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Leanies have no deep message they want to convey to their audience, although they regard their lyrics as important. Some of their songs are poems Greg has written, and he is releasing a book of poetry.

"There's meaning in our lyrics for people who want to listen to them but we're not trying to write political songs," says Greg, "although we did have a no nukes song once."

### Masculinity

"There's a lot of piss-take in our songs," says Nigel, "like in 'Masculinity'."

A story about typical macho-yobbo activities such as muscle flexing, listening to AC/DC, competing at school sports, accompanied by a guitar solo, the irony of which may fail to penetrate your average Kiwi bloke's skull.

The band members share a diverse range of musical tastes. Greg, who's doing a community arts course, listens to a lot of jazz, and Pere Ubu's David Thomas. Lindsay, manager of Radio Massey, is keen on the Residents; Alan, who works part-time in a record store, likes REM and Elvis Costello, while Nigel admires Steve Morris of Joy Division's drumming and Hunters and Collectors.

Number one local favourite is Sneaky Feelings, with Straightjacket Fits and the Abel Tasmanians also highly thought of.

Their video has just been finished and was shot out the back of Otaki. It's of 'By Your Leave' from the LP and cost \$2000 to make, which the band think worthwhile. "At least it'll get our name around so people have heard of us when we play a new town," says Lindsay.

They intend to play around the North Island soon, and hopefully tour the South Island again as well. "One of the good things about living in Palmerston North is that it's quite close to Hamilton, New Ply-

mouth and Wellington, which makes it easier and cheaper for touring," says Alan.

There are other advantages to living in a rural town of bodgy Ag students and foul weather, such as being able to produce a good quality record at a relatively low cost and getting good, cheap practicerooms.

### Opportunity

But these don't outweigh the disadvantages such as lack of audience numbers and opportunity.

"We can't really play in Palmy more often than once every two months or everybody would get to know our songs too well, and we'd always have to be writing new ones," says Greg.

They accept that in the long run they'll have to move to a bigger city if they are serious about their music. Wellington's out because of the weather so it'll probably be a move to Auckland to try and win over the city's thousands of music lovers.

They see it as a move that will probably be a good step for them technically, as the more competitive music scene will force them to tighten up.

Already the entire 250 copies from the first pressing of *Fun in the Key of E* have sold out, half of them at an innovative launch party whereby punters paid \$14 and got the LP, a jug of beer, and cheap admission to their gig the following night.

Another 200 copies are being pressed and should sell as well. Pretty damn good for a "bunch of country hicks" who have achieved what many bands just talk about through dedication and hard work without getting waylaid by egos and ideals.

"And whoever doesn't like the record, we'll punch them over," says Nigel.

Whoever said these Manawatu lads were wimps?

Sue Camden



The Warratahs

Photo by David Hamilton

## Wild Country Time

**Everybody, says Hank Wangford, has the right to bad music, but no one deserves the treatment country music fans have received.**

**But when all the mainstream media dish up in the name of country is Kenny Rogers and Alabama, it's not hard to see why for years the sanity of anyone with a string tie was under suspicion.**

But despite being as hip as Phil O'Brien in some circles, more people are seeing beyond the schmaltz and are sorting out the true grit from the rhinestones. Locally, musicians like Al Hunter and Wellington's Warratahs are help-

ing bring about the new attitude.

Together for a year, the Warratahs have had people dancing on tables during their residency at the Cricketers. Theirs is a rootsy country that proves you can still get joints a hoppin' without ampli-

fied bombardment. Early rock and roll was heavy in country influences, and that spirit is crucial to the Warratahs' success, plus the skill of the musicians, seasoned by many years in rock and country bands.

### Honky Tonkin'

In the frontline are vocalist/guitarist Barry Saunders, once of the Tigers and Rockinghorse; pianist Wayne Mason's pop career began with the Formyula, now he's the finest honky tonker around, with Jerry Lee Lewis and Floyd Cramer slides and slurs down pat. The cutting edge is provided by fiddler Nik Brown, of Hot Cafe and Kaleidoscope fame, while the backbeat come from bassist John Donoghue and drummer Marty Jorgansen, whose brushes slap with a firm subtlety.

"This 50s style suits Wayne and I," says Saunders. "We've stayed away from truckin' country, or the heavier sound of Joe Ely, say. We've always used a drummer with brushes, to avoid getting too heavy — people respond to the gentle swing. We stand or fall on the songs — we don't do too many instrumentals, to get out of the 'hot licks' syndrome. It gets in the way of the song."

A Warratahs' hoedown is a mixture of originals and covers, the latter including numbers by Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Marty Robbins and Chuck Berry. But their debut single, out this month on Pagan, is one of their own, Wayne Mason's charming 'Hands of My Heart.' The single was recorded live in Radio New Zealand's Wellington studio, along with songs for an upcoming album that will be mostly originals.

"One thing about this band," says Saunders, "is that we're constantly producing new material, though we still do a lot of covers. Once you don't write, you're on a downward curve. It's alright to play covers, but you have to say something yourself."

### Unbroken Circle

For Saunders, being in a country band is something he's wanted for years. "I played in a country band in England for three years, and in bands in Australia and Auckland which never got off the ground. I flopped in with these guys in Wellington and it just clicked."

"My mother was a big fan of George Jones, '5\$ Saturday Night' and so on, while my father liked the wilder side: Hank Williams and Elvis. When Hank and Elvis first emerged, it was wild music for the time."

Things haven't changed, as the Warratahs found when they took part in Gore's renowned Gold Guitar Awards during their recent South Island tour. "Most of the bands down there were electric, playing things like Bobby Bare and Tom T Hall. We don't sound electric. We did a Hank Williams song — you'd think a lot down there would be doing Hank Williams, but it's not true. No Hank, and no George Jones." To the band's surprise, but no one else's, they walked away from Gore with the second overall prize, winning the best group and best street performance awards.

"Something about New Zealand is it's always been open to country music," says Saunders. "You can play to an audience who haven't heard much country, but they quickly warm to it. I love the idea of playing rock and roll song country style. It's so natural, and you can reverse the process as well. Country music fans can be very narrow, focussing only on what they like, say the crossover acts like Tammy or Dolly. But young people seem to go for what we're doing."

Having wowed Wellington, Auckland and Gore so far, the Warratahs now have their sights set on Australia's prestigious Tamworth country festival. But don't let them leave town until you've seen their country.

Chris Bourke

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