

Northern Highway

A Fireside Bat Chat

By Paul McKessar

The Bats have ambitious plans for a world tour next year. But doing a world tour Bats-style doesn't involve limos, Lear jets or cocaine.

Like everything else the Bats do, it'll be a kinda humble affair. A very friendly world tour I bet, because the thing everybody likes about the Bats is that they're a friendly pop band. Me, I like to stand on dancefloors and wobble about to 'em as well ...

Talk to singer/songwriter Robert Scott and you can't help but marvel at how the magic roundabout of rock 'n' roll success means so very little to the Bats. He's just as happy to talk about an exhibition of his paintings at Dunedin's alternative art centre Chippendale House, making a comic or releasing tapes under assumed names as he is to tell me about blowing away the Housemartins in front of Bats-adoring Germans in Frankfurt. He'll admit that this Bats phenomenon is marvellously fun and rather weird, but he won't get caught up in all the hype.

Robert's musical career began with the Clean, playing bass and writing about five songs for the band on that instrument. The Clean broke up in 1982, he picked up the guitar and began writing. The Bats started at the end of that year and the flow of songs from the acoustic guitar didn't stop.

He says he writes a lot of

songs because he hasn't got much else to do. "The way I do it," he says, "is to just sit down and keep writing songs. Every tenth one will be good, so I go back to that one and work on it a bit more. So to get them out of my system, I just keep writing them — nine real shit ones, then maybe a tenth that will be okay."

Were you apprehensive bringing your songs to a band at first?

"Yeah, a bit. But the band never really started off like that; it just started off with me playing guitar in a flat and then Kaye, who was living there as well, was starting to learn guitar so we started off playing together. Then Paul and Malcolm joined, so it was all quite a natural sort of evolution and didn't require 'bringing songs to a band' that much."

That situation quickly changed however. Scott left Christchurch to return to Dunedin, and now records his songs onto cassettes with simple guitar accompaniment, which he sends to the others in Christchurch. New songs are tried out at practice before the Bats play live. "Some," says Scott, "will work really quickly and easily, so they're the ones we tend to do, leaving out the other ones if they don't click. They're pretty simple songs and we've been playing together for a while so it's relatively easy for them to come together quickly."

Is that process an incentive to keep things simple?

"I'd quite like to write some different kinds of songs, some more complicated ones, but every time I try and write them, I just get bogged down. Some of the newer songs have got a bit more in them than the earlier ones, that's for sure, but it's a pretty slow process of change."

A toughening up of the Bats' recorded sound is evident both on last year's single 'Made Up in Blue' and the new *Daddy's Highway* album. Tracks like 'North by North' on the album could even be described as "ominous."

How do you personally perceive that process of change?

"Songs are changing a bit in that I can play the guitar better.



Photo by Lesley Maclean

When I started writing, I could only play G, C and D chords. Now I can play things like minor barre chords which gives me more scope in songs and eventually a better sound — they don't all sound the same! Kaye's a really good guitarist; as soon as I've got the chords for a song, she'll think up a really good guitar part for herself [she "let's rip some pretty meaty licks on the old axe," according to the Bats' record company, Flying Nun] and Paul will come up with a really good bassline. We're all improving all the time."

Was it hard for you, initially being a novice guitarist?

"I can't remember what I actually thought at the time, but I was probably quite happy to struggle away at those songs," says Scott. "You can tell they're getting better all the time. I stuck with it because I knew I

was improving. You can get away with it with our sort of jangly guitar sound, it's like from strumming an acoustic anyway."

There are 12 songs on *Daddy's Highway*. Four were recorded in an eight-track home studio in Scotland and the other eight, plus the two songs on the B-side of the single 'Block of Wood,' were recorded at Christchurch's Nightshift Studio. The band are credited as "producers," but Scott confesses to being unsure as to what the term actually means ...

