



Ultravox have never been a favourite media band. It shouldn't worry them, with their commercial success, but it does. Like anybody, they want to be liked by everyone. They feel they're nice enough guys, so why are things so heavy?

Nobody in the media liked Ultravox in the punk days, they used synthesisers and were thus very old hat. Later, when synthesisers made an industrial comeback, everyone cited Ultravox as an influence. Now they've come the full circle, recalling the weighty, ponderous days of ELP and Yes. Can't you hear the screams?

Ultravox with John Foxx had a certain decaying elegance, the sound of old Europe. Now it's 1982, Foxx is gone, and I'm talking with keyboards-violin player Billy Currie and drummer Warren Cann. They're quite ready for the inevitable why-did-John-quit question.

"It was a good thing overall," says Currie. "John wanted to do solo music and for the rest of us, it just wasn't working. It was great to have Midge, mainly because he's an instrumentalist as well as a vocalist, that's what we wanted."

"I was very ecstatic about it, to tell you the truth," says Cann. "I was at the point where I was leaving if John didn't leave. It was a mixture of personality and musical differences."

Seems I've heard that song before.

"He really wanted to minimise things, which was quite the opposite of what I wanted to do, and, as it turned out, what the rest of the guys wanted to do," says Currie. "Our interests were more into branching out and extending yourself musically. More into an area of free soloing, that's an area we've kept on purpose."

"It was difficult, because when we wrote something, John would always want to be the originator. He was very precious about his lyrics. It was 'I have the concept, from the words'. I really fuckin' hated it, because it was like 'Lie down, sonny, don't touch'."

So, things were a little bitchy. Currie isn't surprised by what Foxx has done since.

"I think it's quite good that he's continuing," says Currie ("Especially at his age," chips in Cann). "Metamatic is what I expected, which is what we didn't want to do. It's fairly contrived. I remember at the end of the last tour with him, he said he'd like to go and get his own studio scene together. It gets down to a basic point of money, because he was making most of the money, from publishing, and he could afford to do that. He said he wanted to get more in tune with the underground scene, things that were coming out on Rough Trade. That was quite fashionable at the time."

"The next thing I saw was John on *Top Of The Pops*, singing 'Underpants', sorry, 'Underpass', which is totally opposite to what he was talking about."

Currie and Cann feel they're at a peak now, obviously in the commercial sense, but also artistically.

"I think the next album is going to be a solid development, a gelling point from the last two," says Currie.

"So many people have hooked onto Midge's publicised past, and they don't really know anything about our individual

pasts," says Cann. "They think of Billy, Chris and me as the weirdos, with Midge as the more commercial mind which sells more records. I have to state, absolutely, and categorically, that is not the case."

"Both *Vienna* and *Rage In Eden* have been very successful albums, but the one track that kicked the whole thing off was the single 'Vienna'. You couldn't possibly imagine a more uncommercial track. If you were going to sit down and write a really commercial track, that is the last thing you'd come up with. We've been a success on our own terms."

So what was the attraction in Midge Ure, a pop musician of seemingly opposite backgrounds?

"He had a sense of humour," says Cann. "And he's a very good musician. We just instantly got along well with each other, we had similar ideas, and where they differed, it was in a complementary way. That sparked things off."

"Midge wanted to play with some people that he quite respected," says Currie. "He'd heard some of our stuff and thought we were capable, on a level where he needed stimulating. Like, the Rich Kids was a rather concocted thing."

"When he came along, the very first thing we did was just play," says Cann. "We asked Midge which of our numbers he liked the most, he named a few songs, and we just played those. It was amazing, the solidity he added to it."

Solidity, humour, musicianship. Ultravox may have displayed the last quality at Sweetwaters, but they lacked in the other departments. Technically they were excellent, clear and crisp sound with all the dynamic elements working right. But they were so cold. Their music was devoid of humanity. No passion, only logic. No anger, only petulance. No release, only anaesthetic. Music without life, soul or body. Is this superficial sound the reflection of a superficial age? I hope not. **Duncan Campbell**

Melbournites Colin Hay on vocals and guitar, Ron Stryker on guitar, Greg Ham on sax and flute, Jerry Speiser on drums, and John Rees on bass formed as Men At Work in August 1979, and since then have shot from being the "biggest thing in Bendigo," to one of the biggest things in Australia, and now NZ.

