

It's just after twelve on a Mainstreet Thursday night. Renee Geyer has left the stage after one encore and despite the ravenous applause, doesn't look like returning. The house lights come on and the roadies appear. It's all over but the guy next to me won't quit. "Are you staying around for the next set?" he asks and keeps clapping.

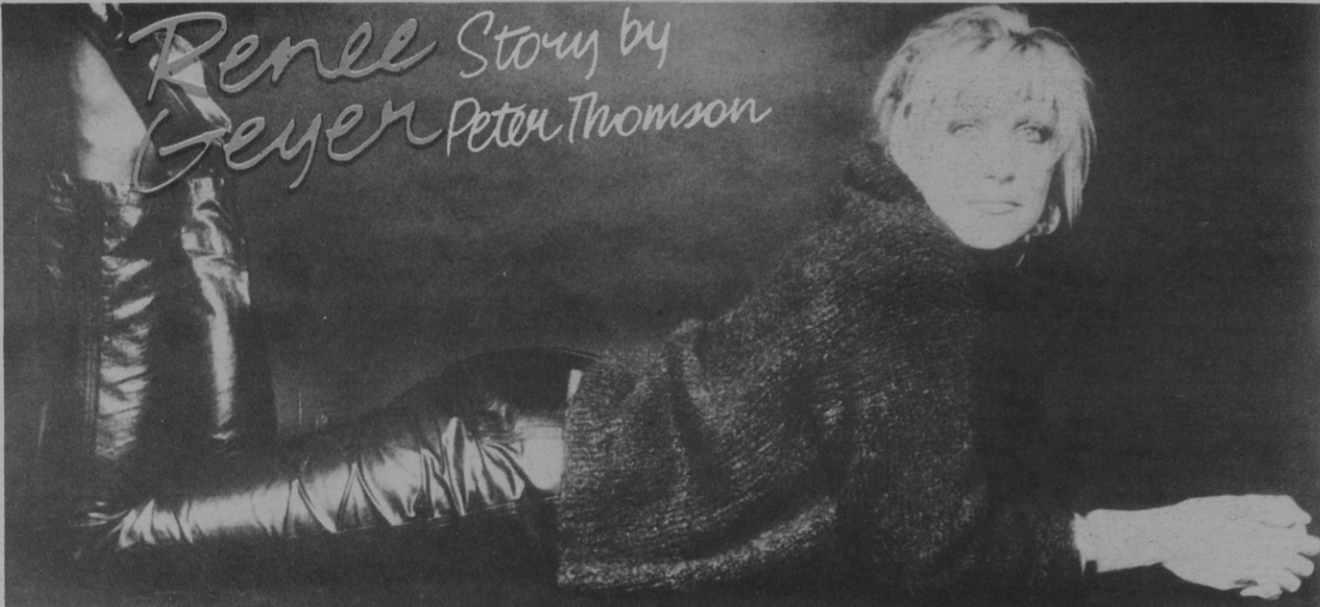
We all thought the show was too short, but then even with another hour, most of us would still have clamoured for more. Geyer's singing was, as always, simply stunning. Moreover she looked far more relaxed and assured on stage than in her concerts here last year. Perhaps it was the superior band she was fronting — a nine-piece unit incorporating three brass, two keyboards and renowned backing vocalist Vanetta Fields.

Ms Fields, who was recently working with Boz Scaggs, has a pedigree that stretches back to Ike and Tina Turner's original Ikettes and includes a period supporting Aretha Franklin. That Fields should now be backing Renee Geyer is only fitting, a small sign that, in musical circles at least, the 29 year-old Australian is slowly becoming recognized as one of the world's great singers of soulful R&B. To hear these two women trade lines on 'Heading In The Right Direction' was a musical treat of rare delight.

But it was a very strong support she received all round and Kiwi pride was there too with Dennis Mason on alto sax and expatriates Kevin Borich on guitar and Mal Logan on electric piano.

In fact New Zealanders seem to be figuring rather prominently in Renee Geyer's music these days, as she'd told me earlier that evening while the band was completing it's sound-check. We'd sat, huddled in the murky depths of the nightclub's mezzanine floor, trying to escape the thunder of amplified drums, talking about her present recording situation.

