

The first Kiwi Animal interview should never have happened. Brent Hayward suggested I meet him and Julie Cooper in the upstairs bar of the South Pacific Hotel. It was humid outside, but in the bar, near the kitchen was hellish. I began the interview with the best of intentions. Something, I don't know what, went very wrong. The right questions got incoherent answers: forced recourse to the wrong questions just made things worse. Brent and Julie contradicted each other, argued, all the while the gap between interviewer and subject widened.

By mutual agreement, it was decided to try again, this time with just Brent, me and pen and paper.

The Kiwi Animal began life as the Real Theatre in Blondie's Cafe in August last year. As the name has changed, so has the format. They have also performed as the Blue Green Browns.

For about two years, Brent and Julie lived in a single room in central Auckland. From that room they worked on their own projects. He was Smelly Feet, she wrote and sang. It was only natural that they should eventually work together.

They gathered all the bits and pieces of their past and present endeavours into an exhibition called 'Making the Monster' at Closet Artists Gallery. The monster had been formed and could now be dispensed with.

The pair now live with others in a house out of the city. The room remains for work and work stays at the room. But Brent still finds it a strain when their work intrudes on their personal lives.

"I don't like to have to talk to other people all the time about



## Brent & Julie

what we're doing. I find that boring."

When it is time for work there is plenty. Neither is on the dole, Julie has a part-time job, Brent has two and then they have to be their own publishers, promoters, advertisers, booking agents, designers and record company.

Last month the pair released a five song EP called *Wartime* on Brent and Julie Records. Brent is reluctant to talk about the recording and the process of getting the record out. That's not important.

On stage, the Kiwi Animal sings, plays, talks to itself and to the audience. Most of the performances are scripted to begin with, but will change according to the mood of the audience, or the moods of the performers themselves.

"It's a confrontation, but it's definitely also entertainment," Brent explains.

"We work hard when we play — sometimes too hard. I can't think properly sometimes. Sometimes I just don't know how to communicate properly with my mouth."

Pieces also change when Brent and Julie begin singing or reciting them at home, or on the street.

The talk turns to the duo's (especially Brent's) apparent bitterness towards this country's rock musicians. A recent gig poster featured cartoons of band members talking among themselves, planning to steal the Kiwi Animal's idea of using costumes on stage, marvelling over how 'simple' the duo's act was, 'anyone could do it'.

A good-guy figure (presumably Brent) takes the band to task, telling them there are too many people playing music, that they should clear out for someone with something to give.

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It's been just over two years since Sharon O'Neill left our shores to work for the big market in Australia and beyond. Since then she's been back for the occasional holiday but only once to perform — a couple of songs on the Royal Variety bash. Right now she's on the phone from Sydney, enthusiastic about her soon-to-be-released album and the consequent chance of a tour back home.

"I'm putting a band together at the moment and we hope that at the end of the month or so we do in Australia we can hop across and do a tour. Hopefully that'll be in three or four months. Partly it'd be to promote the album but also because we really want to. It's been a long time."

O'Neill has been, as she puts it, 'flat stick' preparing for the album's release this year, in fact ever since she got back from L.A. where it was recorded between July and September of last year. Why L.A.?

"It came about through John Boylan. (Boylan is an in-house producer for Epic/CBS who made his name in the mid seventies, specializing in country rock. He was instrumental in forming the Eagles by hiring the members for Linda Ronstadt's backing group when he was producing her.) John quite often comes down to this part of the world. He'd got hold of a couple of my albums and he was touring with one of the bands he produces. He flew down to Wellington to meet with me for one day so his interest was definitely there. We really clicked and since that time, late 1980, we've been communicating a lot. He's been guiding and advising me in all sorts of ways right up until we did the album."

Did Boylan have a specific approach or sound in mind?

"Not really. He gave me a lot of freedom. He virtually threw it all over to me. Obviously he would guide me if it got out of hand or was impractical — which wasn't that often — but basically he wanted me to have the reins so that I could get what I want. Which I haven't ever really had before. It's amazing to go to another country where you really are on your own and then to be given complete freedom. Normally in that sort of situation you tend to step back even more."

O'Neill's previous album *Maybe*, was also recorded when she was a stranger in a new country — Australia — but this time it went a lot easier.

"Firstly, I knew who I was working with. I'd known John

## Recording in the USA



Sharon O'Neill and John Boylan.

long before the album, outside the studio. And also we didn't just leave it up to a bunch of session musicians which happened last time. Brent (Thomas, her guitarist and husband) and I took care of practically all the guitars and keyboards which made it so much more our own input."

At the moment O'Neill is reluctant to mention details of who else plays on the album, preferring to make them known closer to the album's release date. (She did, however, say that Tom Scott plays sax on the single.)

"Basically I wanted to avoid getting off the plane in L.A. and being thrown in with a bunch of hot session players. I've always really liked working with a band and that's something John helped me create. The people we did use we rehearsed with a lot so by the

time we got into the studio we had that band feeling. There wasn't that alienated situation of slicked up players coming in and being tossed a chart and doing their bit and bugging off. I'm really pleased about that and I think the feeling's on the record."

"I already had enough songs written for the album when we got there but several weeks went by before recording and in that time I wrote four or five new ones, all of which got recorded. I think three of them are on the album. So I think the environment up there was very creative for me."

Obviously O'Neill would like the album to do well in the States — "But whether it will or not is totally in the lap of the gods. And it's only my first album in America."

Peter Thomson

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