

the LP *Daddy's Highway* are of a high enough production standard for radio airplay.

Has there been a learning process involved for the band insofar as the sound of their records goes?

"Yeah," he says. "At the time, we thought they [the first two Bats' EPs] were okay, but now we're quite amazed that we could get away with what we did. The first two were done on an eight-track and it's a really thin sound. The guitar sound is totally fucked, and the vocals ... there's um, a lot of out-of-tune singing on it. Like I never learned to sing properly till about a year ago, to actually hit a note properly, so a lot of the singing is out of tune, which I can't bear listening to. But it's just a learning thing where you raise your standards and each thing you do has to be better than the last one. As long as you can see them improving, it's okay."

The singing on *Daddy's Highway* is much improved. Kaye Woodward's backing vocals are highlighted more, and the harmonies are consequently a lot stronger (as well as being more in tune). Scott's voice is not nearly so harsh as on previous efforts, which he refers to as "cringeable."

"On this one," he says, "there's quite a lot of close, breathy style vocals on a couple of songs; not half-spoken but not yelled like a lot of the earlier stuff."

Have you had singing lessons?

"No. I did quite a bit of singing at school, but it would probably be quite a good idea to have lessons—I know people who have, and it's helped them a lot. But it's just a thing you learn over a period of time, I suppose; listening back to live tapes and realising how bad it is, concentrating more the next time and realising what you have to do and remembering that on stage, because often you get completely lost and carried away. You forget what you're doing!"

**W**here do your lyrics come from? Often the emphasis appears to be on odd characters or simple images ...

"I don't consciously think of anything when I'm writing songs. The important thing is the melody, so I'll just start humming that, and then sing any word that comes into my head over and over while I'm getting the song together. Later I'll maybe develop that idea into something and build around it." Like 'Mr Earwig'?

"I don't know how that one came about! It must've just been in my brain and come out! Usually though, it's not a very well developed story and a song can often mean three or four different things. I don't spend that much time on lyrics, which isn't too good really—I should put a bit more work into them."

"Often there won't be any set lyrics for a while and I actually sing different lyrics for up to a year for one song each time I do it. Then we go to record and I have to have a set of lyrics to actually sing for the recording, so that's when they really get written. After that, they have to be sung that way because everybody expects the same words. But if it's not a recorded song, then often they can change, which can be fun, but it's scary when you go to sing and there won't be anything there. Usually something comes out at the last minute."

Even though he is singing a lot better nowadays, Bob's garbled words aren't what fills dancefloors. What consistently *does* achieve that aim though, is the rolling rhythms provided by Paul Kean and Malcolm Grant. Dancefloors big ... and dancefloors small, such as the Bats will encounter on their

proposed summer tour of "out of the way places." Playing somewhere different is a lot of fun, says Scott.

Do you think that the Bats' rustic "New Zealand flavour," a curious amalgam of pop and C&W, Gore-style, would enable them to reach an audience better than, say, other Flying Nun bands?

"Yeah," says Scott, "because some bands rely on complex songs, but ours are kept simple. We just play acoustically sometimes and it's still been okay. Our music is pretty easy to relate to; it doesn't have any pretensions or big ideals about it."

Is that a major part of the band's appeal?

"I don't know, it could be. There's a lot of music around where people think they have to do big special things and make big special noises to impress people, but we don't do that. I think melody is the key, a good tune. There's not a lot of good tunes around."

**S**oon after the interview, the Bats are due to leave for their Australian tour. Australia's an unknown quantity, but the thrill of heading overseas with your songs can't be beaten:

"It's incredible," says Scott. "It's weird for someone overseas, seeing us just playing our guitars, ordinary people from the other side of the world. But it's great taking your songs from here and playing them in front of different people, like Germans ..."

How do Germans react to the Bats?

"I wasn't sure, because in between songs I was abusing them in English, and then I realised that most of them could speak English anyway! We got away with it and were called back for an encore: 'Ja, ja, gut!'"

