

Remember: John Cale has been doing this sort of thing for a long time. In relative terms, a very long time.

John Cale is a big, slightly greying Welshman with a taste for beer, a firm handshake and a malicious sense of humour. His voice is rich and deep, the accent Welsh-cosmopolitan.

He has long since lost interest in talking about himself. He'd rather tell you about other musicians, about the things around him. He does interviews, he's realistic about his obligations.

You're playing on this tour without a band. Was that by accident or design?

"By design. I was surprised at what kind of reaction there was to not having a band, because the last time I toured in Europe was with a five-piece band and before that with the Spedding band. So it was important to find out what Australian and New Zealand audiences were like. And it's amazing. There's a lot going on."

"The solo show is just a different way of presenting the material. You give people a personal view of the songs. You can hear the words and relate the words to the melody and the music."

So it's the same concept as *Music for a New Society*, which was very vocally based?

"Very. I mean, that was entirely the notion with that album."

In that way you seem to be moving away from John Cale the musician towards John Cale the poet.

"Well, that's a polite way of putting it. One of the things that *Music for a New Society* forced me to do was come to terms with the lyrics."

Do you think it substantially improved your lyric writing?

"I think it did, yeah, absolutely."

Does the concentration on lyrics mean a shift towards message?

"Well, the album was a level of communication that was too personal, really, for a record. It was really for a drawing room, for a one to one ..."

Did it reflect your own mood at the time?

"Well, most of the stuff that was there was improvised in the studio."

Do you consider it a depressing album?

"No. I think it's a beautiful album. The songs are beautiful, especially 'Broken Bird'. I don't like to listen to it too much but of all the stuff next to *Paris*, I think that's probably the one I do like to listen to."

Do you think it has a similar feel to that album?

"Yes. Well, there's a chamber music notion in there. I think the style of recording is too ferocious for chamber music. I mean, when you electrify ... it was meant to be a solo album and it was a solo album but there's lots of different instruments on it so it's not a recital album. What it should have been was a recital album without all those overdubs."

So why did the overdubs happen?

"Well, it's just one of those habits you get into when you're in a recording studio. You've got 24 tracks and you sit there and think, *holy shit* ... but there's no excuse for just running ragged with musical ideas."

*Music for a New Society* was recorded under quite intensive pressure. Would you consider

**"You're still better live than you are on record. You never know what's going to happen in a live performance."**

recording that way again?

"Different pressures, different pressures ..."

There's that desperation, though. One critic described it as rock'n'roll without rock'n'roll.

"Yes, I'm proud of that description."

So what does it mean to you?

"It means there's rhythm going on where you don't hear it. You can still keep that pounding going on, which is basically the rock'n'roll thing."

When you work do you have control over your creativity or is it the other way around?

"Yes I do, I assume responsibility for it. I don't believe in innocent bystanders."

But surely some of any record's success depends on it getting away on you? For instance, the difference between *Honi Soit* and *Music for a New Society*?

# CLOSE WATCH

## John Cale Keeps an Eye on Himself



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA WRIGHT

"Arguably so. But there's a forcible case for the fact that if you have a band then you can do certain things that you can't as a solo artist. And overdubbing will not replace what a band does."

"The *Sabotage* live album was entirely based on the idea that after six weeks of touring and supporting a record — like *Helen of Troy* — you end up playing the songs so much better than you do on record that you figure, well, let's record a live performance, because *that's* going

**"Split Enz — what a great band ... 'Charley'. That was a beautiful song."**

to be better.

"But unfortunately that's not true. Because you're still better live than you are on record."

You never know what's going to happen in a live performance."

I understand you've been deluged with tapes by bands hoping you'll produce them on this tour. Would you ever like to again be in the kind of position you held with Warner Brothers? To be able to record the artists you like by virtue of your job?

"That's an invidious position to be in, to be an artist and a producer. I don't like that, it's very uncomfortable. What that job did afford me was an opportunity to learn a lot about the record industry and, if I grabbed hold of something, to develop it and that's not something you can do when you're on the road."

"But there's something self-serving about the position you get into as an artist in terms of production. Because if you're working in a

company, what happens to you as an artist doesn't work in your favour as a producer and everything bad that happens to you as an artist definitely works against you as a producer."

