

Down at The Windsor, Th'Dudes were going through the motions of a death throes. Peter Ulrich tells the half-filled room of unenthusiastic punters that he's had enough, is, in fact, along with Ian Morris, calling it a day, that, in effect, Th'Dudes is kaput.

Mind you, I didn't hang around that long. I found the going heavy enough watching Th'Dudes meander through a half-arsed first bracket, a case of what Dave McCartney may call "Dying In Public". So when Ulrich joined me during the break and expressed sentiments of morose foreboding, I decided on a discreet exit, not really caring to witness the inevitable and bear the general depression the room offered.

Meanwhile, up at the Gluepot, you couldn't get past the door for love or, that's dead right there, Cecil, money. Even yours truly had to come out with some nifty slip shod shuffling to gain entry. Inside, it was a familiar scene: five grubby veterans were belting out their singular brand of raunchy rock and boozy blues, entertaining what has become generally regarded as the most hoonish, loutish and unwholesome audience on the local rock circuit, a crowd of drunken degenerates who are as critical as they are prone to some of the most spontaneous raging every likely to be seen in this fair country. Street Talk are always welcome at the Gluepot.

By the time I'd hassled and harried my way to the bar Street Talk were well into their final set. The place was jumping. And what a weird assortment of folks Street Talk attract. On the dance floor was a fair indication of the 18-30 rock audience, covering the whole social spectrum, including a sprinkling of ye olde hippies, all hair and tassles, doing the jerk or something and even a half-dozen or so conspicuous punk-types pogoing to everyone's else's discomfort. And then, along the perimeter of the room there were the Joe Cools, tapping and twinkling their toes in urbane restraint.

Street Talk were playing "Lonely At The Top", the sort of twelve bar exercise Hammond Gamble can muster up in his sleep. Not that there's any sleeping from these lads. In anybody else's hands such a simple blues vehicle would dribble away into excessive guitar heroics or just plain banality.

At the back of the stand Jim Lawrie crouches, all arms and perspiration, while Andy MacDonald bobs and weaves as he plucks out a free-flowing bass run. Up front Mike Caen and Hammond Gamble share the guitar solo duties; Mike standing all stiff and disjointed and Hammond assuming the now-familiar pose of standing like a schoolboy dying for a piss, his right foot curled around his left calf. And then over there on the side, away from the bright lights, sits Stuart Pearce tinkling methodically. No longer just the pianist brought in at the time of the first album, Stuart has become over recent months very much an integral part of the Street Talk sound, an asset to any band.

The blues number slams to a close and, while the audience dies down, Hammond lights up a B&H, takes a few puffs and then inserts the cigarette in the neck of his guitar; a healthy slug from his Steinie and then he announces "Lazy Pauline", one of only three tracks from last year's *Street Talk* album that is still included in the band's repertoire. The crowd, naturally, go apeshit and fair enough too. A couple more established crowd-pleasers, "Queen Of The Party Line" and "Blood Out Of A Stone", a couple of newies, a final slice of blues and, apart from the customary encore, the night is over.

A glance around the departing crowd reveals, apart from the standard grumble about bells and bustling bouncers, a well-satisfied lot — the George Thorogood fans who follow Street Talk from gig to gig because Hammond Gamble is the closest thing they can find to a guitar hero, the old-timers from the seventies who've kept track of the band since the early days and those late admirers who witnessed Street Talk blow Fleetwood Mac clean out of their country at the recent Western Springs concert.

STREET TALK's BATTLEGROUND OF FUN



Hammond Gamble, Andy MacDonald, Stuart Pearce, Jim Lawrie, and Mike Caen

The No-Hoppers

There's a changeover in audiences every two years, "Andy MacDonald says the following week at Mandrill Studios where Street Talk are recording their second album. "God, I must be getting old. I've seen a few come and go. People change, they get married, go overseas, get thrown in gaol. But then there are the regulars who come in year in, year out. You can always recognise them. They're the ones most like the musicians. The no-hoppers."

