

Life in the Garden



When an Auckland band manager heard RIU were running a feature on Christchurch music he laughed.

"What for?" he asked. Even natives of the Garden City admit it's going through a slump at the moment. There are more Dunedin bands recording for Flying Nun Records than local ones, it seems.

Christchurch music has always depended on the existence of one good venue. The seminal Club Da Rox in Mollet St, Wayne Manor, and perhaps even last year's Pee Jays all had healthy numbers of young bands coming through.

The Gladstone Hotel was crucial from 1979-81. In 1981, bands were coming through the early week specials to headline late week. It was a good system. But it was the punters who destroyed the Gladstone — there was violence, the papers wrote of "riots" outside. The brewery got worried, management changed and eventually the Cowboys became resident and redecorated the place. The Gladstone's superb atmosphere is no more. The "New Gladstone" looks like a Texas brothel. The Cowboys didn't cut it there, so now they're looking for a new resident band.

The Gladstone's successor, the Star and Garter, is hopeless. It's small, modern and has a bend in it so a large proportion of the crowd can't see the band. Still, it's the best original bands have got. The Hillsborough has always been a more mainstream pub. It also has a poor atmosphere.

The presence of a single very good band has also been helpful. The Clean and Dance Exponents were each the centre of their own healthy scenes last year. That's the other problem. Bands don't stay in Christchurch. They move out or break up.

Still, some fine music (Pin Group, Mainly Spaniards) came out of Christchurch last year and I'd far rather see any band with a Christchurch crowd around me than an Auckland one.

It might seem slow there at the moment, but that's always deceptive. Christchurch is less industry-orientated than Auckland, there's a bigger underground. Sooner or later someone's going to break the surface and then watch out.

Russell Brown

Wastrels (L-R): Richard Hlavac (drums), Jonathon Brinson (bass), Peter Cooke (guitar), Anton Jenner (vocals).



Meet the Wastrels

Christchurch's Next Big Thing will be the Wastrels.

That's pretty generally agreed. They're probably the only band with the right balance between mass appeal and integrity around at the moment.

If it happens it won't have been a Dance Exponents-style rush to stardom. The Wastrels' rise to the top will have been an unusually twisted one.

The early part of last year was a good time for the city's pop kids — the Exponents were just getting

big, the Wastrels shared many a bill with them and seemed to be set to follow them to success.

But something went wrong. The Exponents buggered off to be stars and Jordan Luck's favourite band, the Wastrels, was left behind playing to diminishing crowds. A Wastrels gig could be a depressing place to be — what a paradox!

A second place in the Battle of the Bands brought a trip to Auckland and recording time at Harlequin, but after the fuss had died down they still hadn't cracked it in their home city.

It seems people got tired of going to see the Wastrels have a good time and fall over and laugh and play out of time and get pissed and ...

The main problem with all the onstage hilarity and sloppiness was that it hid the band's main strength — a batch of great Beatles-type pop songs.

But things have changed a bit recently. They've got a manager and, with perfect confidence, are shopping around record companies for the best record deal. They already have a track on the new Propeller compilation.

"For a long time we were just fucking around," Jenner explains. "We were doing it mainly as a fun thing, an extension to being on the dole. But now I'd like to get a bit more serious and I think everyone feels that way."

"But it's still going to be fun. Like I've always said, when it stops being fun that's when I'll stop being in a band."

Guitarist Peter Cooke, the main songwriter, feels the songs and the way the band plays them, are improving markedly.

"We're spending a lot more time arranging things, there's a lot more

input of ideas. My songwriting's maturing."

"It seemed to me that it used to be quite tightly tied to a Beatles-type formula but it's more Wastrels now," Jenner adds.

"The majority of the songs are love songs ..." Cooke begins.

"Lust songs, songs of jealousy ..." Jenner interjects, smiling.

"Yeah — the word love is kept tightly under control, but they're love songs," Cooke finishes.

The band has been rebuilding a following this year with regular Saturday afternoon gigs at the Hillsborough. It's called "The Wastrel Show" and it's very casual — anyone can get up and have a go. It's great fun.

Of late they've had their own South Island tour and they'll be supporting the Troggs around the island. They play Auckland's Mainstreet next month.

But all this won't change their values about playing, they hope. They are a good-time band, they enjoy playing, people should enjoy seeing them.

Are they worried about falling into the pub circuit 'tight 'n' ragey' (and tedious) stereotype?

"We're a ragey band. You can rage to us if you want to, but it's not so restrictive that you have to," Cooke says. "I mean, I don't write songs for people to dance to."

"Some bands are designed as dance-pub bands and there's very little else. We're not one of those bands."

In the near future the Wastrels' aim is to put a single in the charts. Beyond that, things aren't so clear, but the usual aim of getting overseas doesn't figure particularly highly.

"I think New Zealand is just big enough and small enough to just travel around as a sort of road-show, if it could work that way without people getting too tired of you. You know, just make enough money to live, have a good time, get some recognition from people. You don't have to go overseas," Jenner says.

"My aim is to put out a record like 'Gutter Black'. It was released years ago but people are still listening to it and thinking it's good. That's what it's about for me," says Cooke.

Very old-fashioned ideas in some ways. But then the Wastrels

don't have a synthesiser. They also don't sound like anybody else at the moment.

While the Wastrels are together, being a Wastrel will be "a way of life".

So what does being a Wastrel mean?

Anton: "Just being totally into pleasure without regard for the consequences, I suppose."

They haven't changed that much. RB

Radio Radio

In a country where radioplay is not even a consideration for most artists, student radio has a particularly valuable role to play.

The preaching is to the converted as often as not, but the university stations give local bands another medium, one that doesn't require people to make the effort of going to a gig, of buying a record. One that may well encourage people to do these things.

"We're trying to lay our hands on as many local demo tapes as possible," says the boss of Canterbury's Radio U, Michael Higgins. "And we need copies of all independent singles. Bands who go out of their way to give us their records and tapes will get airplay."

Bands like Ballon D'essai, who had their tapes playlisted on the station for months before they were put on record, know the value of that airplay. The station also played the first Dance Exponents demo.

Radio U began in 1976 and Higgins has been involved with it since 1978. This will be his last year at university and he'll be completing it and running the station without the help of a bursary.

The station plays a wide variety of music. And white middle-class boot boys ringing up and abusing the DJs for daring to play reggae won't change that.

The station will hopefully give its usual boost to the local music scene.

"Christchurch is just missing a couple of really good bands at the moment," Higgins says.

One band he can see standing out as the year goes on is John Markie's new band, the Chance. RB

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