

# Frontseat Driver

The funny man speaks out

The word frontman might almost have been invented for Dick Driver.

That is what he is and probably will always be regarded as. He won't be remembered for his singing or song writing but for his gangly body, his bulging eyes, his humour, for his moves.

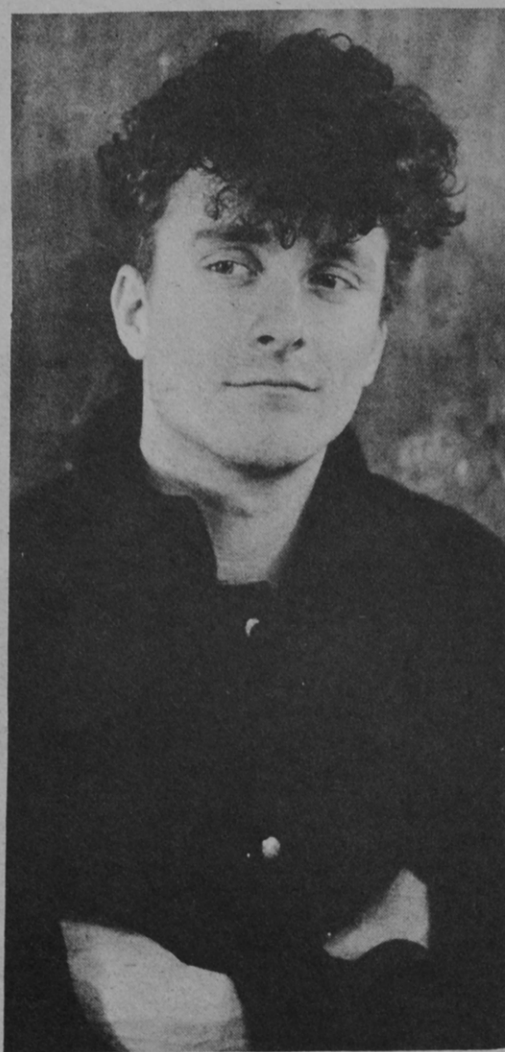
Driver's influence on other frontmen has been obvious. More than one singer has taken and reworked Driver's moves just as Driver mixed some of Tim Finn's with his own neurotic-sclerotic style. But at least Tim Finn never got told he moved like Jordan Luck ...

Driver's musical career began in Christchurch in 1977 when a friend of his brother's, Ian Costello, brought around a copy of the *Live at the Roxy* album and said he wanted to form a punk band. The 20-year-old Driver was "knocked over in a big way" by the record, and a bunch of longhairs called the Doomed (aka Johnny Abort and the Doomed) began its nine-month stint, playing for a dozen bottles of beer a night, usually. Legend has it that the band could play the entire Roxy album but Driver isn't sure about that. He does, however, admit to doing Johnny Moped's 'Hard Loving Man' four or five times in their hour-long set.

Was he doing his stage gymnastics then? "Oh yeah, more so than now. It was very physical — epileptic fits, just going berserk. There was really no thought went into it but it was a really good release for me.

"Looking back it was embarrassing because I didn't expect it to get that much publicity, for people to take that much interest."

The Doomed ended when Driver walked off stage and didn't come back one night. He went back to racing motorcycles. He hadn't learned much musically from the Doomed and didn't really want to sing again. That changed when



he saw Split Enz on the *Frenzy* tour.

"I thought, I want to do that," he says.

Next morning he was down at that perennial community centre for Christchurch musicians, CJs, and there was a sign saying "Vocalist wanted. Must not look like Simon Darke."

Two weeks later he was in Splash Alley, performing fulltime. A few months later the band was in Auckland and was called Pop Mechanix.

"Things happened so fast that we didn't really have a chance to think about it. All of a sudden, we'd arrived, we were getting taken seriously. One day in Wellington I stopped to look around and got really frightened by the whole thing. Not that we were hugely successful or anything but I couldn't go on — I was just physically unwell. I just gave them a day's notice and went

home.

"It was stupid, a really rash decision. The week after I left I wanted to come back but I wouldn't tell them because I was too proud. If I'd stayed with it everybody might have been better off, them and me."

Driver's next move was to Melbourne, to try out as singer for the Marching Girls, only to find they'd broken up when he got there. He worked in a plastics factory and went for all the auditions he could. The next local audiences saw of him was when he brought the first Hip Singles back to Christchurch. In the wake of Pop Mechanix's success with new vocalist Andrew Snoid, the Singles did well.

"It was quite a mismatch, heavy metal guitar with synthesiser. I don't think even we knew what we were doing but it was helluva good fun — just decadent."

But "the novelty wore off" and the Australians went home, leaving Driver in Hamilton with \$10 in his pocket. He decided on the spot to accept an invitation Blam Blam Blam had extended to him several months earlier to join the band as singer.

"I rang Tim (Mahon) and went up and joined the Blams without giving it a second's thought, which was really dumb. None of us really thought about it. If we had we would have seen it just wasn't going to work."

"It was mainly me and Don (McGlashan) — Tim and I got on great. Don probably didn't like my vocal interpretations of his songs because he's an amazing singer, he could run rings around me. So it was kind of pointless having me there as well as him because I wasn't contributing at all, I was just being a frontman, a funny man, which was at odds with what they were trying to write about."

"The Springbok tour was happening then and they were terribly anti-tour and it was pretty uncomfortable because I don't care for any of it — the rugby, the racism or anything."

