

The warning had come through that Cocker was very wary of the press, that I wasn't to question him on any of the drugs or booze-sodden periods of the seventies. I hadn't really intended to but I was certainly curious about his current state of health. Was he fit? Articulate? Coherent even? Instead, the Joe Cocker who met *RIU* in the sunny hotel lounge overlooking the harbour was anything but a mumbling derelict. Gentle, even gracious, he talked quietly and amiably about his career.

Less bloated than past photos suggested, his modest frame nonetheless seemed faintly incongruous in a surfboard company's promotional sweatshirt. The thinning hair and lined face don't hide his 38 years and, like his famous stage mannerisms, the hands are constantly in motion: fiddling with a cigarette or dead match, scratching his sparse beard or simply fluttering to emphasize a comment. And while we sat around a coffee table, over there, keeping just apart yet staying well within earshot, was Joe's tour manager.

We began by chatting about various tracks on his new album, *Sheffield Steel*, and the editor showed him Ken William's laudatory review. Cocker pronounced it 'pretty fair' but winced at Ken's observation that "for a while it looked as if Cocker would remain one of his period's rather more pathetic visible casualties." Then he simply shrugged. He'd obviously read many such comments before.

He was relaxed and in a mellow mood. This was his fifth visit to "Australasia — if you'll forgive the term. I get off down here. Things run pretty smoothly, a lot smoother than they do in Europe."

And the audiences?

"Great. They're getting more mixed all the time. I have this group for whom I'm a little bit of a legend but I'm always taken with the number of young kids. A lot seem to be growing up with their parents or older brothers listening to my music so

they just sort of fall into it. These days there don't seem to be many white blues singers about. When we played London recently, Eric Burdon and Chris Farlowe turned up. I flipped out. I'm not the only one who's still alive." He laughs at the thought, then continues. "There's not much of the blues in modern music. Maybe these kids have a leaning towards the soul element."

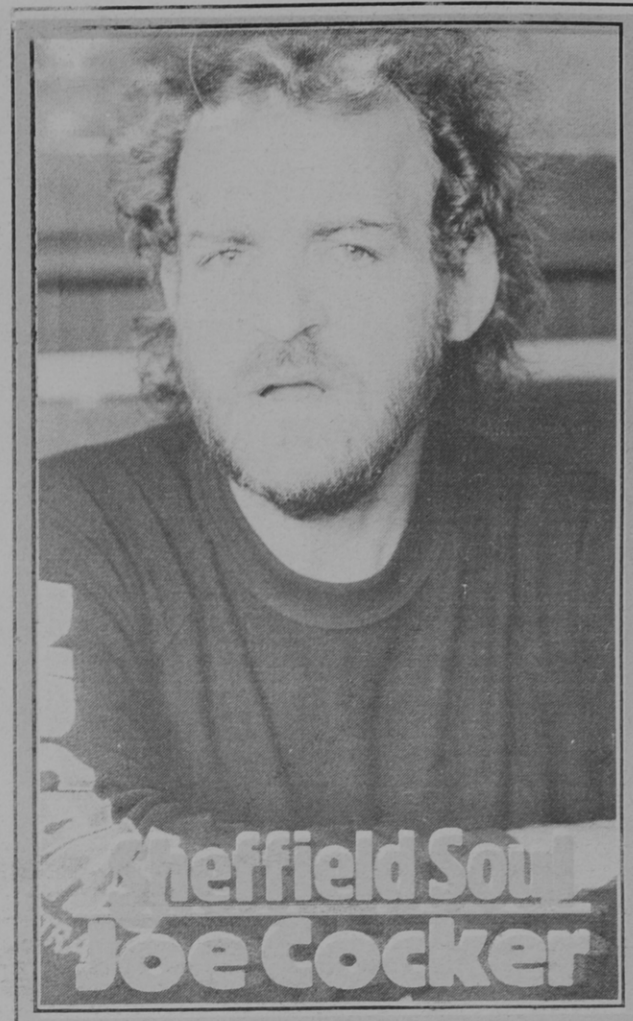
Does he listen to much of the new rock music then?

