly new, whereas the English, they seem self-satisfied in a lot of ways.

"The best songs that Australian bands have recorded over there (England) — the Go-Betweens and Birthday Party and so on, are songs that are strongly Australian."

'Cattle and Cane?'

"Yeah, and 'King Ink', 'Nick the Stripper' and all that — just the feel of songs that have a certain openness and sense of landscape."

Seymour is happy and settled back in Australia — Melbourne ... home. The confidence of *Human Frailty* stems in part from a settled question of perspective. But the fact remains he has been ... there. Does he care, still, what the Europeans think of his band?

"I don't care what the English think, but I do care what the Europeans think. When we were over there last time, Belgium, Germany and Scandinavia, we had quite a bit of interest in those places. People write and tell me there is a definite underground interest in us over there but we couldn't convince the English record company to promote us in Europe as opposed to England. They said, well, it's got to happen here first."

Did he ever want to be totally absorbed by the English thing?

"When we first started the music we played was fresh and spontaneous and related to our immediate environment. But as time went on and we got all that over-the-top press over there, we started trying to write music that would appeal to the British rock critics. That's when we made *Fireman's Curse*, which was totally divorced from what we were on about and that was just stuffed."

Regret?

"No, there's no point regretting the past — it was just a mistake basically and we had no one to blame but ourselves. What I am pleased about is that the band has survived and developed a much stronger sense of its own identity."

**Alastair Agnew**



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