Andy is propped in an armchair in the foyer. Hammond and producer Bruce Lynch are twiddling knobs and what-nots in the control booth, while the rest of the band wander around aimlessly, drinking coffee and reading mags, waiting to be told to get back in the studio. The building is filled with the sound of "Battleground Of Fun", the album's title track, a haunting melody as unlike Street Talk as any of the Fowley-dominated tracks on the debut album.

Andy listens to a couple of bars then emits a whoop of delight and, changing the gender on the band's current single, sings, "He's Done It Again. Hammond Gamble is bloody amazing. He just pulled this song out yesterday, it's such a great song. It really pisses me off, you know. People, I think, tend to consider Hammond as some drunken blues guitarist but, really, he's so much more. It's such a buzz working with Hammond, he's the only lyricist, except for maybe Costello, who can continually — Pow! — put a hole in my head. He's that good. I honestly think Hammond is criminally underrated in this country."

If Street Talk's recent live performances aren't enough, the forthcoming album, with not a trace of Springsteen influence or Fowley lyric in sight, should confirm once and for all that Street Talk are one of New Zealand's most productive units and finally lay to rest any claims that the band are a spent force. For anyone who's ever laid their bets on Street Talk, the dividends are just about to come through. They've never played better and, as songwriters, they've only just arrived.

Bands come up and disappear almost as fast but Street Talk, well Street Talk just hang in there producing the goods. With the recent demise of Hello Sailor and Th'Dudes and the departures for dustier pastures by Citizen Band and Toy Love, Street Talk are undoubtedly New Zealand's top rock'n'roll drawcard. "Number one by default," mumbles Mike Caen without a trace of irony.

Early last year, many people believed that a well-deserved and long overdue success had finally come the band's way. But *Street Talk* wasn't the breakthrough NZ album and international success failed to materialise. After a flirtation with the bright lights, the band retreated back into the hard slog, one of the country's top bands but only one of nevertheless.

Jonathan Who???

Shortly after Kim Fowley had left these shores and the shouting had died down, Street

Talk were back into the gruelling grind that is the local rock'n'roller's lot. With Auckland tightly in the grip of the new wave bands, Street Talk's continuing affair with the blues made the band something of an anachronism. It appeared that the band had nothing to offer the city's teenagers.

To make matters worse there was the open disdain the younger bands held them in. One night Toy Love, upon seeing Jim Lawrie and Mike Caen in the audience at Mainstreet, dedicated a song to Street Talk and proceeded to play a disjointed and cacophonous twelve bar blues with lines like: "Welllll ... Ah've bin playing der blooze ah since ah 1964."

Mike and Jimmy were not amused. Then there was the case of Street Talk's guest appearance at last year's Rockquest. The band came on at nine o'clock following the announcement of the results. Most of the audience — mainly el punko musos and their fans — had been drinking steadily since noon. Halfway through the set a bottle flew past Hammond's head. In a rare outburst, Hammond strode to the front of the stage and demanded a confrontation with the culprit. The culprit, incidentally, was one Jonathan Jamrag, then lead singer with Proud Scum.

"That c**t!" Hammond explodes, remembering the incident. "Funny thing happened after that though. The following week we were playing at the Gluepot when this geezer comes up to me and says, 'Ere, you know that guy wot threw that bottle last week? Well me and my mates done him.'" Hammond grimaces at the whole unsavoury episode. "That silly bastard may be a faithful fan but, really, he's just as bad as Jonathan F**king Smelly Dags."

Maybe it's because the audience is realising that there are limitations to the flash and fury of punk, but several weeks back a visit to the Windsor revealed a packed house with a large number of skinheads, bootboys and the like pogoing like crazy to "Leaving The Country". True.

The Cook Street Connection

Playing only sparingly outside Auckland since the release of *Street Talk* and, again, neglecting to follow up their well-received four week tour of Australia, the band failed to capitalise on last year's Fowley coup. In part, this can be attributed to a lack of a manager. But when Brian Jones, he of Cook Street Market, entered the local rock industry last year he impressed a lot of people with his energy and enthusiasm, including Street Talk.