"To be honest I don't. Maybe I should. Y'see I don't have any offspring like Pete Townshend. Maybe if I had a kid who was listening to Haircut Number Nine or whatever then I'd know what was going on. But the fact is I don't hang around people who listen to new wave music. If something on the radio made me go 'Wow!' then I'd go out and buy it but nothing has really made me spring up yet." He pauses and almost seems to shake his head. "And there's so much about. God almighty just the number of new labels around in Britain is staggering, let alone the bands. When I was back in London last year (Cocker has lived in America for the past decade) we went to see some group — I forget who — but I wasn't impressed at all. It was in some pub, this latest rage of every wave. I don't want to sound square but there was just no emotion there. Rock without the soul."

But surely his using Sly Dunbar, Robbie Shakespeare and cohorts on *Sheffield Steel* is a contemporary move in itself?

"Right. When Chris (Blackwell, Island Records owner/producer) first called me and suggested it I was totally unaware of who they were. When Chris told me about them, that they'd worked with Marianne Faithful and Grace Jones I went 'Oo bluddy'ell; I'm not sure about this.' But when I met those guys — they're beautiful cats, all of them. They deliberately un-reggaeified themselves for me and kept it hard-hitting R&B."

Cocker rolls his eyes and grins. "I mean them working with



Grace — that's what scared me half to death. We did two tracks together on spec and then it worked out from there. And Nassau's a nice place to record."

As well as the current album success, Cocker's just scored his first ever number one single in the US: a duet with Jennifer Warnes of the theme from the movie *An Officer and A Gentleman*. Is there to be a follow-up?

"Not really. It was an isolated thing, for a movie. But I would like to do more duets. The other day my manager called Aretha up. Apparently she'd heard the single and said she'd do a song with me anytime. It's been a longtime dream of mine to do a duet with her. Or Ray Charles. I'd love that. We've talked about it with TV people. The idea is for a special, if Ray was up for it. He'd sing me under the table though."

What about the financial boost from a number one hit?

"Well maybe. Like in the US I've been doing a bar circuit — big bars, a thousand seaters — but I'd become more a cultist thing. Maybe this summer it'd be nice to do some big festivals or something."

Joe smiles. Perhaps his semi-allusion to the old Woodstock days was unconscious, but it's there just the same. I begin to ask whether he often reflects on the extreme twists in his career, how the first heady successes were followed by ... he cuts me off and picks up the *RIU* review and reads out with a grin.

"... and then the 'pathetic visible casualty' department. You can never say that'll never happen again. You just try to stay on top of things, like everybody else. But there's no way you can guarantee it. I don't let things get to me as much. Well, once in a while I do." He casts a sheepish look at his tour manager. "But I try not to. It saves a lot of wear and tear."

Are there any of his recordings that he regards with special pride, that he sees as a standard to measure the others against?

"To be honest, *With A Little Help From My Friends*. But back then we had the time and the money. That took two years but as a measure of quality I still think it's the best record I've ever made. These days the time and money pressures are much greater. You can't just redo songs in different ways with different bands, spend a quarter of a million dollars on a couple of songs. People don't throw advances around like they used to. You can't afford to waste that sort of money. It's tougher now."

And is the voice holding up to the pace and the pressures?

Joe is lighting his second cigarette of the interview. "I still can't stop this filthy habit. I think we've only pulled out of one show on this tour. In Germany. But that was just not getting a night off in two weeks. The shallow end is when I've been partying too much. There's no special procedure for taking care of it." He belches and takes another sip of his beer. "But when I'm on form I'm on form."

