

# A Deeper Shade of Blue

## Al Hunter Sings Country

This month Al Hunter's first album comes out. Called *Neon Cowboy*, it's named after the song that came to him in the middle of the night. He's been singing around Auckland since the early 70s, in bands such as Cruise Lane, Chapeau, and Hillman Hunter and the Rootes Group.

Hunter grew up in Pukemiro, a mining village near Huntly, where his father, who died when his son was eight months old, was a miner by day, farmer in the evenings, and well-known as a keyboardist who could "make the piano talk." When young Al heard Gene Pitney singing 'I'm Gonna Be Strong,' he was hooked on music too. "As a kid of about four or five, I'd get up at the mining club socials, or football dos, and sing things like 'Don't Be Cruel' and the Frankie Lyman song, 'Why Do Fools Fall in Love.'"

Listening, like everybody else, to the Beatles and Rolling Stones, Hunter was then unaware of the strong country influence on those groups. On the radio was Jim Reeves and Patti Page doing schlocky versions of Hank Williams tunes, but across the road was a neighbour with the real thing on 78s. "He was the guy with the feeling, with pain," says Hunter. "I've always been affected musically by the emotion in music. That's what's driven me really, whether in blues or country, the heart-felt emotion of it."

"I used to cry as a kid at things like 'Old Shep.' But that's a thing I don't like now about country music, those things that play on your emotions. Songs like 'Biff the Purple Bear' or about a cripple kid who talks into his CB. That's sick, I hate that sort of stuff. But I cried when I heard John Mayall sing 'Tribute to J B Lenoir' on one of his first albums. He's not a great singer, but that had so much feeling to me, I couldn't help it. It's

**Huntly, late 50s** — An eight-year-old boy, suffering from chicken pox, lies in bed listening to the radio. One song he hears never leaves him — 'White Lightning,' by George Jones.

**Auckland, early 80s** — A singer dedicated to country music wakes up in the middle of the night. He's just had a dream, about the neon cowboy above Kean's shop in Queen Street, who'd fallen in love with the neon sign across the road. A song begins to take shape.

**On one wall hangs a picture of Lowell George, in flight with Little Feat on an Auckland stage. On the television, the Everly Brothers reunite once more in a favourite video. On the floor are about 50 records, ranging from Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, through Merle Haggard to Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam.**

**Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers are about to take the stage a couple of miles away, but Al Hunter is going in the opposite direction with his records. He's got Hillman Hunter's Honky Tonk Heaven to present on Campus Radio.**

the emotion that's the most important thing. That's why I was never into art rock, because basically there's no emotion, no passion. The American music had the feel, the soul — that's what it's all about."

### Cruisin' & Driftin'

So, after singing in teenage bands in Huntly, when Hunter came to Auckland he took the Leon Russell, Delaney and Bonnie, and Joe Cocker route rather than Genesis or ELP. "Cruise Lane were very in-

fluenced by Delaney and Bonnie, the Leon Russell gospel type of thing. It was quite a big band. After seeing *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* we got really inspired and went from an ordinary five-piece to having a space choir!"

The country rock of the Burrito Brothers hadn't taken hold here yet, so it wasn't until Hunter's next band that he began singing country. "Chapeau were very influenced by J J Cale, and we started listening to Dobie Gray after 'Drift Away.' I loved



PHOTO BY KERRY BROWN

all those players — Reggie Young, Kenny Malone — they were soul players on country albums, and they were hot."

Leon Russell's album of country favourites, *Hank's Back* re-introduced Hunter to George Jones. "I distinctly remember hearing 'White Lightning' while in bed with chicken pox. That's never left me, the feeling I got from that song." Soon, Chapeau were doing songs like 'Truck Driving Man' in the Crypt nightclub. "That was unheard of, no one did country songs in a nightclub."

Before their demise, the band won supports for Leon Russell and Faces concerts at Western Springs. After a short sojourn in Australia with pedal steel ace Red McKelvie, Hunter was back in Auckland, emulating the Amazing Rhythm Aces. "They were a combination hotch-potch of R&B and country. I'd always wanted to have a band like the Rhythm Aces or Little Feat, who could play an R&B song or a straight kick-ass country song."

One night in Jilly's nightclub, supported by guitarists Dave Mabey and Mike Farrell, Hunter was joined on stage by the Aces themselves. "That was incredible," he says. "Five years earlier, being on the same bill as Leon Russell, and now having a blow on Delbert McLinton songs

with the Amazing Rhythm Aces. They said, 'Keep playing that good music,' because they had a ball too."

### Comes a Time

"I've been playing for how many years? 18, 19? And this is the first record that I've ever made. Basically because I never had anything to offer before — I was just a singer. Now, I've got something else. I think I'm writing strong songs. And ... it's time."

*Neon Cowboy* was made in Sydney, at the small studio recently established by Stuart Pearce (ex-Street Talk and Coconut Rough keyboardist) and Dave Marrett (who has produced the Dance Exponents and Coconut Rough). "I was worried about doing it over there, because I wasn't going to have any control," says Hunter. "But they persuaded me that was the best way to do it, because being their own studio, we could have unlimited time." Also, Pearce was sympathetic to Hunter's requirements; as a 17-year-old straight out of school, he'd passed an audition to join his first band — Chapeau.

Hunter took a week's holiday from his work in an Auckland record store, flew to Sydney and laid down the vocals in the studio (which was just completed in time). Then Pearce set to work, laying down key-

board and rhythm tracks and recording local musicians. "Ken Francis is a respected guitarist in Sydney, on steel we had Kenny Kitchen, who's won many awards in Australia," says Hunter. "Wayne Goodwin, the fiddle and mandolin player, came out here with Emmylou Harris's Hot Band; I'd met him when they came up to the Country Gentleman after their Auckland show."

In the tradition of country songwriting, Hunter tries to write songs from experiences he, or other people, have had. "You don't get flashes of inspiration like 'Neon Cowboy' much," he says. "That dream was so vivid and strong I had to get out of bed and write what it was about. I turned my bed around to face that way again, but I still haven't had that same flash!"

Several of the songs were written when Hunter was truck driving a couple of years ago. 'Country Music' ("is what I want to play") sounds like a statement of purpose. "I wrote that in the sleeper of a semi driving across Auckland," says Hunter, laughing at how corny it sounds. "It was an easy one to write — 'All day long standing on my feet, doin' my job, I get home beat / The only thing that gets me through the day is knowing I'm going out to play.' That's what playing is all about, why I do it."

### Blue Eyes

"That song 'A Deeper Shade of Blue' I wrote while I was an offsider in a truck delivering pet food between Hamilton and Auckland. I walked into a dairy in Huntly, and there was a girl I went to school with, I was infatuated with her when I was 13; she had incredible eyes. She now owned the dairy, and she told me what she'd been doing — she'd had a few kids, split up with her husband, and now had a boyfriend who was driving long-distance and called in if he passed by. I got into the truck, got out a pen and thought, 'Your eyes have turned a deeper shade of blue ... the lines behind the laughter gave the clue ...' The song just flowed, it came out in about 50 miles."

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# WALKMAN CARRY PAC

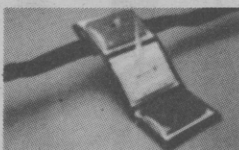
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