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hunting & collecting



Let's get anthropological and discuss the implications of the name Hunters and Collectors, a new Australian band due out here in early November. They conjure up associations of restlessness, inquisitive tribal beginnings, something different, something individual and, in reality, on record, Melbourne's H&Cs are all of these.

Their music, stretched over their three track EP of last year and this year's debut album containing a two track EP, is simplicity itself. It usually begins with a skinny, straight-forward, up-beat guitar line from Ray Tosti and builds in pitch and tension until the whole six-piece drive to some sort of final natural climax. It's heady without being conceited or esoteric, it's sparse without being cold or ugly and there's a sense of humour in there somewhere.

Greg Perang, percussionist and one of the three lyricists (the other two being guitarist/lead vocalist Mark Seymour and keyboards player Geoff Crosby) left Picton, New Zealand, seven years ago and the band at the time of this phone interview, are in the midst of a tour in Sydney. Perang's Australian twang betrays little of his humble New Zealand heritage. But forget accents why did the band start up, was it a jumping on the funk bandwagon?

"No I get really annoyed when we're called contrived. Our only influences were the Talking Heads, who Mark liked and I really liked the Pop Group. We were playing here before most of the funk bands started playing in England. I came back from England and I used to be a drummer and I said to Mark that I just wanted to play percussion as I wasn't much good as a drummer. He already had these people playing with him and when I went along and started playing percussion we started working a lot on rhythm and it gave the others a chance to open out a lot more.

"When we started we were fairly amateurish and apart from a couple of the people we hadn't played that much before in groups and now that we've a lot more confidence we can put a lot more feeling into the playing."

After Hunters and Collectors' first performance in May of last year they rapidly became the band to name-drop and the

gig to be seen at. Have they subsequently managed to transcend the cult snobbishness?

"Yeah, we have a really big crossover audience now as we're doing the suburbs. But in the inner cities we do small places and so we still have a more selective audience but that's the venue more than us."

Accusations of self-indulgence have been aimed at the band: "Self-indulgence is a fairly tenuous term as you can call anything that's not directly mainstream self-indulgent. We have a distinctive sound where we work a lot off each other and we think of what each other's doing rather than just sitting there for the sake of playing."

Sparse is the operative adjective when considering the Hunters and Collectors' brand of ethnic entertainment:

"Yeah, the songs are fairly long and we like to work with plenty of space, so often there's only a thin thread that holds the sound together. It works better emotionally if you start off with something fairly sparse and build it up to some sort of climax rather than starting with a bang and ending with a whimper. It's much more stimulating to play that way too."

The band record on the White Label, a subsidiary of Mushroom Records. White Label logo and their sleeve designs are particular in reflecting Australian moods. Does that consciously extend to the music?

"It's an unconscious thing that comes out. It's a unique situation here where you've got a huge cosmopolitan population and so you're surrounded by European influences. But we'd like to be distinctly Australian, not necessarily patriotic, but rather than live a lie, we'd like to represent what goes on here rather than what goes on overseas."

The debut album, taking its name from the band, was recorded between October 81 and April of this year. With that sort of time span it must've been some sort of challenge to Sgt Peppers. Why did the album take so long?

"We started it off and put some songs down. Then, we went on tour and came back to change one song and mix it. We paid for it ourselves and so we had to tour to pay for it. Studio wise it only took us about three weeks and we were incredibly naive about recording but we wanted to do it our way."

Are you happy with the way it finished?

"To a certain degree. Obviously it came out much later than we wanted and it's still a bit flat in places. We've just done some recording with Mike Howlett who's worked with the Gang of Four and with him we took our fold-back system into the studio so we could all work off each other by just listening to what each other was doing rather than listening off earphones. So the stuff we've just recorded is more powerful and alive. But for our album and EP we used headphones and it just doesn't work for us because of the way we build our songs."

Has the album surprised people who expected only funk by numbers?

"Yeah, as the whole funk thing came about because we're very rhythmic. If you listen to the bass lines on the album they're not very funky, they're more in line with the things that PiL or the Velvet Underground have used where you get the basic feel and work over the top of it. We're a lot more eclectic than people like to think and with the new material especially there's a lot more pathos and emotion."

Hunters and Collectors are just beginning.

George Kay

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LOOK

5 STARS NO SWEAT!

MIDGE MARSDEN BAND: 12 Bars
From Mars (Peak Records)

And this is one of the best musical surprises of the year.

Live, The Midge Marsden Band is a lovely, raunchy, rough-and-ready, rocking blues combo.

Marsden has been around the Kiwi and Aussie rock traps for years, blowing his harmonica, singing and occasionally clutching a guitar with the long line of bands that stretches right back to Barri's Breakaways in the mid-'60s.

Last year he finally made an album in his own right with his own band The Midge Marsden Connection. It was a fairly patchy collection of old blues, stage favourites plus new, rockier songs. A thin sound didn't help.

The new album is a quantum leap. Recorded in Auckland's Harlequin studio under the producership of Lee Connelly, it's nothing short of stunning.

They've moved from blues to rhythm and blues — and rhythm and blues with a fire, a sway and sweet melody, we're all probably just not prepared for.

The opening Carry My Blues Away has the raunchy rocky sound down pat, as has the beefy I Wanna Be With You.

Track four side one, and Hard Town, penned by Marsden and guitarist Michael Farrell, is prime knee-jerk boogie, steaming along on a surging wave of guitars and tight bass and drums.

One Wheel in the Sand, up next, is the one to stand us all on our heads, though. From the pen of keyboards player Liam Ryan, it's a sad ballad of magnificent proportions. The sort of song either Tom Waits or Randy Newman — sometimes they're not that far apart — would be proud to

Colin Hogg
on rock albums

rest their voices on.

As it is, Marsden turns in a wonderful performance as the song surges to a peak with a stirring saxophone solo from Dennis Mason.

Even after that, side two stands as the stronger.

Starting with Wayne Mason's Shooting in the Dark, a strong mid-paced rocker lifted by some sneaky Dire Straits guitar from Farrell, the side just goes from strength, stretching all the remaining three tracks out to five minutes plus.

Someone Else's Cars — another winner from Ryan — rumbles in on a Bo Diddley drum pattern from Ross Burge and uncurls one of the best choruses of an album full of good choruses.

The album's magnum opus, Don't Stand in Corners/Ask that Mountain, swirls in on a piano phrase Split Enz's Eddie Rayner would be proud of before it takes to the air on the thrust of John Dodd's bass guitar.

This is the track that really leaves the roots behind, developing as it does, into a piece of singular beauty and a showpiece for Ryan's wonderful keyboard textures.

Finally, Blue Murder, a slinky R&B piece of the sort Ry Cooder would be most fond. Sax from Dennis Mason and acoustic guitar from Lee Connelly shimmer alongside Farrell's slide guitar.

A marvellous album, no question. Terrific songs, exciting and successful excursions into new musical areas, stand-out performances from everyone in this fine band and great sound from Messrs Connelly and engineer Steve Kennedy.

Five stars — no sweat.

MIDGE MARSDEN BAND

NEW ALBUM

12

BARS FROM MARS

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