

National Anthem Hear Our Voices

"So you wanna be a rock and roll star
... just get an electric guitar and take
some time and learn how to play ..."

When the Byrds sang that in the 60s perhaps that was really all it took. These days it seems nobody takes any notice unless you can wave some black vinyl around; an album has the best impact, it lets people know you're really serious. Forget about the hassle of running a five or six-piece band — since a lot of successful outfits are run by one or two central figures anyway, a duo will be fine — and get in whatever people you need when you need them. Write some songs, get a deal, manage yourselves and hope like hell.

Anthony Johns and Craig Smith-Pilling are two sharp young men living in Auckland who are looking to go public in a big way. Their "band" officially consists of themselves, helped out by some talented musicians and studio people. Released this month is their album *One Day Different* containing last year's single releases 'Chapter One' and 'Please Say Something'. New Zealand songs which deserved a better reception than they got. They call themselves National Anthem.

The pair entered the 80s playing together professionally in an Auckland band called New Entrants, who became Blond Comedy. Disillusionment with endless touring, financial insecurity, line-up difficulties and the feeling of always covering the same ground forced their eventual disbandment, by which stage Craig had departed anyway. In 1983 they decided to re-activate their songwriting partnership from early Blond Comedy days, by now feeling wiser about the ways of the music world. Ostensibly only an outlet for their musical interests, they soon had enough material to consider approaching "somebody important".

"When we broke up Blond Comedy," says Johns, "we decided we were going to do some nightclubs, do some cover versions and then we found we actually enjoyed writing and working on our ideas more than learning the cover songs. After we'd written about ten songs we approached Mushroom Records and they said, 'Yeah, very interested'. We never looked on it as a formal duo, it was just us writing songs. I think we have a good relationship working together — we have our arguments and disagreements ..."

Smith-Pilling interjects: "Our musical tastes are completely different and with our writing, we ar-



National Anthem: Craig Smith-Pilling, Anthony Jones.

rive at the same thing but we go about it different ways."

With the demise of the local A&R department of Mushroom Records, they landed a deal with Auckland's Reaction label releasing some singles. 'Chapter One' in particular received fair radio-time in Auckland, yet still National Anthem remained absent from the performance venues. Johns explains: "We were going to play last year, but the people we wanted to play with were tied up in another project, so we decided we'd start playing in November/December of last year. Then Mike [Chunn, Reaction Records' rep] asked if we'd like to do the album in December. We were actually looking for a producer and having trouble finding one, and we had no money anyway, so Mike says, 'How about doing it yourselves?' We had the experience, so we said yes, and we started arranging the album. The live thing just never eventuated."

"We hate the term 'studio band'," says Smith-Pilling. "We do all the input we would in any other band, plus a bit more. What we would channel into live music we channel into somewhere else."

An interesting connection crops up with Mike Chunn (ex-Split Enz, Citizen Band, Party Boys) not only being National Anthem's label representative but also being credited with bass and piano on their album. Decorum usually insists that an act does not invite members of their label's inner staff to play on a record and be in their live band. One can almost hear the accusations of nepotism from the disgruntled already.

Smith-Pilling explains: "In some instances it works for us and in others it works against us, in that Mike's got to be careful obviously, ethically, not to do something that will go against Reaction's beliefs or anything like that. He keeps the two fairly well separated. I think it was really a fluke that he played on the album. We couldn't find a bass player and he offered his services, he also turned out to be very good at keyboards, which we didn't know. It certainly wasn't contrived or anything."

One Day Different was recorded in "drips and drabs" between December last year and March this year at Mandrill Studios with the small team of Johns and Smith-Pilling, Michael Harriambi (drums) and Mike Chunn. Production is credited to a Lord George OBE, who turns out to be an amalgam of "everybody who's on the album," says Johns. "Craig and I, Mike Chunn, engineer Tim Field ... what we would do once we had recorded a song is all talk about it, piss each other off, argue ... everybody would have different ideas, so rather than list everybody we just put down 'Lord George OBE!'"

A number of National Anthem's songs, built around Tony Johns' emotive vocal style and Craig Smith-Pilling's strident guitar work, have a quite anthemic quality, almost epic in the manner of a number of current British bands. They both deny any direct influences and mention of names like the Psychedelic Furs, the Sound and the Jam draws a quick response.

"When we was playing in Auckland in 1980," says Johns in his English drawl, "I used to get slagged all the time for sounding English — no fault of my own except me parents. There was nothing I could do about it. People would say, 'You sound like Paul Weller'. I've never owned a Paul Weller song or album — it's just that we were born in the same area of England."

No bones are made about the fact that *One Day Different* was made on the cheap. They say the main reason they ended up producing themselves was the infamous Kiwi lack of money. Only having two weeks to get the sessions organised, they didn't have the time or money to obtain a producer. Says Tony, "Everybody on the album did it for nothing — even Tim Field, who I think did an excellent job, 'cos he helped co-produce as well — he basically did it for nothing, too."

For their next recordings they hope to have a more financial and better organised arrangement, with suitable efforts made to obtain a well-known and capable producer. Smith-Pilling says that although they are happy with the results of producing themselves, being too close to the music and too involved in its creation made them lose sight of what they were striving for at times. The lack of some particular person at the helm with objective ideas they definitely noticed.

Currently Mike Chunn is in England with tapes of National Anthem and other Reaction artists hoping to secure some UK releases. Upon his return in two months time, National Anthem plan to rehearse a band (hopefully with Chunn on bass or keyboards) to begin live work promoting *One Day Different*. A re-mix of 'Please Say Something' will be released as the first single off the album, as Johns and Smith-Pilling feel it is a good song which got buried last year.

As far as future plans go, Johns reflects, "I always wanted two goals. One was to make an album, and the other was to make my living expenses off music. I've never had the opportunity to achieve both until we made this album that's just been released. Hopefully we might be able to earn some money soon — you know, enough to survive on."

With career ambitions never far from sight the emphasis of the two musicians is still firmly on having fun. "We definitely don't take ourselves too seriously," says Johns.

"I don't take Tony seriously," says Smith-Pilling.

"And I don't take him seriously!" Johns grins. "It'd be nice to be successful, but if it doesn't happen, well ..."

"... We've enjoyed it along the way," laughs his partner.

A shame, really, that someone else wrote a song about two hearts beating as one. It would hang on these guys well.

Brendon Fitzgerald

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