

Creative success is largely measured in term of self. Self-control, self-criticism and especially self-confidence. Alastair Riddell has learned a lot about these things in the past couple of years, especially the last-mentioned attribute. Right now, he exudes an infectious enthusiasm, has a highly creditable album in the can and will soon be playing live again.

A sharp contrast to the very jaded figure of 1979-1980, who seemed to have hit a low spot in his music, was lacking inspiration and seriously considering tossing the whole thing in. So what brought about the change?

A little overseas experience turned out to be just what was needed to recharge the batteries. Riddell packed his bags and headed first for Los Angeles, with the aim of eventually continuing on to Britain. As it turned out, he stayed in LA.

"If I hadn't gone overseas, I probably would have got out of music. I found America a very stimulating place, for all its faults. There's so much energy there, as there is in the UK. Because of the size of those places, the people, the exchange of views, I came back here with a tremendous amount of that energy in me and wanting to do something with it.

"The temptation to give up here was very great, because I didn't feel that I was going anywhere creatively and for me the writing side was of paramount importance. I'm not saying that I don't enjoy performing live, because I do. But if I don't feel the music I'm writing is good, then I'm not interested in performing."

The decision to stay in LA came after a chance meeting with an American musician in an LA music store, where Riddell had been trying out some guitars. A couple of days later, he agreed to form a band, playing original material with a strong bias towards Britain. The local press labelled them a mod band, since this was the time when mod music was undergoing a revival in the States, spearheaded by the Knack (does anyone remember...?).

"It wasn't a very fair label, but we weathered through that and were getting good reviews," Riddell recalls. "You don't get much money in LA, but we played the Whisky A Go Go, which is great the first couple of times, but after that it becomes just like anywhere else.

"The big thing is to build up a following, because then people take notice of you, the record company people hear about you and start coming along to the shows. It is an industry, it has lawyers, managers, all these people are scratching other people's backs. If you can get people who have clout behind you, suddenly all these doors open, the money starts to flow and particularly with the amount they charge in American recording studios, you need that money to make a single."

But after six months the band split and Riddell took up an offer from the ex-20/20 drummer to form a more experimental group. This band actually recorded an album.

"I wasn't particularly happy with it. I think I could have done a better production job myself. But it was very good for me, from a producing point of view. If I hadn't had that experience I couldn't have come back here and produced my own record. I learned how to get a guitar sound or a synthesiser sound or a vocal sound, just the general procedure of the studio. The engineer was also very clued up about synthesisers and I learned how to use them by talking with him and experimenting."

But in the end, Riddell had to come home. As he says, LA "got to him."

"There's a pressure and a tension there that you only discover when you've lived there for a while. You read about the killings and the rapes, the mass murderers who make the Yorkshire Ripper look like an amateur. There was a shooting just down the road from the apartment where I was staying and that was considered a good neighbourhood. I just couldn't stick it anymore."

So home he came just before Christmas 1980, with a handful of new songs and a head bursting with ideas. Longtime musical partner Steve Hughes was most enthusiastic and the two set about recording some of the new material.

Some tracks were laid down last year, but the only one that emerged was the single 'Zero', a much-underrated and whimsical little number about interplanetary love. Some 15 new songs were written with an album in mind, plus three or four left over from the American experience. Recording proper for the album didn't start till last February, when Riddell and Hughes went into Mandrill. They financed the sessions them-



selves and worked right through till July. The result is an LP entitled *Positive Action*, coming your way soon on WEA.

"It took us quite a long time to record it, but we didn't suffer this time as I think I suffered with my second album, because the idea was there from the beginning. The songs, the basic direction we were heading in and the feeling for them were there. We took a lot of time because we wanted to be careful that we didn't just slap them all down and come out with something that was rushed.

"It's great for recording here, because you can get studios for reasonable rates. In America, it would have been financially impossible."

Steve Garden plays drums on two-thirds of the tracks, though drum machines are also used. Hughes plays bass, but the synthesiser is the dominating instrument. Riddell plays most of the keyboards himself, assisted by Andrew Hagen and Paul Crowther. Is he worried about possible negative reaction to an LP with a strong 'electronic' bias?

"I do find there is a certain negative attitude here towards synth music. I don't think it's financial, because you can buy cheap keyboard instruments and do a hell of a lot with them if you buy a few effects pedals and things like that. I'm not out to make a religion out of synthesisers, but I find it hard to believe that people are still arguing about them, because they are a genuine instrument, just like the guitar or violin or whatever. I think we're living in an age that is highly technological and it's no wonder that the music is reflecting that."