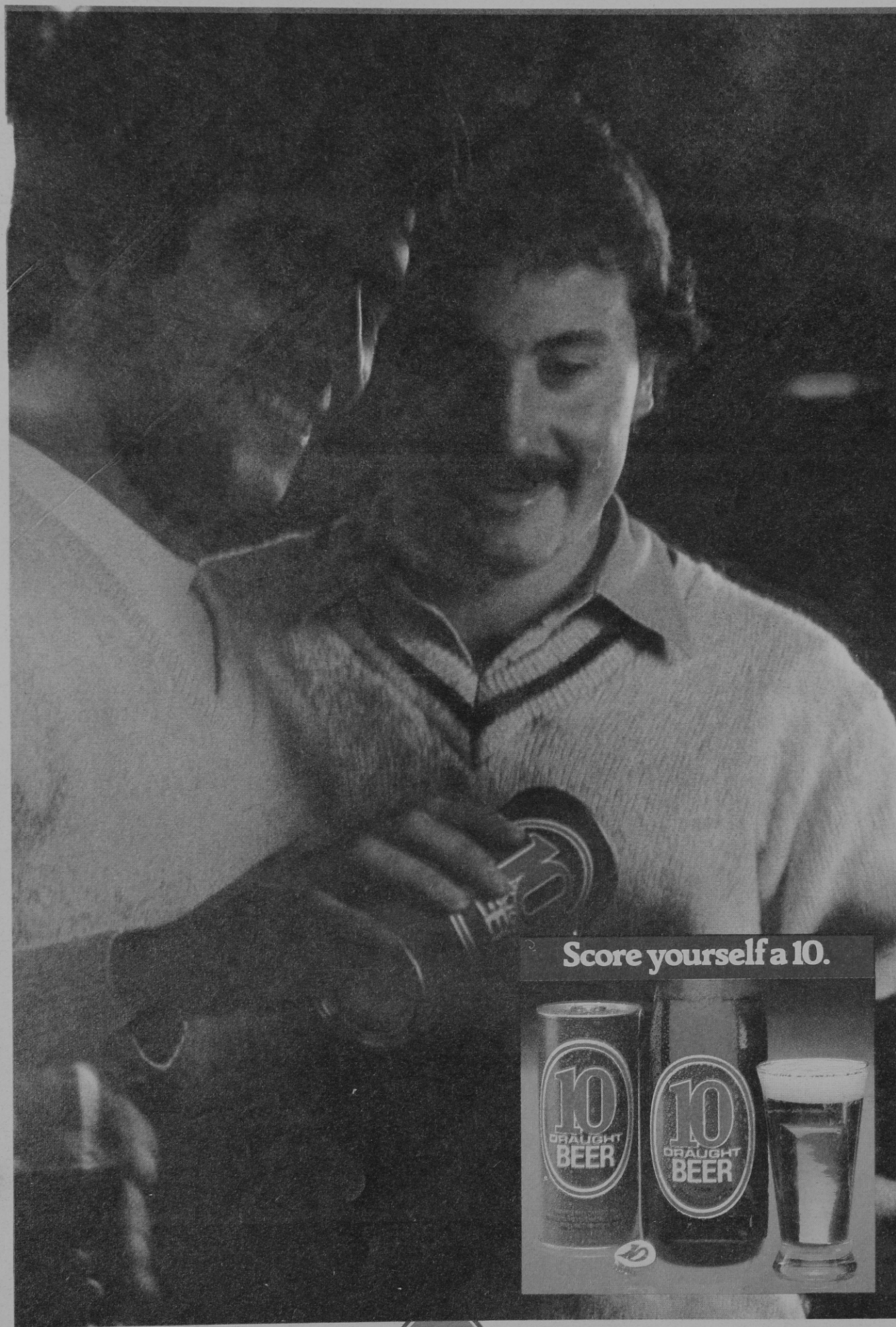
That night Auckland Cocker fans were able to check out his form at the Logan Campbell Centre. And he was right about his audience. They ranged from well in their forties to kids of first year high school. Of course Joe's voice has suffered considerably over the years. It was never less than rough but it once used to be a lot richer and more flexible. These days he can't reach the top of his range at anything less than full throttle and then the notes won't hold. Yet after 18 years of singing he can still summon up vocal passion, albeit somewhat tattered. He remains almost totally without a sense of stage command; when not singing he simply looks bewildered by what is going on around him.

The female backup singers were fine but the band did not serve Cocker well. They lumbered through the greatest hits capably enough — which is what the adoring crowd had come for — but on subtler numbers such as Marvin Gaye's 'Inner City Blues' the crass HM guitarist's inadequacies were pitifully obvious. The two keyboards tended to cancel each other out rather than complement. Only the sturdy rhythm section kept things alive. A comparison of the band's performance of songs from *Sheffield Steel* with the album cuts made the shortcomings quite obvious, something Cocker had virtually acknowledged at our interview earlier in the day:

"There's no real way we can get the road band to get the album's sound. I mean Chris Blackwell came to hear us in Paris and he didn't like our version of 'Ruby Lee'. I mean he's very Rastafarian natured y'know. But I never pressure the band to play different. I mean you can't play like Rastafarians if you're not."

During the course of the interview I came to like and respect

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