

Wool Away

The Triffids Pass Muster

The Triffids are well-loved by the fickle English music press, those guardians of good taste, ever-appreciative of something easily labelled ... A band that goes hundreds of miles into the Nullabor desert just to record an album in a woolshed are just right for praising, even if they're a little odd.

A world away from the NME, I look at the Triffids and see honest artisans of pop, trying to distance themselves a bit from all that hype. Each to his own, I guess, but at least we can all agree that they ain't a half-bad band.

Guitarist/vocalist Robert McComb is on the line from London's Livingston Studio, where the Triffids are at work on a new album. The starting point for conversation is the just-released *In the Pines*, the record that the Triffids left civilisation to record, but that was 15 months ago ...

"Yeah well, that's usually the way with our records, and I guess with everybody's. It wasn't even released in Australia until January — we weren't even sure that we were going to release it when we were recording it; it was more of an experiment that worked out well."

How did the idea for the recording come about? It's a novel idea.

"It was originally just an idea we had four years ago. We were driving somewhere across Australia, and passing a woolshed our sound engineer wondered what the sound would be like in there. It just grew from that — we hired a guy and his equipment and decided we'd take the risk. We had a week down on the farm where we knew we could have

a good time as well as play in the shed."

That "good time" comes across clearly on the record, evident in slogs like 'All Day Long' and in what sound like basically live arrangements.

"There's the occasional overdub of an instrument we wanted to put over the top of it," says McComb. "But that's the exception rather than the rule. And we did different versions of the same songs in order to get a good 'live' version. Twice as many songs were recorded as ended up on the record, which gives you an idea of the experimental nature of the recording, and we saved some of those songs for the album we're doing now. The whole idea of the recording was to do these live versions and to get the natural interplay of the echo of the woolshed between the instruments."

"It's different to some of our more intricately recorded works like *Born Sandy Devotional*, where we've done lots of overdubs and recorded bass and drums separately."



Whispering Pines

"Evil" Graham Lee and his pedal steel guitar joined the band before the recording of that album, twisting already folk-derived tunes toward a laconic country and western feel that is to the fore in much of *In the Pines*, and significantly filling out the band's sound.

"Yeah, he has made quite a difference, but we do tend to have a lot of instruments in that mid-range melodic area — keyboards, violin, guitars and pedal steel — they can have similar sounds, so we do have to work on leaving them out sometimes, or cutting down the arrangements so that they're effective, otherwise it can be a bit mushy. I think we do like warmth when hearing a band, but at the same time we like to have empty sounds as well as really full ones. That's partly to do with the woolshed as well — even one instrument sounds full in that echoey space, which does fill out the sound a lot."

In the Pines works well in an understated kind of way, making do without an obvious hit single. The sort of thing that can confuse record companies?

"We were almost expecting them not to put it out, but they obviously see it as an album for what it is and are not trying to release singles off it. We're glad that they can see it for what it is, but there's no real reason that a song off that record couldn't be a hit though — like we were surprised to see 'One Soul Less on Your Fiery List' on the Australian Airlines playlist."

'One Soul Less ...' as an example of the Triffids' songwriting, highlights the tension between high drama and tenderness that is something of a Triffids trademark. Agree?

"Yeah, well I wouldn't say that's just our trademark. We do try to get a bit of that into our songs, and sometimes we like to be a bit rough as well. We think that 'One ...' is quite an individual song; it stands out in our live set as well. But we don't think in terms of having to come up with this trademark sound — it's left in the eye of the beholder."

Crocodile Rock

Last year's "Australian Made" tour featured the Triffids alongside the Saints, Divinyls, Inxs, the Models and Mental as Anything. How did you get involved in that?

"It was basically organised by Inxs and Jimmy Barnes' management, and when we were first asked to do it, we thought it sounded all very tasteless and posturing jingoism about 'Australian made', but they made us an offer that was basically too good to refuse. They really wanted us on the bill — it was supposed to be Australian bands who

were doing well overseas and they felt they couldn't leave us off. We thought in the end it would be a good way to play before a lot of people, and we ended up playing before more people in Australia than on any of our club tours. It was a good way to show people that we don't put limitations on what we might do. We're not trying to restrict ourselves to one particular following."