The three numbers that survived from the American trip are 'Zero', which has been re-recorded and will be re-released as a single, 'Futura' and 'I Saw The World'. The latter has a naggingly familiar refrain and a lovely chorus. It speaks about travel and the ultimate need to return to things familiar.

"I don't know how that one is going to work stylistically. I put it on because I liked the song. It represents something I felt personally. Most of the songs have changed considerably since I got back, but some of the ideas have worn very well, in fact they seem just as current now as when I wrote them."

Of the newer songs, several are most impressive. 'Do You Read Me' is an impressive opener, with crashing synth percussion and could be a killer on stage. 'Let Her Know' reminds me of the Cars and will be the next single. 'Have A Heart' is one of Riddell's best-ever vocals, intense and nerve-racking. 'We All Take Off' has some fine classical synth motifs and a chorus that demands a singalong. Riddell says it's more representative of where he's headed. The jaunty title song sums up the man's attitudes these days. He has eight more songs which will be part of the live set and are still unrecorded. Public reaction will determine their future.

"I suppose this album is fairly romantically inclined. I tend to write about things from certain stimuli within myself, so a

lot of the tracks are fairly personal."

I remark that Riddell's best work seems to deal with darker emotions.

"Yes, there's a sort of ambivalence in songs like 'We All Take Off' and 'Futura' ... a mixture of sweet and sour. I think that's deliberate. Some of the new stuff is even more like that. It's quite up in energy, almost the sort of thing people could dance to, but it still has that dark tinge. I find it quite exciting, that mixture of positive and negative qualities. I think it's more real if you can touch on that raw edge."

The most common reaction Riddell has had to the album so far is that it needs two or three listenings before its strengths become apparent.

"Generally, I'm not trying to jump out and whack anybody on the head with it. It's quite intentional that the songs will creep up slowly on you. I like that approach, personally. I think if it comes out and whacks you on the head immediately, you get sick of it fairly quickly."

Riddell also spent some time in Britain last year. Having travelled and come home, how does he see the local scene?

"In countries like America and Britain, the incentive is there to work hard, both with a band and as a writer. I think the problem in this country is once you start to do reasonably well and people like you and you've had all this inspiration ... after a while it starts to dissipate. It's not going to develop very much further unless you go overseas. A lot of bands think of 'overseas' as Australia. I think they should try somewhere like the UK. It's very tough to make ends meet there, but there's something in the air ... a certain ethos ... it rubs off on you."

"But I still think the depth in New Zealand music, particularly for the size of the country, is really amazing. When I left, there were a lot of bands operating in Auckland that you could have taken to LA and they would have been a hell of a lot better than many of the bands that were playing there and getting noticed."

"Maybe there's not enough tension or pressure here. Before I went overseas, I was annoyed that there wasn't the stimulation here, that people didn't seem to care, didn't put enough money into making local records, encouraging local artists. But the size of the country does have a lot to do with it and there are very positive things here as far as lifestyle is concerned. I prefer to think that if I want stimulation I can go overseas and come back here and that's the way I approached this album, making it locally with the energy I'd got from overseas."

"I think another problem here is that people in the music business are very secretive. If they've got a good idea, they get closed off and don't want other people to know what they're doing. One of the reasons that things work so well in the UK, for instance, is that there's a big pool of ideas and people. They share their ideas, talk to each other and the whole effect is to create that energy."

Riddell has returned to live work with Hughes, drummer Simon Hannah and two keyboards players, Greg Barlett and Kerry Lamb. Barlett comes from a classical background and Lamb is a recording engineer at Mascot.

They've started in a low-key fashion, playing some dates at Retro and other selected venues, including Hamilton's Hillcrest.

"We're not going all out to play everywhere, because we don't want to get jaded, which is one of the problems of touring. We're lucky, because nobody in the band is reliant for their income on the music. We'll let things take their own course and I think the songs will grow from that as well. If you go on the road and you're working all the time, I think most people in bands would agree that it's very difficult to write."

We briefly recall the Space Waltz days. Riddell agrees that the glam rock image got out of control and started to rule his life, finally stifling the creative flow. The cover of his second album, where he wore an ultra-conservative three-piece suit, was a deliberate attempt to bury that image for good. How does he feel about himself now?

"I feel I'm completely in control of what I'm doing and I feel that if I hadn't gone overseas I probably wouldn't have ended up with that insight into myself, the ability to do that."

*Mankind seems bent on disarray
With millions suffering every day,
So I've come back,
I saw the world...*

Duncan Campbell

Rocky Sharpe

and the replays

Features The Single
Shout Shout
(Knock Yourself Out)

Put On Your Dancin' Shoes
and Get Ready To Party!!!