

#### FROM PAGE 16

"That was written quite a long time ago. I'd actually tried to sing it on Telethon but wasn't allowed to. They had a production meeting and there was to be no politics. So I felt sick when Jim McLay was on, I thought, typical TVNZ — celebrating New Zealand's anti-nuclear stand is political, but having the Leader of the Opposition on television isn't."

"It struck me when New Zealand became nuclear free that we became a bit scared about it, whereas it should have been something to celebrate, with a huge nationwide festival of peace, say. Instead we were hiding our light under a bushel."

#### Elevation

The song is the only lighthearted touch on quite a serious album. Do you find it hard to write lighter songs?

"Yeah, I do. I've written songs in my time that would probably be *censored* — that's my lightheartedness! They're a bit grubby! I do enjoy my music, but I suppose it's the elevation of writing something. It's almost trance-like. When I listen back to them I get a sense of elevation, which is my enjoyment."

There's a joy in musicianship on *South*, with its carefully crafted production and innovative use of vocals and instruments, from electronic to orchestral.

"We did a lot of acoustic gigs over here promoting the album, so a lot of people have said it should have been acoustic, which is kind of disappointing. Stephen and Graham [McCurdy and Myhre, producer and engineer] and I went in and it was like the last ditch stance when we were recording it. We thought, bummer radio, we're gonna do what we want to do, and really went for it."

The backing vocals on the LP have quite unique arrangements, ranging from choral to, on 'Bishop,' a Maori karanga.

"Stephen and I decided we'd use a greater than normal proportion of the budget on singers, as New Zealand has so many great singers, and songs like 'Bishop' and 'Soviet Snow' kind of lent themselves to choirs. It seemed like a good idea, and for the singers too — they don't often get to sing with more than two others, they had a really good time."

Among the backing vocalists are Nigel Lee and Bunny

Walters. "Bunny did some scat stuff on 'Bishop' which was really lovely. We just played him the track and he said, 'I've got an idea,' and just went out and did it. It was just amazing. He said it was the way he sings to his baby. It was really lovely. They gave so much."

#### Solidarity

"The Maori on 'Bishop' is sung by Temeura Morrison. That started out as a haka, which was completely the wrong idea, because the haka is a threatening thing. It's a song of solidarity, the power of positive thinking and all that. Even if New Zealanders can't actually do anything, they can think positively about South Africa."

Do you find that songs with a political message sit uneasily in the pop world?

"In New Zealand it seems that something with political comment isn't going to be played, but in Australia with 'Kennedy' that was probably the reason it attracted people's attention. Midnight Oil's new album entered the charts at No 1, and there isn't a non-political song on it. It's all about Australia, race relations and western attitudes to the land. I think Australia and New Zealand

differ quite radically as to what gets played, which is a shame."

'Kennedy' is a sympathetic song, about the price of fame. Have you had to pay a price for being in the public eye so long?

"I suppose in a personal sense I have — it's very hard to actually meet people on an equal level. The name is known: 'Are you Shona Laing?' is the question I'm immediately asked. It's very difficult to stay in touch with who you really are, from the other part which is performing and writing. But I suppose that's become what I am anyway. My whole life is music — everything I look at, everything I do, I somehow relate back to a writing perspective."

Shona Laing became a household name in New Zealand in 1972, when she came second (to Steve Gilpin) in the NZBC talent show *Studio One*. Before she'd even appeared on television, Laing was offered a recording contract after a local record executive was shown advance tapes. With a hit song in '1905,' she was suddenly a professional musician at the age of 15.

Your television success set into place music as your vocation very early. Did you have any doubts?

"No, I think that it did make my decision for me, though. Throughout my whole life decisions have been made by circumstance. Before then I probably had thought of doing other things, and I suppose in the tough times there have been the odd regrets, but that's just been from a financial point of view really. Being on the bones of one's bottom, one thinks if I'd gone to university, or learnt to teach, I could have kept the bank manager happier."

#### Anonymity

"The first two years in England were really tough. It

was a bit of a blow to the old ego, because the ego had been pretty inflated in New Zealand, but then the anonymity was in some ways quite refreshing. I was nothing special at that time, it was just like I'd come in from Swansea or somewhere, and the fact that I'd been successful in New Zealand meant nothing."

During her seven years away, Laing recorded two albums in Britain, one of which wasn't released, though the other, *Tied to the Tracks*, received quite a bit of airplay. She also spent two years singing backing vocals in Manfred Mann's band.

"Whenever things looked really bad something would come up. In lots of ways I think the reason things didn't happen was timing — I've always done pretty much the same kind of music, and in England I think musical fashion is much more important than it is in New Zealand. We get a bit of everything, whereas in England there was always some trend happening that decided what the chart was made up of."

How did you react when the punk explosion hit in 1976-77?

"Well it was a bit of a shock, really! I was just about to sign a publishing deal and had management, but it was really tough, because no one was the least bit interested. But I suppose it added an edge to my writing. I'd probably been writing pretty schmaltzy stuff up to then, and sort of realised, why not get back into basically complaining about society?"

Coming home to New Zealand for a holiday in 1983, Laing found it was difficult to leave:

"England had got fairly dark, and the whole nuclear issue was really bothering me at that time. I felt at that point Europe didn't have a lot longer left, and didn't really want to die in a nuclear holocaust, and wanted to be at home."

#### Fallout

'Soviet Snow' off the new album relates to the fallout from the Chernobyl incident:

"I think the Soviets got slagged something awful for that, as if the whole nuclear issue was entirely their responsibility, and it really bothered me. And I'd been reading a lot of Russian literature and listening to a lot of Russian music, and a book about Shostakovich. It was quite a sad book, about the Russians' attitude to themselves post-Stalin. It just strikes me that they've got a hell of a lot to deal with, and that they need a bit more support from the rest of the world."

The song 'South' was the last to be written for the album. It continues the Pacific theme, and much else besides:

"I was concerned about Antarctica, the talk of mining exploration. Western power seems to be moving south, and we've got to stop it somehow. It's a difficult song, about spending time apart from Peter, and the possibility of things happening in music, whether I was going to dive in and try and make it in a big way again."

Like many expatriates overseas, Laing found New Zealand continually entering her work. "Forget about New Zealand!" her manager would say. "But I couldn't because I was too much a New Zealander. I suppose I had this crazy juvenile attitude that was one of the reasons I stayed away so long: I didn't want to go home until I'd actually achieved something. It's like being a refugee."

"It's ironic that it happened when I was back home. The year I lived in Wellington [after returning] I thought it was all over. It was once an ambition of mine to have a hit record somewhere. It still is, it's like a point to prove."

**Chris Bourke**

# U2



WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME

on 7", 12", cassette

contains previously unreleased material

SEE U2 IN THE U.S.!

Listen to 91FM Auckland &  
C93 Christchurch for more  
winning details



thin red line



lie of the land

THIN RED LINE present their debut album

'Lie of the Land'

"eleven soundscapes for the new, multicultural N.Z. Society"

out now on **ODE RECORDS**

P.O. Box 1535, Auckland