"Brian was the only guy we ever considered as a manager," Hammond says. "We were impressed with what he did for Sheerlux so when the occasion arose we grabbed him for a manager. And I tell you what, we're bloody glad we did too. He's been brilliant."

In February Brian flew to the States to try and generate interest for the band. His first week was spent, in typical big industry introduction style, waiting around his motel room for phone calls that invariably never arrived.

But eventually Brian got to meet Dan Loggins, WEA International A&R Executive Director. "Loggins was amazing," Brian says. "He was so genuinely positive, so enthusiastic. He told me that he considered Street Talk to be one of the WEA acts with the most potential."

Bearing news like that, it's no wonder that, since Brian's return, Street Talk have applied a fresh enthusiasm to both their live performances and the new album. The album itself is the one many thought would surface last year. There are no concessions this time around. Street Talk play the blues and they're damn proud of the way they play it too. So, yes, there's a couple of blues numbers on the thirteen track album ("Lonely At The Top" and a new version of "Leaving The Country"). Other stage familiars included are Mike Caen's "Queen Of The Party Line" and "China Girl", Hammond's "Goodbye Good Fortune" and "What Happened To Lucy?" and the arrival of Andy MacDonald as a songwriter with two contributions, "Feminine Minds" and "Lonely One", the latter likely to be the first single lifted from the album. But the real surprises come on songs like the title track where Hammond's insistence that the Beatles as well as the blues are Street Talk's biggest influences.

So Long, Kim, G'Day, Bruce

During Brian's US sojourn the Fowley link was finally severed. Too busy producing the likes of Tina Turner and earning big bickies, Fowley, after continually postponing his second NZ visit since September, was a little peeved that the Bruce Lynch-produced single ("She's Done It Again"/"Long Night Blues") was going to be released. He told Brian that he didn't know for sure when he'd be able to come to NZ but when he did, after listening to the demos the band had sent, he wanted them to use his specially written lyrics. Brian, quite rightfully so, told him he didn't think that that was in the band's interests.

And so Street Talk have opted for Bruce Lynch to produce the album. Although not possessing the clout of a renowned jetsetter like Fowley, Lynch has done an admirable job and, unlike Fowley, has allowed the band members themselves to have a greater say in the production. Hammond, though, is quick to point out that there are no hard feelings with Fowley. "I still reckon Kim's a bloody good producer and I'd like to work with him again. But I guess *Street Talk* isn't really indicative of the band so I'm really happy with this one and with Bruce."

Andy, though, is more to the point. "I'll tell you one thing," he whispers, "I'm bloody glad we're no longer a Fowley band."

Leaving The Country

As recently as Sweetwaters there have been criticisms of the band getting lethargic, banging out the same old stuff in the same old fashion. Over the past two months, however, a new life has come into the band's performances. With three composers currently popping up with inspiring songs, 1980 looks like being a fertile year for Street Talk. Despite this, the band aren't rushing off just yet. To coincide with the release of *Battleground Of Fun*, there's a national tour in June followed, in August, by another Australian visit. Maybe then they'll look further afield.

Back At The Gluepot

Well look at this, another full house, another raging crowd going home happy with the knowledge that they've seen one of the finest bands in the land tearing the roof off the Gluepot. Yes indeed, folks, Street Talk are playing tighter than a nun's knickers, a gloved fist pounding the table in jubilation of rock'n'roll. Well maybe it ain't that romantic to you rocksters who catch the band three drinks the safe side of sanity but me I'd rather spend an evening with Street Talk than with any other band currently playing the local circuit. I'll give George Thorogood a wide berth thanks but as for Hammond and the boys, well now that is rock'n'roll. It's like the conversation I overheard at Sweetwaters.

Three young dudes in front of me: the first one, studying the programme, says, "What are Street Talk like?" The second guy dwells on this a while and replies, "Well ... they're good but ... ah, you know, they're just a blues band." The third chappy looks at his mate aghast. "Just a blues band? No way. They're the best bloody blues band there is."

John Dix

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