Driver was asked to leave in the middle of the lineup's second tour, in Christchurch. He finished the tour and was left on 'Pensioner Love' on the Blam's album, *Luxury Length*.

There followed an enjoyable interlude in Christchurch with the Dick Driver Dance Band, a pick-up band that played covers by the likes of the 1910 Fruitgum Company, Gary Glitter and the Bay City Rollers. Then original Hip Singles, members, guitarist Peter Zeug and bassist Trevor O'Neill came back across the Tasman and Hip Singles Mk II was formed.

"That was pretty depressing. It was just like trying to recapture the first Hip Singles and it never really worked."

The Hip Singles are now up to Mk VII, with Driver the only constant factor and the format

is looking undeniably tired.

"Hip Singles have never really been trying to say anything. The reason I've kept it going is that I make a living out of it and I really enjoy it and there's nothing else I want to do at the moment. It's not going to last much longer."

"It's just an outlet for me. I just have to rely on other musicians to put it all together so I'm at the band's mercy in that respect. I'm just expressing myself through facial expression, body movement, singing and a few lyrics."

"But my working-class upbringing places a priority on doing it for a living. I'm not making heaps of money but I'm making a living. I'm very proud of the fact that I haven't been on the dole for years, that I'm one of the few people who can make a living out of original material."

But Driver says he'll never settle down into a Blades-type resident band playing Top 40 covers. Ever. He's also developed some firm ideas about the country's music business.

"I think it's time we got away from bigger PAs and lights and higher cover charges, the whole live thing. You're not the best live band in the country because you do more gigs than anyone else and have a bigger PA and lights."

"Bands have got to get back to the basics, the music. This 'let's get the punters in' at four or five bucks a head is despicable."

And his advice to young bands?

"What Coconut Rough have done is great. They've made a record and they've done in months what it's taken a band like the Narcs to do, well they haven't done it yet, in three years."

"My advice to any young band is to go and spend \$2000-3000 bucks and make a really good single before they tour rather than go out and tour and lose \$2000-3000."

Only in the music business could Driver, at 26 and with only four years' experience in full-time bands, be considered an old man. With the future of the Hip Singles apparently limited, people are already saying he should have a go at TV.

"TV? Yeah, that's pretty frustrating. I've had mixed reactions from the auditions I've gone for. I would really like to be an actor but that's something you can take up when you're 40. I'll stay in music until I cease to enjoy it."

He's writing more lyrics these days and would like to concentrate on his songwriting, learn a few more chords, carry on the search for the perfect musician(s) to work with. But if all else failed would this self-confessed workaholic ever settle down to a job driving trucks or shuffling paper?

"No. I think I'll always be doing some kind of wheeling and dealing. I don't know, a couple of used-car yards maybe ..."

Russell Brown

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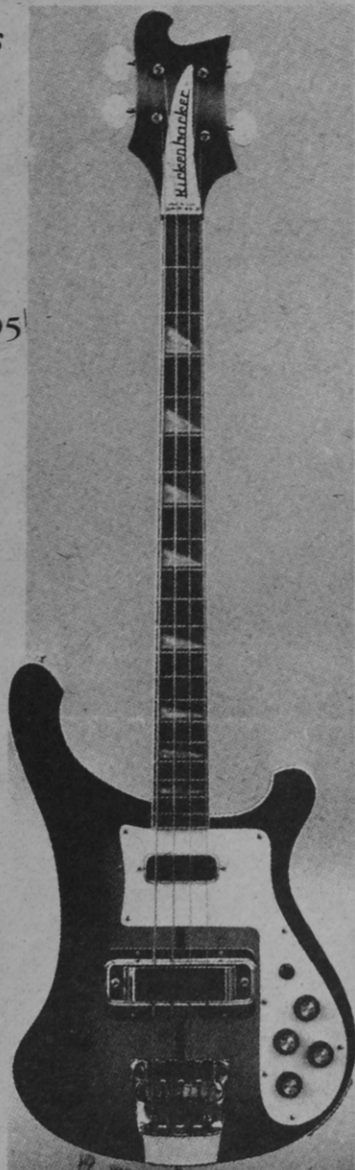
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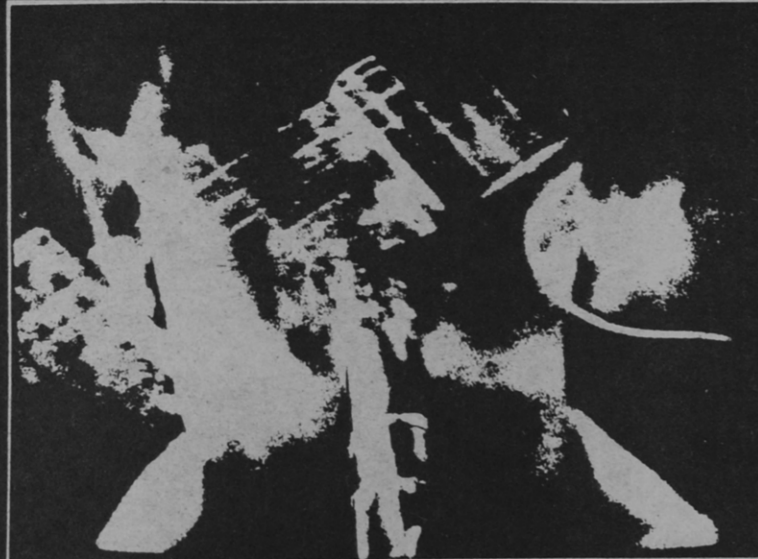
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