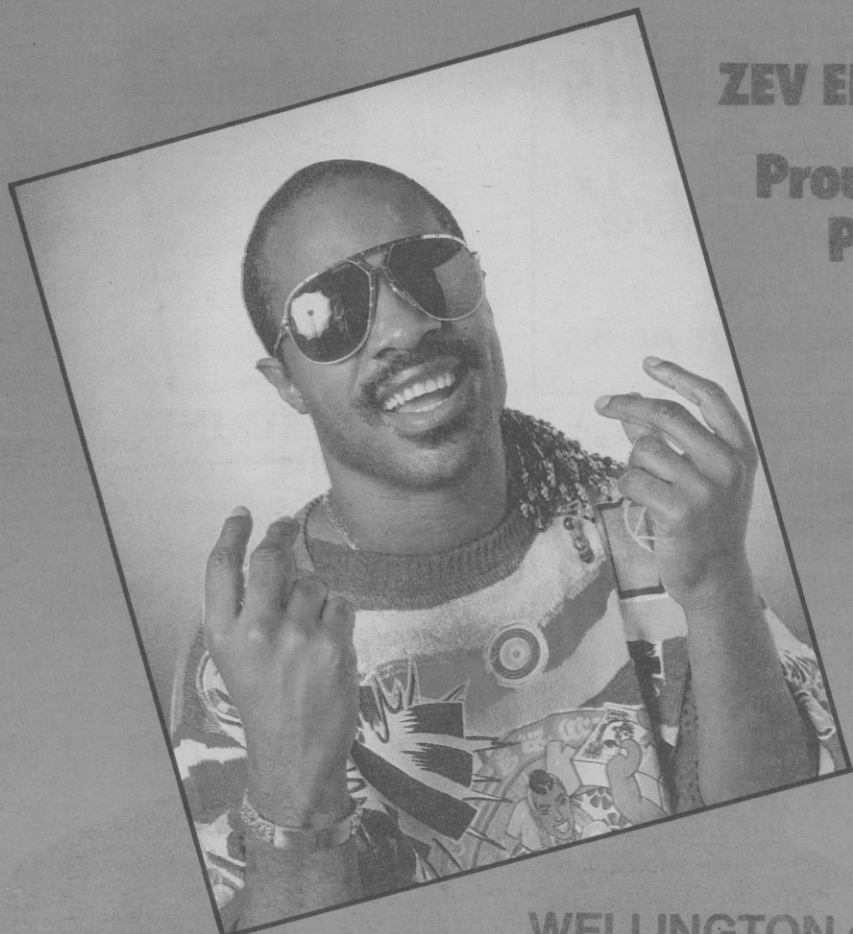
"I think it's someone who picks the songs and says how they're meant to be played or something," he says. "We had Rob Pinder, our soundman,

twiddling the knobs in the studio because he'd done the JPSE in there a few weeks before. He really knew what he was doing on the desk and we just set up all together in the big room and played about five songs in a row. If we were happy with the versions we'd just go back and do overdubs [guitars, vocals, some keyboards from Kaye and violin from Alistair Galbraith] over them, so it was pretty easy to do. So I suppose we produced it ourselves, but it is a weird word ...

"New Zealand bands are used to having to do it themselves, I think. Usually someone like Doug Hood was around when the Clean was going, setting up the machines and saying, 'play that song,' or 'do it like this,' but no one was like, putting their mark on bands, or telling them exactly what to do."

(Talking later to Paul Kean, who was credited as producer of the first two Bats' EPs, suggests that his job was basically to organise finances and studio, etc. Mixing is sometimes a bit too diplomatic for him; he'd prefer a focused idea rather than "a bit of this, a bit of that" — "I like to capture the feeling of the music, which can get smoothed out when the technical side of production takes over," he says.)

Bats songs always seemed perfectly suited for New Zealand radio. They're good songs and shit, they're hardly the sort of thing that offends your mother. If Neil Finn can do it ... Ironically I was to learn from Paul Kean that Sydney biggie Triple J-FM playlisted both the sublime 'Made Up in Blue' and a test-pressing of new single 'Block of Wood.' I never heard either of 'em here. Scott agrees that both 'Made Up in Blue' and



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