"Both tracks on the current single are by New Zealanders,



both by ex-members of the Crocodiles. Tony Backhouse wrote 'Love So Sweet'. He's been submitting songs to me for a long time and this one really got to me because it's an R&B thing that normally you'd expect to find about the late 60s, early 70s. Usually you'd have to cover something that sounds like that yet he's writing them now. He's one of my favourite writers at the moment. I'm going to use some on the album."

I said how much I liked the second track, 'I've Got News For You' by bassist Jonathon Zwartz, with its distinctly Little Feat-ish rhythm.

"Oh yeah, a great feel, very self indulgent."

So these two numbers are not from any new album then?

"No. I'm doing a studio album in November in Sydney. In October, though, we're doing a live album of the current show. That'll be in Melbourne. Actually I'm going to have three albums coming out. There'll also be a 'Best Of'. I'm not sure what they're trying to do but I hope it's the right thing." Her laugh sounds just as smoke-and-whisky cured as her speaking voice.

The single was produced in Sydney by Mark Moffatt and American Ricky Fataar. Fataar, a one-time Beach Boy (the *Holland* album), drummer with the Bump Band, also played on and co-produced Geyer's last album. Will these two be producing the new album too?

"Yes. A lot of *So Lucky* was Ricky's influence production-wise. I have a lot in common with him."

She has not always been so lucky with her producers however.

"At the time," Geyer reflects, "I was happy with all the work I'd done. At the time. Now I look back and there's a few albums I loathe, that I'd never go through again. The ones with (producer) Frank Wilson were..." She pauses, finally letting the words out in mock whisper, "... pieces of shit."

I express surprise. 1978's *Winner* is one of my favourites.

"Well the songs were fine. I've always picked songs I wanted. It's more the way we recorded that I couldn't stand. First there were studio musicians who'd been booked for their three-hour call. Then later I came in and sang over that. It was like singing a jingle. And all the horns or strings where an arranger would come in, pick up the tape in the morning and have to return a chart that night — the pizza man delivers — there was no real communication of feeling to get into and I think that ends up coming through on the record. I'm not proud of that period of my life."

I recall a similar tale Randy Crawford had recently told about how unhappy she'd been, having to leave recordings totally in the hands of a producer. Is the recording process still so little in the performer's control, even with major artists?

"Yeah, I would say so. Especially for solo artists. And not just in America. I think it's that way in every country. Unless you know what you want. It's taken me a long time. I still don't always know how to put my finger on exactly what it is that I want but I sure know what I don't want. So I can eliminate. And I've worked with bands for so long that I feel almost like a band singer so that background helps. When I work it's very much a unit. We work the arrangements out together."

"That's what makes the last album so special. It was done live in the studio. I'd call it a live album. Most of the vocal tracks were put down with the rhythm tracks. We didn't have partitions up between instruments. The tapes we ended up with maybe had a few fluffs but the spirit was more important. Direction-wise too, it's the best album I've ever done because it doesn't nail me down to one style and yet it does have a unity. Technically it's the roughest thing." Geyer rolls her eyes. "Especially for California (where it was recorded) but that's the way I want to work from now on. With that gutsiness."

Will the next album be as diverse?

"Probably. We're going to approach it the same way. With *So Lucky* I'd been preparing — so called — for about a year and ended up doing songs I'd found a month before. So I'll see what comes up around the time we're due to record. It'll capture where I'm at at that time."

So there's no thought of tailoring the record for a specific market?

"Oh no. I don't consider myself clever enough to be able to pick what a market would want from me. I knew 'Say I Love You' was a great party song but I didn't know whether it would be a big single or not. You've just got to do what comes natural and hope for the best."

How importantly does she regard commercial success then?

"It's important because it makes everything else very easy. You get nice hotel rooms, better transport. People are nice to you. But I've had a lot of things that weren't commercial successes and life goes on. I've spent a lot of years without record success, touring and getting over to people. We've established a small but really strong following and that's success to me."

The new single, for instance, is not doing very good business. The solid fans are loving it but it's not reaching the huge audience that snapped up 'Say I Love You'.

"'Love So Sweet' maybe takes more listening to. You've kind of got to be more of a hardcore R&B fanatic to like it straight off. I'd really be..." — Geyer throws her arms out wide and grimaces, miming the agony of being stretched on a rack — "... like this if I went in all the directions that people reckon I should."

Does she ever get frustrated and covet an everyday life of quiet obscurity?

"Sometimes maybe. When I'm being bugged by somebody when I go out to a restaurant or club or something. People can

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10 der moments.