



## Burning Oils • Heat & Dust

**Australia is gearing up for its bicentennial, but as the politicians begin to wave flags and mouth platitudes about the "coming of age of a vibrant young country," the musicians are beginning to ask what is there to celebrate?**

Elsewhere in this issue Hunter and Collector Mark Seymour says the event is a "whitewash," and 'Bicentennial,' the flipside of Paul Kelly's new single, won't win him any plaudits from Bob Hawke.

But there is something to be said for the maturity of Australian culture. Many of their musicians, for example, eschew bland internationalism and wear their Australian-ness on their sleeves, and seem to be able to succeed doing it. Examples such as the Triffids' woolshed recording or the very names of the Painters and Dockers or Hunters and Collectors reflect an awareness and pride in their culture, while avoiding trite patriotism or ra-ra jingoism.

Midnight Oil seem to get more Australian with each album, but although their fans may throw their fists in the air, the Oils' music doesn't tell its audience to beat their chests about Australia, but question its faults. Their latest, *Diesel and Dust*, is a hard-hitting album of upbeat songs, most of which concern Aboriginal land rights. Both the music and the message are refreshingly accessible, with singalong melodies that reach back to a folk tradition, and upfront lyrics that speak with the candour of the committed.

But instead of being consigned to a radio ghetto for political music, they succeed in bringing these issues and sometimes radical viewpoints to the widest possible audi-

ence. Here, while New Zealand programmers run a mile from anything local that even hints at taking a stand, the Oils manage to break through such timidity and get a song like 'Beds are Burning,' demanding land rights for Aboriginals, all over radio and to the top of the charts.

### Break Ground

*Diesel and Dust* was inspired by a groundbreaking tour the Oils made of the Australian outback to get a first-hand grasp of the Aboriginals' struggle for land rights. They visited remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, travelled through the desert and tropical regions of Arnhem Land, meeting with elders of the tribal groups and playing concerts to tiny settlements and communities.

Although Midnight Oils' songs are, with strict democracy, credited to all the band, the intense personality of Peter Garrett is always the dominating presence. From the band's Sydney office, he discusses politics and *Diesel and Dust* with tireless articulacy, ever-ready to proselytise.

"We'd been entranced by the whole outback area of Australia," he says. "So when Ayers Rock was being handed back to the traditional people, and those people decided to make a film about it, there came an approach to Midnight Oil to write a song

about it, and that song was 'The Dead Heart.' They also invited us to Uluru — which is what Ayers Rock is now called — to play.

"So after negotiations with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, we decided to do a tour called the Blackfella Whitefella tour with the Warumpi Band, to the remote areas of central and northern Australia, mostly to Aboriginal communities but also to some of the white towns. And out of that experience, which to us was fairly incredible to say the least, came quite a lot of the inspiration for *Diesel and Dust*. Some of the songs were half written before we went, but being out in the bush certainly brought a focus to it."

### Shock

While the Aboriginal communities were at first shocked by the power and force of the Oils in performance, afterwards the band and local people would settle down to share each other's music. The band, on the other hand, were shocked by the poverty they encountered.

"It was unbelievable," says Garrett. "People are just living in shanties, they have limited supplies of fresh water. Their teaching facilities and basic standard living facilities are of a very low standard. There's a lot of disease, especially among the kids, there's a lot of glaucoma [the eye disease which blinded Ray Charles as a child]. Alcoholism and petrol sniffing are rife. The places themselves are incredibly remote and very inhospitable landscapes. It's rough country — there's no green grass or anything like you lot have got."

Aboriginal land rights groups are becom-

ing more organised, says Garrett, but the situation differs from state to state. "In some states the Aboriginals have never lost their land, but in others they have never lived on their land. You've got urban Aboriginals, some of whom are relatively sophisticated educated people who are working. And you've got others who are bush people, who have lived out in the bush all their lives and can still remember a hunter-gatherer existence, and to whom white customs are relatively foreign. It's an enormously complex task, and of course they don't all share the same language either."

"But I think the bicentennial is helping to come to a clearer picture. We've seen the emergence of some common claims by Aboriginal people which are being endorsed by some sections of Australian society, and that's really their challenge: to get some kind of body that governments and white groups can talk to."

### Hesitance

Garrett agrees with the hesitance expressed about the bicentennial elsewhere in this Oz-heavy *RIU* by both Hunters and Painters ("both bands are good value for different reasons"):

"I think most Australians have got mixed feelings about it. But for people who have any kind of concern about the future and who are at all socially or politically aware, there's an opportunity to focus on issues and not necessarily sailing ships and fireworks displays and statues."

One thing that strikes me about Australian bands as opposed to New Zealanders is the way they display their cultural identity. So strongly Australian are the Oils that it seems they've got a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to international success.

"The Oils have always been primarily Australian. We've been touring overseas before and will do some more. But the band wouldn't want people to confuse jingoism or mindless patriotism with national concern. But one vision of Australia is basically driven by the corporate desire to sell things, usually foreign products like Coca Cola and McDonalds. So probably people like Paul Kelly and ourselves and others are simply acting as either a conscious or sub-conscious creative response to that."

"It's a real onslaught here, and as you'd be aware, the Oils have never taken the subtle approach to things, we've always gone head on. But partly that's because the forces we're up against are very powerful, and we need to be like that."

### Unity

The fact that the Oils have had very little turnover in their lineup reflects a unity within the band. "The big issues are not the kind of thing the Oils are going to disagree on," says Garrett. And now with *Diesel and Dust* they've achieved a new level of maturity. The rich production, with strings and French horns, enhances the singalong quality of the strong, strident melodies and consistent political theme.

"Jim Moginie and Rob Hirst are the Oils' major writers, and I think that when they began writing, they were conscious of making an album that was quite focused, that didn't go off in every direction. We thought, we want this album to be about an experi-

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# Squeeze

*babylon and on*



Julian returns to the fold and Squeeze brew up a new album which is as cool as pulling mussels from a tutti frutti. "Babylon And On" is a masterpiece — for sure!

