

Gunning for the Big Time

Shriekback Return

They may just be the most philosophical band in pop, but the collective mind of Shriekback at the time of our interview was of a distinctly practical bent.

On the eve of the Canadian leg of their *Big Night Music* world tour, their road manager had been deported back to England, and they were frantically tracking down their record company's local recommendations.

Burly Hugo Burnham (ex-Gang of Four drummer) is interrogating a likely lad on the phone in one corner, while this writer attempts to divert Shriekers Dave Allen and Martyn Barker from their dilemma by discussing jazz and New Zealand.

Turns out they love both; the group's recent NZ visit proving very pleasant and interesting. That summation is confirmed by the core member of the group, Barry Andrews, when our interview begins.

"Yeah," says Andrews, "New Zealand's a laugh. Apparently we're more popular there than anywhere else in the world. You say it is the same for the Fall and Joy Division? Maybe it is the promised land for all the freaks!"

Despite an outward appearance known to scare cats and little kids, Mr Andrews is no freak. He is one of the more enlightened and eloquent performers in the circus of pop, so we'll allow him his say with a minimum of editorialising.

First, congratulations on last night's (typically incandescent) show.

"Thanks. Things were looking a bit desperate, but last night was a bit more like it. Performance is not an easy thing for me actually. I do like it most of the time, but when it's bad, you want to slit your own throat on stage. One of the weird things about all this is that when it's going bad-



ly, you don't remember the good bits, and when it is going well, you don't remember the bad bits!"

After five years and as many albums, you've paid the proverbial dues. Are you ambitious in a career sense?

"Yes, I am/we are. You get a bit fed up making records that not enough people hear, that don't really impact the world as you'd like."

A high Risk Business

Does touring with arena bands (Simple Minds, Inxs) make you more competitive? You think, "we should be doing this?"

"I can't deny that has crossed my mind. With someone like Simple Minds you realise they're

doing something not terribly different from what they were doing three albums ago. Then, they were in the same position as us, now they're absolutely huge. I think we could do it, we'll see. It is a high-risk business, but I enjoy the process of doing it."

So you're not just working to reach a future commercial Utopia?

"If you do that, you're doomed to never get it. The more you talk to people who are famous — and we've talked to a lot of famous people over the past year — the more you realise there is no essential difference. It is not going to give you anything you haven't got now, with the exception of money."

"It'll actually make you feel much worse if you feel you've come by all this wealth and fame under false pretenses. And it is fucking hard work. To be a Simple Minds or U2, you have to work bloody hard. If Shriekback could stop touring in the winter, that'd be alright. Our incline would start to decline, but with those people it is like 'We're on the crest of a wave now, how long are we going to be here? We have to pump it out now!'"

"If you think your music isn't all that good anyway, that there is a bit of bullshit in there, then I can imagine how you'd feel in a hotel room somewhere surrounded by people you don't really like. You might start to get a little cynical."

Star Quality

Have you learnt from the attitudes of people you've worked with, Iggy Pop, Robert Fripp, etc?

"Definitely. A lot from Fripp, as he's gone up there in the rock star place then gone back down. He's more comfortable there, and I think he's maybe right. And Iggy was just aspiring then. He's a big star in real life, it is just getting the rest of the world to catch on. It was interesting to see the qualities of 'star-ness.' After Iggy, I could see the star-quality in people like caretakers and policeman. It is not something that depends on how many people know your name."

Onto the record. I played *Big Night Music* the other night as virtual background music, and it

worked, whereas your earlier abrasive stuff wouldn't have. Are you consciously changing the sound?

"I've been interested in doing this for a while. At home I mostly listen to old church music, Monteverdi, etc. If you want to sit down and listen to it, you can put a score in your lap and get into the tunes and the parts, the whole cerebral end of it."

"The other thing is to have it real quiet, bubbling away in the background, and it'll change the actual atmosphere of the room. It is Muzak, but in a nice way. It makes the room smell nice!"

That sounds like Brian Eno's theory of ambient music.

"Yes, I love the idea of that. I wanted to work on something that would change the atmosphere of the room. It wouldn't just be like a sculpture in the corner which is a talking point for five minutes. It would change the smell and the lighting, and make people feel different when it is playing. So it makes me very happy you say you could eat food and have pleasant conversation with *Big Night Music* burbling away in the background."

Big Hush

Has your writing moved more in this direction since Carl Marsh left?

"In the past, we put a lot of obstacles in our way. There'd be an LP with so many drum tracks, so Carl and I would take half each. The most I'd get would be five songs, so I'd do a couple of quiet ones and a couple of loudish ones. On *Oil and Gold*, I did the quiet ones — 'Coelecanth', 'Faded Flowers', 'Big Hush', 'Only Thing that Shines' — and 'Nemesis', the noisy one."

"So it was like wanting to explore that dark, warm, quiet thing. It was no surprise to me when I started writing songs and the rhythms that Martin and Dave came up with that most excited me were the ones that most lent themselves to that area."

Do you think people view Shriekback as a weird, fringe band?

"Sometimes people think we're more obscure than we really are. People at our record company say how hard it is to get our stuff on the radio. They thought of going around to radio stations with 'Gunning for the Buddha' as a white label record, only telling them later it was Shriekback."

Feel your name and appearance contribute to that perception?

"Well, I don't think Shriekback is all that frightening a name, and we don't really look too fierce."

Your sound now is more of a sinister whisper than a shriek.

(Laughs) "Yes, but I still think there's some shrieking to be done! I've got a feeling there'll be a bit of a rush-around beer-party feel to the next record. We shall see."

Do people ever imagine by your appearance that you're a member of some extreme Eastern sect?

"I think it is a function of having your head shaved. People think you've sunk your individuality into some sinister cult and you're out to involve them as well, to lull them into giving all their money to some cynical American guru's Swiss bank account. I quite like that. One woman came up to me on the tube and said 'Stop following me!'"

"I shave my head for aesthetic reasons, but it has turned me into some kind of outsider. I like feeling as if I mean something, to be somebody people look at. A stupid ego problem I have."

Do you feel privileged in being able to explore your obsessions — different philosophies, reptiles, fossils?

"It often seems strange that people will fly me all over the world and pay me money to go on stage and sing about reptiles! But we must be doing something right for this to happen and have people like it."

Animal Ethics

Does the band ever take political or social positions?

"We're on a compilation LP by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. It is to promote the quite novel idea that animals have some kind of rights that need to be respected. We shouldn't discriminate between sentient beings of our and other species. That is the same as racism or sexism. The South African thing [a sleeve note] is to ensure that because that logo is on the sleeve, it is illegal to sell the LP in South Africa."

"It is enlightening to hear Dave rant on the topics of the day, but I'm rather inclined to the view that the left and right, the upper and working classes, have had their day. Maybe this makes me a bourgeois individualist, but I think the way forward is for more forgiveness and communication, less taking of sides."

Are you optimistic about the fate of the world?

"Quite unsupportedly I am. Sometimes I feel stupidly optimistic about human beings. You sometimes get an extraordinary inkling of what people are capable of. If people can draw back from the bullshit of everyday life, you see acts of great beauty and strength. If that happened more often, the healing of the world wouldn't take long at all. We're trying to help create an atmosphere in the world where those kind of things can happen more often. A beautiful piece of work gives out an energy that has nothing to do with eating, drinking or getting fucked. It is about the highest part of people."

"That is why I have a sense of validity about what we do. The idea is to give inspiration and heart to people."

Kerry Doole

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