The *Business As Usual* album sat at number one in Australia for at least six weeks, and hit the top spot here two days after their Sweetwaters' gig.

"We've played a few festivals on the last day, and invariably things go wrong. I mean you've had all this equipment that's had 200 different road crew set up 200 different ways, and I was just glad everything was working," says Greg Ham. "It went really quickly. There's all these people, and you're playing, and suddenly it's all over."

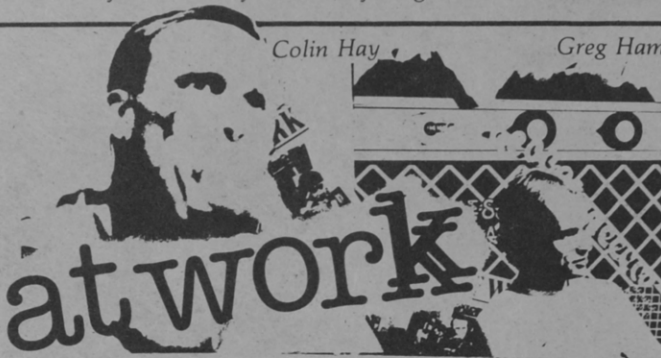
"And you spend weeks getting passports," adds Colin.

"And you sit around for hours afterwards and talk about it," Greg carries on. "It's a big shock too, going onto a large stage after you've been playing your average pub-sized stage. It's like a big paddock, with all this space to fill in."

"And no sheep," quips Mr Colin Hay.

The last six months have been constant live performances in pubs and clubs, with the occasional support thrown in.

"Pubs are the bread and potatoes, or meat and carrots, or whatever you call it, of rock and roll," Greg says.



"There's no band in Australia," continues Colin, "that can survive doing concerts. You have to do pubs. Booze is where it's at."

The *Business As Usual* album is a curious blend of light, uplifting, sometimes funny songs with a reggae backbeat.

"Some of the songs are stories, and some are just nonsense," Colin comments. "Some are real stories, and some are real nonsense."

So just where does that leave a tune like 'Be Good Johnny'?

"It's an observation," Greg says.

"A tale," says Colin. "A little situation, an idea. Greg came up with the music, and I came up with the story to put to it

which was based on a nine year old boy named Johnny who gets hassled by all these daggy uncles that come around and ask him about playing sport. That's basically what it is about."

And where does the band's humour fit in?

"Yeah, we like to laugh at it," Greg says. "If you can't laugh at it you may as well put your leather jump suit on, slash your wrists, bite the heads off doves or something."

"I think we've all been bored by bands that take themselves too seriously. It just gets tedious when people can't laugh at themselves and what they're doing."

"And the relative unimportance of rock and roll," adds Colin philosophically.

Back to the album, and a look at the whys and wherefores behind 'Down Under'.

"It was a very quick process," Colin explains. "The first verse developed out of a bass riff, the hook 'Down Under', and the second and third verses are situations which were related to me by friends. Situations which you store in the back of your head. For example, the Brussels thing. It was a friend of mine who went and tried to speak French in a bread shop, and the guy behind the counter was from Brunswick in Melbourne. There's nothing new or revelatory about the song, but people think that having words like vegemite sandwich, and chunder in a song are really hysterical. They love it."

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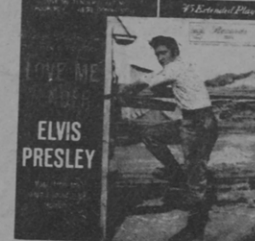


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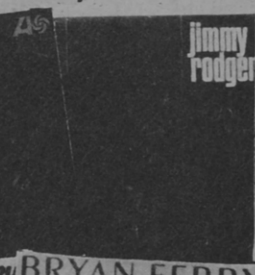
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