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Wellington is a strange town. For most of the past year, there have been only two regular rock venues in town. Despite this, between thirty and forty local bands performed, and more than a dozen recorded.

This scene is based on people who have only emerged over the last eighteen months. It is new enough for Stephen Morris of Naked Spots Dance to be able to say, "I can't remember Wellington bands before a couple of years ago."

It has grown up in a peculiar atmosphere. Just as New Zealand music has had to fight to make an impression on the international star machine, so Wellington bands have had to fight against a colonial relationship with the Auckland-based New Zealand rock establishment.

Andrew Fagan of the Mockers puts it this way: "When the Ambitious Vegetables tried to get a support spot at the Resort, about September 79, we couldn't because we weren't well enough known. The Resort was strictly for 'big time' New Zealand bands from Auckland."

The shortage of regular gigs and the failure of the previous generation of local bands to bequeath an audience meant that the capital's bands are pioneers to a greater extent than their peers in other cities. Still, those who wish to be pros leave, those who stay do so on a part-time basis.

Increasingly, this is seen as a liberating factor. If you can't make a living regardless how populist your approach, then why not go the other way, take an artistic hard line and lose money with dignity?

"Why Wellington is different from every other centre is that all the bands are really into their music and trying to create a whole sound of their own," says Proton, Tony Richards. "There are no pub bands in Wellington, everyone's trying to be art."

This cuts both ways. Bands tend to cater to their own little self-contained followings of committed scenesters rather than Joe Public on a night out. As a result, there is fragmentation and tribalism, at its most apparent when a band such as the Rodents gets too popular and moves beyond the cult format. Peter Marshall, back in Wellington after the break-up of the band has his regrets.

"The way bands treat each other — there's a lot of backstabbing going on. It was basically sad the way things got taken to extremes. There should be etiquette, even at the level of poster. In Wellington, you're lucky if your posters stay on top overnight."

At its worst, the art-for-arts-sake outlook ran to a bizarre form of inverted snobbery.

"It was the ultimate hip to be really f---ed on your instrument for a start, and if you knew anything about playing, you were an 'intellectual', or something," says Richards.

Allen Jansen of the Steroids agrees. "Life In The Fridge Exists could have been brilliant if they had practised, but when they did practise, it was in front of an audience."

A measure of the growth and optimism that flourished anyway is the concern of local musicians with recording and record promo-

Top to bottom: Pete Marshall, Kate Walker (Naked Spots Dance) and Mockers Andrew Fagan.

Capital chat



tion. A year ago, the big complaint was that there were no gigs. Now it is the tokenism of local radio which restricts home grown singles to night-time shows rather than regular play-listing.

The Mockers' problems are fairly typical, according to Fagan. "We went to see their radio programmer and asked if, instead of our single just going on the late-night show, would they give it regular airplay? And she was real adamant. It came down to the fact that she wasn't prepared to play anything that hadn't previously been tested in Auckland or overseas."

Record company types and similar official figures fared just as badly.

"All these people only turn up to see bands like Pink Flamingos and the Tigers. Suddenly, all the Arts Council people, and record company people, and radio people you never see otherwise, are all over the place with complimentary tickets and stuff."

Despite all this, the various factions at last seem to be gaining a sense of common cause, and of their own shortcomings and needs. Tony Richards sums it up: "I'll argue anytime about musical things, but when it comes to organising venues, promoting singles, getting good PAs and service, then we're all in the same boat."

The town could do with more venues, preferably licensed, preferably small. But things are happening. In Bunk Records, Wellington has its own independent label, and with *In Touch* its own music paper.

Most important, the musicians who have every reason to be discouraged, are still committed to the task, and have learned from their mistakes. The Wellington rock scene, which was born in 1979, and went through its growing pains in 1980, should start producing the goods in 1981.

Don Mackay

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