Is that why you haven't produced anyone for a while?

"No, it's just really not exercising myself. I've been lazy."

Is there anyone you've heard who you'd like to produce?

"There are people like Beefheart, strong

characters who aren't going to fade away. And Split Enz — what a great band. I just remember this one song called 'Charley'. That was a beautiful love song."

They've changed a little since then ...

"Have they? I love the sloppy way that's recorded — it sounds like the mike was yards away from the piano. The thing about that band was that as well as the visual thing that was going on was that there were so many volatile musical ideas flying around. The thing about

**"One of the things that *Music for a New Society* did was force me to come to terms with the lyrics."**

the band that made me nervous was the punk side of them. That was like such a waste, there was so much talent that was not being considered."

On to your new album, *Hungry For Love*. You're back with a band, one that includes the two engineers on *Music for a New Society*, David Lichtenstein and David Young. Why did you choose those two?

"I just wanted to take that engineering chore

away from them so I could say 'You go over there and play that'."

Are you finding it easier working with the band?

"Yeah. They're great, they're all gentlemen. I don't know why they put up with me."

Does the band's presence mean this will be a more musically based album?

"It's a more rock'n'roll album, it's a pop album. I don't think it's *offensively* commercial, it's a very good rock'n'roll album. I'm really having doubts about it because there's maybe too much difference between one song and another. I mean, there's 'Mulberry Root Recital', which is one kind of rock'n'roll song. There's 'Magazines' — I get a lot of magazines and somebody threw all my magazines away. It's about the withdrawal of not having them around. There's a ballad, 'Where There's a Will There's a Way'."

How close to finishing it are you?

"Well, I've got to go in and do some synthesiser stuff with Eno when I get back. It'll probably be out in Europe in January and here about the middle of next year."

The above conversation was culled mainly from a Campus Radio interview with Cale, DJ and myself. It's relative sensibility in print belies its free-form nature on air. Several times Cale would answer perfectly sane questions in the manner of "Did somebody just fart?" or would set off on some apparently unrelated topic that he was more interested in talking about.

"I didn't give you too hard a time, did I?" he grins in the car on the way back to the hotel. No, but you owe me a beer.

The crowd that gathered at the Gluepot for John Cale was suitably cosmopolitan. Some spoke in intelligent clusters, others concentrated on piling up as many empties as possible while they could still reach the bar. Middle-aged bearded types fought for seats with greatcoated post-punks. A few people had probably come to hear J.J.

Things seemed determined to go well, with the Tall Dwarfs playing maybe the best they ever have. Backing tapes, instrumental prowess and audible WORDS.

Cale broke the odd flux between acts by rushing on stage, picking up his guitar and launching into 'Ghost Story'. There began the intensity that was central to this performance, a pace that had little to do with the tempo of the music. "Rock'n'roll without rock'n'roll" here for the taking.

Songs like 'Leaving It Up to You' didn't simply survive solo performance — stripped back, they drew strength from it. The only song which seemed as if it wouldn't pass the test of nakedness was Lou Reed's 'Waiting for the Man' which began in a pedestrian, arbitrary way on piano. In the nick of time, Cale perverted the melody and worked the song into perhaps the most unnerving climax of the night.

Other highlights included 'Ship of Fools', 'Guts', 'Cable Hogue', a wantonly desolate 'Heartbreak Hotel' and the beautiful 'Chinese Envoy', off *New Society*.

When Cale is on stage it's easy to see what really matters, what makes it all worthwhile. He was open, with only a pair of dark glasses for cover.

The fact that Cale had already left (reportedly well pleased) as the crowd called for a third encore wasn't really important. When the cries for more rose to drown the PA music it was obvious that Cale had already given the audience something valuable — emotion.

Some people who dealt with John Cale while he was in this country found him an insufferable egotist. Even those who had time for him found him difficult to talk to in any depth. The excitement of the whole circus has long since faded for John Cale — he's been doing it for years and doesn't really care what happens so long as it happens smoothly. He simply can't afford, either, to have his brain picked by enthusiastic would-be friends or even by interviewers. He thrives on performance, not its periphery, that's what counts.

John Cale seems particularly sane.

Russell Brown

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