

The last time *RIU* caught up with the Swingers, 'Counting The Beat' was camped immovably at the top of the Australian charts — and zeroing in on number one here. The album was just about ready to start, the new drummer was working out well, and there were songs to burn. The pages of 'The Swingers' Success Story' seemed about to inevitably turn.

But then there was a mishap. Or two.

Phil Judd, on the line from Melbourne the afternoon before the beginning of the band's four-month Australasian tour, looks first at mishap one — drummer Ian Gilroy breaking his wrist.

"For a couple of days it seemed like absolute disaster, but it's worked out so incredibly well. We've been doing the *Star Struck* movie for the last couple of months, and that's both kept us alive financially and sane at the same time. We've written music for it, been appearing in it, and it's been a lot of fun."

But some momentum must have been lost.

"There was, yeah. We didn't play for five months — apart from in the studio, which doesn't really count — and we discovered when we went back into practice a couple of weeks ago, we spent a week getting nowhere. But some good things came out of the broken wrist, some good songs."

Mishap two was the follow-up single 'It Ain't What You Dance (It's The Way You Dance It)'. It charted reasonably high here, but Australia?

"It did badly," admits Judd. "There just wasn't any airplay at all. They didn't want to play it. We were told by various people in the business and DJs that it was too over the top for the singles-buying market — too busy. It wasn't something that would go in easily. But we've learned our lesson from that."

A cue, it seems, for the new single 'One Track Mind', which Judd and Tickle had recently finished mixing, along with the album *Practical Jokers*, in New York. So, what can we say about this crucial third single?

"Oh gosh, nothing as usual probably."

Ummmm — the album then. Had it turned out as hoped?

"Overall it did, yeah. There are the usual disappointments, petty things, but overall we're very pleased."

And, aside from saying yes the first two singles would both be included, that was about it for *Practical Jokers*. I move sideways to producer Tickle. The last *RIU* interview — with Bones Hillman — had the bass player still concussed from a 14-hour studio stint on the second single just getting the bass drums right. Tickle, it seems, likes to spend a little



time getting things down.

"Technically he does, yeah, but he's got the patience to let us try out new things. Because he's young and fresh, he loves finding new sounds like we do."

Tickle is a proven performer at working with the bottom half of a record. Judd certainly has no complaints as to how he works with the rest — Judd's half — either.

"There are no arguments. We're the best of mates. The Swingers are his pet band — he's almost tempted to give up being an engineer to join the band. We don't think of him as a visiting producer, he's one of the team."

Judd stayed in New York with Tickle mixing for all but three tracks of the album. So what's in New York then Phil?

"I never saw anything," he replies. "It was twelve hours a day, bed to studio, studio to bed."

But while Judd was there, he did pick up some nice comments from people who heard the band's music, even if the band's immediate overseas future appears to lie more with England and Europe than America.

"'Counting The Beat' is coming out in England in a couple of weeks. I think it should go well, but in England it's pretty much a matter of luck as to what you bump up against."

Split Enz, with Judd as the group's chief writer, certainly bumped up against a whole lot when they first tried England. Do the whims of fashion accommodate The Swingers a little more easily in 1981?

"Well, we're the odd man out at the moment in Australia. There are a lot of new and different bands, and musically we appear to Australia as very much another indigenous New Zealand band. We've got our own sound, and it's worked to our advantage — they've got an open mind here about things now."

The Enz reference had not evoked any noticeable wincing over the trans-Tasman line, so I plunge ahead. How accurate were Tim Finn's recent *NZ Listener* recollections on how the initial Enz repertoire was put together?

"In those days we would sit around one afternoon and write a couple of parts, and then write a couple more the next afternoon, and sort of stick them together when they came instead of filing them away under various categories. A strange approach, a very naive approach, but it was fun."

The Enz-knockers used to say the songs were assembled that way of course — but try convincing us fans of it. Impossible.

"It's nothing to get embarrassed about, but we tended to let our minds wander a bit instead of repeating a certain phrase X number of times like one should do. But to entertain ourselves, we'd put all the parts in a pot and shake them."

Favourites from that period?

"'Under The Wheel', mainly coz of the way it came about. But they're all very special."

And what (he asked timidly) about Split Enz now?

"It's hard to say. I've got a lot of respect for Neil Finn's pop writing talents, but I can't see it as the Enz that was something I formed. To me it's strange music — it's not the Enz I want to remember. They've had to compromise or else they wouldn't still exist, and I'm glad they still exist — particularly for Tim, because it's been such a hard slog."

Judd was intrigued to learn *RIU* had made it through to issue 50. The last he'd heard, in fact, was that the magazine had gone under.

"We were all very sad about that. It seemed like the death of an era."

I assure the man all is well, and we continue. We agree the rock press can be a great motivator for bands starting out, but how far should they go with the more established?

"I don't really care any more," says Judd. "Often the same person will say a different thing one day to the next. In England it seems to me that ninety percent of the writers are either ex-musicians or frustrated musicians, so a lot of twisted reasoning comes out in the critiques."

Judd was very much a part of New Zealand rock through the 70s decade, from Enz through the Suburban Reptiles and the Enemy changeover on to The Swingers. He backs away from overview comments on the decade, and while he admits he hasn't really kept up with the singles boom of the past 12 months, he still feels things could be a lot better here.

"It seems to me that nothing has changed. The record companies are still stuck in the same situation as far as putting out the pennies to help the bands."

Judd says the songs are still coming faster than the band can record — or even learn — them.

"When we haven't played for a while we get frustrated, and with most of our writing being done at practices, when we finally get together for a practice, some wonderful things come out of that frustration."

But it is the progress of the songs already recorded — the third single and the first album here, and perhaps principally, 'Counting The Beat' overseas, that holds the key to the band's future.

What happens after the current tour is uncertain, but Judd is sure England and Europe will be sorted out by then.

Fingers cross — and a final question: could the same pressures that forced Judd's exit from Split Enz ever occur in this band?

"No, nothing short of a nervous breakdown. In Enz we had some pretty earth-shattering experiences and it became obvious there would have to be compromises, and I didn't want to do that in that band. I wanted to die gracefully and start anew — which I did. I've realised that I love music and I love the business, and this time I'm going to stick at it no matter what."

It is, after all, not what you dance, but the way you dance it.

Roy Colbert

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