

Southern Comfort

Shona Laing in the Nuclear Age

Shona Laing's '(Glad I'm) Not a Kennedy' is a Top 20 hit in Sweden, which sounds pretty odd, but then so does the idea of Laing touring Australia with Midnight Oil.

With her new album *South* just released, she's spending a month in Australia supporting the Oils in small towns and large. Their music may be poles apart in subtlety, but both Laing and the Oils share an opposition to things nuclear that provides a link. Maybe one of Laing's new songs, 'Soviet Snow' about the Chernobyl incident, will become her next Scandinavian hit.

With Shona Laing, Australia has taken another New Zealander under its wing. "Drive Baby Drive" is going up the chart again," says Laing, taking time out from watching television in her Armidale, NSW, motel room. "We went into Sydney's Triple M station and did 'Drive' acoustically, and they've been playing that more than the record, which is ironic." Irony? For anyone, let alone a foreigner, to play live on commercial radio here would be unheard of!

Laing says she and guitarist Gary Verberne were "freaked out" at first by the idea of doing the Oils support. "But I think the

Oils' audience has a reputation which is pretty unfounded really. On the second night we got 'Oils, Oils' during our set, but otherwise it's been great."

With various guitar delays and effects, the duo achieves a "big, powerful sound," says Laing. "People don't know what to expect. The band are on our side, which helps. It's quite an honour to be invited on a gig like this. Touring Australia with Midnight Oil has to be the best gig in the world."

But with the tour only four days old, Laing was yet to talk politics with the voluble Peter Garrett:

"He's pretty busy. The ID card thing is still happening, and

he's dedicating quite a lot of time to that, out and about talking to people. I think they've got to keep their heads together before gigs, so there's not much socialising."

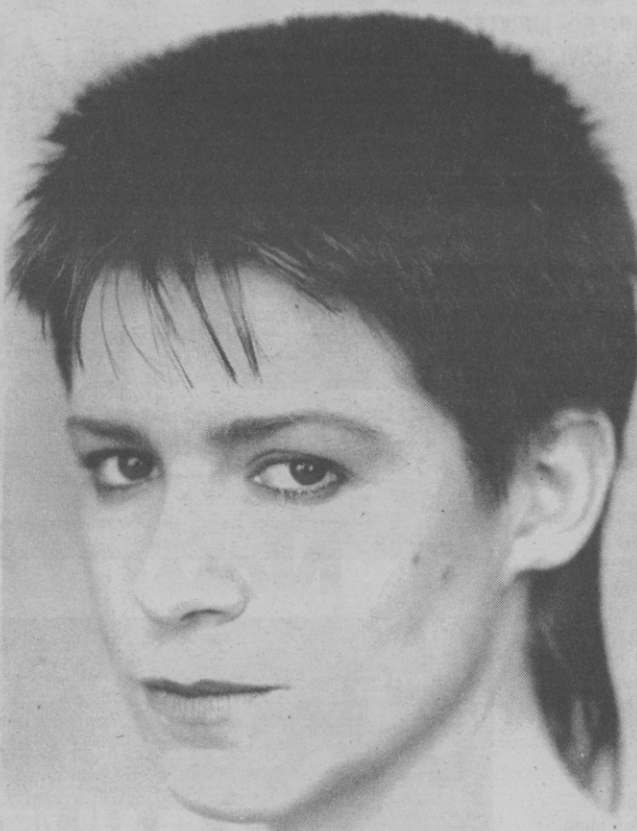
The Candidate

There's a lot of political content to your music now — how would you like being a spokesperson like him?

"Although I admire Peter Garrett, and what he does, he does extremely well, for me the music's the thing. If people ask me what I think about things, I'll tell them, but I'm not going to make a determined effort to go out and campaign for various issues. I'm a musician, a songwriter, rather than a politician."

With songs like 'Kennedy,' 'Bishop' (named after Bishop Tutu) and 'Highway Warrior' (about the road toll) on the new album, you must find it easier to write about specific issues or people, rather than personal things.

"Yes I probably do — especially now that I'm [she laughs] a married woman! I'm very happy with my man, so



there's not a helluva lot to write about from an emotional point of view. So many songs about relationships are about the negative side, losing a lover or meeting a new one, and that just doesn't happen in my life. I've tried creating scenarios in

my head from past experiences, but it's not easy. That's making songs up as opposed to writing them.

"I get into a kind of musical mode. Sometimes I'll just go out to the shed and write a drum pattern and work on a bassline

and build it from there. Other times someone might say something in the course of a conversation that rings a bell, as with 'Kennedy.' I actually said to Peter [McCauley, her husband] 'I'm glad I'm not a Kennedy,' and that came from that."

"Highway Warrior" was written from personal experience: I came across this three-car head-on collision on Highway One, which was awful. So they're usually from some kind of real experience, or just from saying something in conversation that sounds out of the ordinary."

The Message

You manage to get the message across in your songs without labelling the point. Is that difficult?

"Once upon a time I suppose I was fairly pedantic. There's an album I did in England which is probably going to be released in Australia soon. It's called *Tied to the Tracks*, and EMI have re-discovered it and are talking about releasing it. So I listened to it again, and found that vocally and lyrically it's a bit table-thumping. But I think there's this urge I have had to be positive as opposed to highlighting all the negative stuff going down. Also as an individual there's not a lot you can do, you can only attempt to inspire a positive attitude."

The only traditional political song on the album is the jaunty 'Neutral and Nuclear Free.' But being vocal about one's pride in New Zealand's stance doesn't always go down with the establishment, Laing found:

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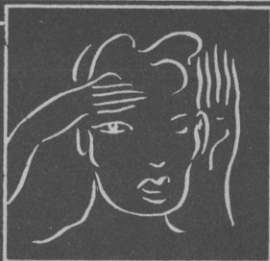
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