

Benny in the Jetset Woodentop Pop

"The Woodentops" is a name that probably means more to Kiwis as the name of a 60s children's TV show than that of an up-and-coming young English band. Their drummer is a cheerful bloke named Benny Staples who, after successful stints in NZ groups such as the Newmatics, Miltown Stowaways and Avant Garage, left our shores to "get involved in the English pop business."

Resident in London since May 1984, Benny says he spent the first year learning how to survive, trying to work and experiencing poverty for the first time. The exorbitant cost of rehearsal space in London meant that Benny and some friends from the Newmatics could only afford to rehearse once a week. There was apparently no intention of keeping the Newmatics going in London and Benny concentrated on meeting people and trying to get into the city's music scene.

"I met an ex-famous rock journalist called Nick Kent who used to work for the NME in the 70s. He has a band and I played with him twice in London and one of those times Geoff Blyth [Dexy's Midnight Run-

ners] saw me, and he was a friend of Rolo's from the Woodentops. I found out that their drummer had left so I made a call to another New Zealander, David Swift, who works in the NME, and got the Woodentops' press guy's number — he didn't even know the drummer had left. So I said, "I'm Benny Staples, I'm from New Zealand, I can play the drums ... and I think the Woodentops are great!"

"Their drummer left because he was much more politically active — the Woodentops don't express any particular sort of politics, so he left and joined the Redskins — he's a committed socialist and wanted to be more active."

In the last year-and-a-half the



The Woodentops, Benny Staples, top right.

Woodentops have built a strong following on the English club circuit and can now sell out 2000-seater venues in London. Benny says press coverage has generally been good, with an average of seven out of 10 reviews being classifiable as good — but, he says, a slagging doesn't worry anyone much. The Woodentops' album *Giant* was sixteenth in the *Melody Maker's* annual top album list and thirty-second in the NME's — excellent for a debut.

The band tours extensively in Europe: "We're probably bigger in Europe than we are in England, France especially — we've done really well there. Comparatively, we sold more than the Smiths and Elvis Costello's latest albums, for example. For some reason the French love us — they said some of our early stuff reminded them of the Velvet Underground. We all love the Velvet Underground but we don't want to sound like them and we're not trying to sound like them. But we always get compared to them for some reason."

"Our influences take in all sorts of stuff like the VU, T Rex, Suicide, weirder groups from the late 60s/early 70s like Can and Soft Machine, all the punk stuff, I'm especially into black music — hip hop, early James Brown, old soul, dance music. The whole range really."

On the sleeve of *Giant* it says, "Written and directed by Rolo." He must be the lynchpin — is he a dictator?

"He's the main focus, which is good. We're not hired hands — we're a full group. Once he writes a song he brings it to the rehearsal and we pull it apart again and each person will add their own character to the way that it's played. He might give me an idea for a drum part and I'll just take it and make what I want out of it. I have more freedom than everybody else but we all have input to the music."

With good footholds established in the UK and Europe one wonders what steps, if any, have been taken to further the dissemination of Woodentopism, ie, what about America?

"*Giant* was released there in October last year. We first went there in July when all we had out was a special mini-LP of singles and B-sides just prior to us signing with CBS America. When *Giant* came out we went back for a month and did a headlining tour of clubs around 500 to 2000 seaters."

"We've had tremendous support on US college radio. We got to No 2 on the national college radio chart — we couldn't get ahead of REM, they're huge there, but we were ahead of the Smiths, Talking Heads and UB40, people like that. Having a big company like Columbia behind you is very encouraging."

"That's how we got hooked up with CBS Australia and CBS New Zealand. Our label is Rough Trade in London, which is where we retain our artistic control, and we just do licensing deals to get releases. Virgin in France and CBS in other places."

Will the Woodentops tour here in the foreseeable future?

"Well we'd love to. Our first gigs this year are in Japan and it is too late now to organise anything down here for that trip. If the record does well here and in Australia then the band will be looking at touring."

Would you tour here as a support for a bigger act?

"Probably not. We supported Echo and the Bunnymen on a small tour of England but no, we're really trying to do it ourselves and I think if we can carry on the way we have been and work harder, then we can do it. There's a lot of people that don't want us to succeed — I think it's because we're really optimistic and believe very strongly in ourselves. A lot of bands are quite dark in their attitudes and will group up with other bands. I dunno, it might just be paranoia, London can get like that."

"People couldn't believe that we sold 2000 in London without a hit single. The album worldwide has sold very well but we haven't had a hit. That's a good position for us, we haven't had the pressure of having a big single. We've got to have a hit this year to maintain our thing of being a pop band though."

"You've got to work within the structure otherwise you've got to be alternative — we don't want to be alternative but we want to use all sorts of influences, street music, industrial music, junk music, whatever, anything can be used. We have enormous influences."

"That's the best thing about seeing the world. The Woodentops have travelled a lot, for the size of the band. It's been brilliant. Seeing all these places, meeting people. I spent about two years in culture shock! It's really exciting."

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