"We played with the Housemartins in Frankfurt, and they were amazed that there wasn't a record company paying for us to get there. They asked if we were on WEA or CBS New Zealand, and we said, 'Naah, we just saved up some money and came over.' They couldn't believe it. We just got told that if we turned up at this place where they were playing and asked to support them, they might let us. They were so boring—all their songs sounded the same!"

Is there a point where the Bats change from being a group of friends into a "professional" band?

"That happens to a lot of people, but we try and feel among ourselves that we're a group of friends. We don't treat each other like working partners. I think it would be pretty horrible if it got to a stage like that, and I know we'd stop. A lot of bands do slave on, too scared to stop."

Bob Scott after the Bats? A record producer?

"Yeah! Putting my own stamp on records: 'Do a G there, you need a G!' I dunno, there's not many openings for that sort of thing here. Stay unemployed ... get a job ... play more music!"

**A**nd so the Bats depart from our shores. A month passes and I get hold of Paul Kean on the line from Christchurch. Post-Bats, Australia battles to pull itself together. The band have come and gone, gigs have been played, dead kangaroos have been inspected on roadsides. Now the furore is over whether *Daddy's Highway* will get pressed at EMI; it's due to be one of the last records pressed at the plant, and Paul Kean's fingers are crossed, hoping that there will be no hiccups ...

"Australia went brilliantly well," he says. "We started off

expecting it to be lowkey, but over 200 people turned up at our first gig, practically filling the place to capacity."

"It was a good start and the gigs kept building, getting a cross-section audience, not just expatriates. It culminated in a 'Flying Nun showcase' with the Verlaines and Max Block at the Sydney Trade Union Club, which is like a prestigious gig. It's a place with three floors—bars and one-armed bandits everywhere. We got 600 people there."

Rounds of interviews kept the band busy, and most of the feedback from the Australian music press was positive, including some very enthusiastic reviews. Critic Mark Mordue instructed *RAM* readers to "see them soon before they go home back across the Tasman Sea, leaving you to wave, cry and say goodbye." The Bats observed that the major trend in Australian bands seemed to be moulded in a Hoodoo Gurus vein. There

were plenty of venues, including lots of small corner pubs with PAs strung up in their ceilings.

Kean found the most appealing thing to be "a lot of good community radio—public radio like Triple-J has a very high profile, a real high audience rating and no advertising."

"In Melbourne the crowd was enthused almost to encore status," he says, "but that's not done for support bands. [Relative indie "giants" the Go-Betweens were the main act.] There was a very industry-minded roadcrew, but I suppose you couldn't really do that here either ..."

**H**ow do you feel about "pioneering" Australia for New Zealand bands, being the advance guard?

"I hate the idea that's built up

about 'following in the Chills' footsteps,' us being a second-rate Chills. The point is to explore and be able to give advice."

Paul Kean's previous musical jaunt to Australia had been as a member of Toy Love. That was also the last time a major "alternative" New Zealand band has appeared touring across the Tasman.

"I got the feeling from a lot of questions that we made more of an impact then than we actually thought. A certain mystique has built up because of the time lapse in bands coming over of an alternative nature. I think Chris Knox put a lot of people off Australia, because we did have such a difficult time there, but having seen what's going on now, we're keen to go back in April next year."

How did the Australian tour compare to last year's European trip?

"It was a lot more intense and organised than Europe," says Kean. "We've learnt a lot,

gained a lot of knowledge. On our next tour [the world] we're going to approach it that way. We'll go to Australia, America and then Europe—basing ourselves there, rather than in London. They are more enjoyable audiences and you get treated with more respect as a musician in Europe."

Phew. How does that ad go? "Don't leave home till you've seen the country?" Maybe I could modify it to say something like, "Don't be a fool: see the Bats while we've still got 'em here, and see the Bats because they're a *New Zealand* phenomenon, not some computer-generated monster backed by LA session musicians."

Paul Kean always judges a band by whether you can dance to them. The Bats have been refining and maturing their pop craft for five years; they're the best they've ever been right now, and yes, you could spend a whole lifetime dancing to them. ●

## Pet Shop Boys, actually



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