Do you plan to approach the difficult American market through the college radio circuit?

"Nah, we're breaking big! None of this college radio stuff, ha! Like I said, we're not putting limits on what we're capable of doing. We don't want to just say we're going there to do the college circuit. In fact, we're quite glad we haven't gone there and just had to play a six week tour of little clubs, losing money. We might well end up losing money, because it is difficult to make money there, but the object is to advance ourselves musically. If this album is well-promoted, we're confident that we can have a successful tour there, hopefully go there and make an impact."

The Triffids have managed very successfully in Europe, building up a strong following in Holland, Germany and Sweden. McComb says they may well be more popular in Sweden than Australia:

"There is quite a remarkable interest in Australian bands and that's encouraging for us — it means we can at least afford to go to these places. We got voted 'critic's top band' in Sweden; apparently we sell more record there than the Smiths! In Denmark in a couple of weeks we are headlining a festival in front of 60,000 people, onstage opposite Iggy Pop. We're quite popular in some of these places — it sounds remarkable, but it's true."

Bold as Brass

The Triffids made a bold move to London in 1984, before even "making it big" in their native Australia. Has that move paid off?

"Well we knew we were different from your average band, and you don't know what anything is like until you try it. Sure, we've spent quite a lot of time and money pursuing something that some might say isn't worth it, but we think it is. We haven't put ourselves through absolute misery or lived wealthily either, but we survive, travel a bit and make the records we want. You can't be put off just because the Birthday Party went to England and broke up, or whatever. We are our own band and don't feel particularly part of the 'Australian made' music thing — that's why we felt a bit funny with the 'Australian Made'."

McComb is well pleased that the Triffids have secured a record deal

in the UK with Island, a label they've had their eye on for a while who "seem to give priority to their acts," alongside a healthy degree of artistic freedom:

"People talk about all the 'compromise' stuff. You've got to be practical. We're not saying that we make life hell for ourselves, we're practical about the way we go about things, but we also try and make the music we want to make and that's fairly simple really. We're happy to be in a situation where people do respect us for that, and even the people who put out our records want us to make a record that is peculiarly our sound, and this is what we're working on now. A challenge really, not without its complications, but good fun."

The Triffids: peculiar, proud, and popular in Sweden. Sounds like they have the world at their feet, doesn't it?

Paul McKessar

OFF THE RECORD

Jet Lag

This is one of the finest fanzines I've ever seen: 40 clearly mimeographed pages on quality paper, full of enthusiastic reviews on a catholic array of music. Interviews with XTC and Camper Van Beethoven, reviews of Nick Cave, the Feelies, Robyn Hitchcock and the Saints, articles on Bad Brains, Concrete Blonde REM's Don Dixon and Burning Spear, the more accessible end of the independents, and major label acts too. Issue 75 (March '87) includes "Outbreak in the Outback," two pages of reviews of Flying Nun records: the Clean, Chills, Verlaines, Tall Dwarfs, Doublehappys. Twelve issues \$US18 (sea) or \$US24 (air) from Jet Lag, The Mailman Building, 8419 Halls Ferry Rd, St Louis, Missouri 63147-1806, USA. CB

Whole Weird World!
An excellent new zine from Nelson, 20 well-bound xeroxed pages covering NZ and UK indie music; Husker Du, the Clash, the Mighty Lemon Drops, Greenpeace, the Clean's *Compilation*, plus live reviews of New Order, Murder Inc, Spaghettis, and Jane Venus. Lots of news from Nelson and abroad. (Bummer of the month: recording the wrong channel while RWP's punk special was on.) Cost: one nuclear free dollar, plus postage, from 5 Surrey Rd, Richmond, Nelson. CB

The Captain's Fanzine
Still bringing the good/bad news from Gisborne is Grant McDougall, with the Captain's second issue. Covering locals Flaming Star, Wasp Factory, Michael Dwyer, plus the Verlaines and Billy Bragg live, and lots of (mainly F-Star) vinyl reviews. Eighteen messily typed witty xeroxed pages. Send a donation to 64a Russell St, Gisborne. CB

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