

Fits and Starts

Numbers begin to swell at Auckland's Gluepot, a curious bill of Straitjacket Fits supporting the appalling Aussies Painters and Dockers.

The audience is similarly divided, there are lots of blokes here tonight, but by the time Straitjacket Fits have finished their set of swirling soundscapes, of barely concealed panic, even some of the blokes are tapping their feet and nodding their heads, in between beers.

And if this is what modern life is like in Auckland, New Zealand, then this is the story of a modern band, of four likely lads living in the 20th Century, and well — things are looking up.

But flashback to February 1986, when Shayne Carter, John Collie and David Wood try on some new clothes, a well-fitting item of restraint, but with one arm missing. The addition of ex-Orange man Andrew Brough completes the jacket in August '86 and the sartorial set is complete.

The 'Fits have now completed an EP *Life in One Chord*, and have been doing a "loosely-knitted together" tour, culminating with gigs at the cramped City Hotel in Auckland. Shayne Carter describes the EP as "Schizophrenic — in that the four songs are different from each other, which is a reflection of the stage we were at — still wondering what direction we were going in. But it's still a good record." Andrew Brough says he's happy with the record: "Well produced."

If life for a band in 1987 is still marked with the usual money hassles, there is a new seriousness in the manner most bands

approach their craft these days. Witness the Chills and the Bats, and for the young but seasoned Straitjackets, that particular road is necessary too.

The Game

The business side of things may not be fun, but it's gotta be done. "When it's your livelihood," says Carter, "it's not just a matter of getting up and playing anymore. You have to play the game to certain extent, but you've gotta watch it, it would be very easy to be led down the garden path. But it's possible, especially with the sort of framework that Flying Nun provides, to be able to do it without compromising and feeling you've lost your integrity."

Brough: "I just wanted to play on stage, have a good time, but as you get older you have to make up your mind about what you want to do."

And, like the Chills and the Bats, Straitjacket Fits will also head to the land of overseas next year. John Collie feels Britain sounds really depressing, but all agree it's a starting point. "There are people there to organise things, but it seems pretty bleak, so we'll

use that as a gateway to other place," says Carter.

Experience this band doesn't lack. All have played with many bands, including Working With Walt, the Blue Meanies, the Orange, the Doublehappys and the famed Bored Games. Perhaps the fact that they're all aged 23 accounts for the "click" that seems to have happened.

Playing in a band doesn't get easier, but it does get better. "We're all at a stage where we've got good enough and have worked out things technically to know what we want to do," says Carter, "everyone's focused enough. This year's been a year of building bases and learning to play with each other, there's been a lot of progress, working out our strengths. We had our teething problems, but that was inevitable. Andrew Brough agrees: "The potential's there."

"We try with our songs, to make sure they're goodies, there's a lot of effort," says Carter. He writes most of the songs, with Brough having added a couple too. "Writing songs is really hard," says Brough, "especially as your personal standards get higher."

Carter: "The songs on the EP are lyrically one-dimensional, basically personal life problems. They were all written in the last year-and-a-half. But you get sick of people bleating on about their personal problems and what's going wrong in their particular love life. Personally, I've become more interested in wider issues — people around me, rather than me."

The Sound

As for The Sound, it swirls, it evokes, it's a carefully planned, multi-layered beast warmed by Carter and Brough's harmonies. It beleaguers comparison, although some critics have likened the 'Fits to REM. The band don't think that's true, but there's another label Carter objects to more: "60s psychedelia" is the one that pisses me off. It seems as if when you write songs that are coherent, without being clichéd — and don't stick to the cliché — that any added weirdness is automatically tagged 'psychedelic.' Plus the fact that we're a guitar band with harmonies. But I find 1977 just as inspirational as 1967.

"It's great if you can convey a certain feeling through music, the mood that arouses. You want to affect people and I still think you can build a mood with the music. People say you don't get hit straight away by Straitjacket Fits, but by the end you've been absorbed into it."

It seems the only hassle they've had is the *too loud* criticisms, which Brough says they're remedying. Carter says it's gotta be loud, so people are wrapped up in the sound, "But it's trying to get right — we don't want to rip people's ears to shreds and cause involuntary bowel movements." Power through sound, not volume.

So, with 1987 all but gone, Straitjacket Fits are saying "World, watch out," and we better be ready for them.

Fiona Rae



Straitjacket Fits (L-R): Andrew Brough, Shayne Carter, John Collie, David Wood.

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charts which are incredibly straight.

"So we thought, why hang around here, we've put in six months and got incredibly depressed. In hindsight six months was too long. So we don't take the British charts too seriously. In realistic terms every band has only got one life to live, so why not do it in style?"

But Hunters have better memories of New Zealand, where the band has received two gold records and played packed houses on all their tours. Our audiences, says Seymour, are "pretty over the top. You're only there for

a fortnight but you come out pretty wasted. They go bananas. Bands don't go through there much and they make the most of it."

"New Zealand helped us preserve our self-respect. We had some pretty hard knocks on the international rock scene and New Zealand was the first place we went to where we flew over a vast expanse of ocean and actually were accepted. New Zealand and American college radio have been the two sources of overseas interest for us. I like to think that there is some sort of cultural bond between us."

Backpeddle

"On the political level, there has been this ridiculous back-peddling by the Australian Government over the question of its relationship with the American nuclear arms umbrella. New Zealand has taken a stand on that and I'd like to think we could take a cue from New Zealand on that matter."

"I want a free Pacific Ocean
I see the truth come clean
I see the world go on forever
Our blood will boil, it's now or never."
— "Breakneck Road"

The band has toured the States twice. With plenty of Australian bands over there, Australian music is getting plenty of airing — but why the States?

"It makes more sense to tour there. They've got a club network and there are bands out there touring all the time and people can make a living out of it. The reason for going over there is that the creative energy inside the band is alive and well. We've gotta keep on the road to keep the whole thing going, and it's the next town down the road."

Tim Byrne

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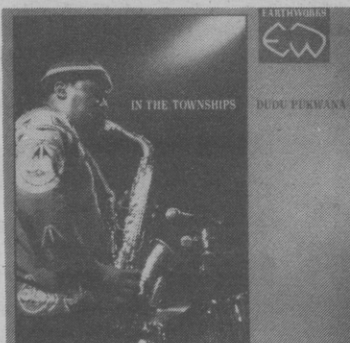
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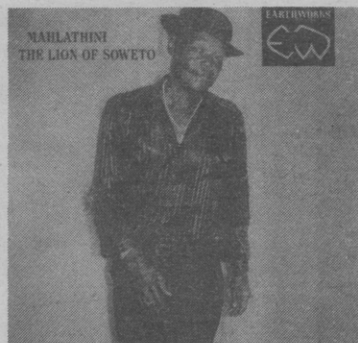
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