

Rockin' in the City That Shines, almost.

Christchurch Scene Report

Christchurch has never quite made the rest of the country sit up and notice its music scene. It's been close — the garage punk scene in the 1970s and the fact Roger Shepherd set up Flying Nun in the City That Shines in early 1981. But, even then, Dunedin dominated as the New Zealand music mecca of the South Island, with Christchurch having the odd successful band. Now Christchurch is getting its own back, having its musicians enjoy commercial success in the 1990s.

Contributing to Christchurch's day in the sun is local record label Failsafe, owned and operated by Rob Mayes. Mayes, a self-proclaimed art-collector/music fan, founded the company in the mid 1980s and released numerous compilations, EPs and albums with mixed results. Some bands disappeared — others, like the Holy Toledos, got picked up by multi-nationals, like Sony.

It was Failsafe releases of 93/94, *Avalanche* and *Goodthings* respectively, that finally attained nationwide airplay and recognition of Christchurch's indie music scene.

However, suffering from discontent at the lack of return for effort put into the label, Mayes threatened to shut it down in 1994. It was the same year Loves Ugly Children and Pumpkinhead, both previously released on Failsafe, were signed to major labels.

While Christchurch should be basking in its glory, some say the city has 'sold out' — given into commercial pressures. Others say Christchurch has just finally caught up with the rest of the world. One of the accusers is Grant McDonagh, who, in his own publication *Sunburn*, wrote: "Where it all went wrong, it was *Music Storm*, or what came after, all that *Avalanche* shit. It was like the whole of Christchurch was immersed in the most stupid, inane, phoney show biz bullshit imaginable, and music got sort of shoved under the carpet."

So, in search of truth, justice and whatever comments managed to slip into the conversation, three players in the Christchurch music scene had their say on musical politics, commercialism and the dreaded sell out.



Simon McLaren

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Simon McLaren

Loves Ugly Children Singer/Songwriter/Guitarist

1993 was a good year for Christchurch music, lots of bands, lots of venues. Then, in 1994, Loves Ugly Children and Pumpkinhead both got signed, and Failsafe threatened to close. What's happening now? Has Christchurch lost its edge?

"No, it definitely hasn't lost its edge. When all the bands played John Greenfield's wake at Warners, it was a really good display of Christchurch coming together, and the community feel of the music scene was just pulling together. There were a shitload of good bands, a complete variety of styles, and it was a genuine showcase of goodwill and a great memorial for John. After that, I felt really good about the Christchurch music scene again. It highlighted that Christchurch isn't bitchy, nor is there a lot of competitiveness, or one-upmanship. It may be there on the surface, but, when it comes down to it, everyone's really supportive."

"Personally, I've stopped going out so much over the years, but I still like to know what bands are coming through, and who's doing what, and I help support them wherever I can."

"For me, it's different because we've got busier as a band, and I have to spend more time song-writing and getting it together, rather than going out and celebrating the scene."

"If it wasn't for people like John Greenfield, and the basic network that already existed in Christchurch, then there is no way that I ever would have been able to start a band, and keep going, and feel like it was a valid thing to do. I think it's a valid means of expression, but you really have to question yourself sometimes: 'Is it worth it?' That's when you fall back on your environment for support."

When you say you question whether it's worth it, in what respect do you mean? Is it because you don't make money out of it?

"No, I'm talking about after you've been in your band for one and a half years, and you've released your cassette, or been played on RDU, and done your gigs, and you're not signed — in that limbo. Now that we've signed, I don't have to wrestle with those thoughts so much."

Some people, like Grant McDonagh, would say you don't need a lot of money, or need to jump on the commercial band wagon, to make music.

"Well, I think coming from Grant's perspective, anyone that releases a CD or prints on glossy paper is probably the enemy. I think he's just a reactionary figure against anything that has any mild success. I mean, if you are going to berate people about being able to release their music, or those that advertise in any way, then you're an idiot, basically."

Where does Christchurch fit into the New Zealand music scene?

"Well, if you're talking about touring nationally, then there's us, Pumpkinhead and Squirm. There are other bands as well, and those bands just existing is something to offer to New Zealand. Christchurch is [a] really conservative city, culturally, but it's anti-culture has a really strong element. It doesn't really matter if Auckland is sitting up and noticing what Christchurch is doing, just as long as Christchurch notices itself. Sure, it would be nice to see more independent publications and labels springing up in Christchurch, so that it can be its own entity, but it comes down to needing shitloads of money, and nobody has any."

Do the independent labels like Failsafe and Flatcity make a difference?

"Hell yes. Without those kind of organisations or labels existing no-one is going to get off that first step. You need to get released on a label with a good local feel before anything else happens."

Do you think Christchurch's music tastes are changing? Christchurch is traditionally a guitar-rock city, but now bands like Salmonella Dub and Darktower are evolving.

"Well, the diversification is good, the more the better. I mean, Christchurch was hung up in the indie, English sound

time warp for quite a while. That was pretty boring, so the more flavours the more fun. You know what I think about all this, it's that Christchurch has finally caught up."

Grant McDonagh

Musician/Passage Label/Commentator

How would you describe the Christchurch music scene at the moment?

"I've been in and out of Christchurch for a lot of years, seen a lot of different things come and go, and I think Christchurch is at least two distinct cities. There's the West side, Fendalton, Riccarton, places like that, and then there's the East side, with some of the poorest parts of the country. There's two quite distinctive cultures. There's a middle class, cum successful yuppie orientated society. Then there's a real down and out working class society. There's two distinct kinds of music associated with those two things. It seems to be that Christchurch goes through cycles, whereby one has the upper hand at different times. For the last two to three years it's been the up-market music, and the whole thing has been orientated toward that, like the *War of the Bands*, *Goodthings* and *Avalanche*. They're all sort of middle to upper class kids, with flash amplifiers, playing really safe kind of pop music."

Is it fair to bring those kinds of politics into music?

"I find it impossible not to. I don't think you can separate them."

Is Christchurch moving into a more commercial scene of music then?

"Moving out of it, [I] would say. I think that whole thing has its cycle. Maybe it will in another two to three years. I think it's exhausted itself. Out of all of those bands on *Avalanche* and *Goodthings*, none of those bands have achieved what they theoretically wanted to achieve, or have 'arrived'. None of them have made a big impact overseas, lets say."

Is commercialism in music a good or bad thing? Some would argue that money allows creative freedom.

"It depends. All you can do is look at examples of people who have gone through that whole process. I look at the those involved in the kind of post-punk thing — bands like REM, Sonic Youth. How much credibility do those bands have these days? Maybe Sonic Youth has got some, but they lose it by going to a big label. They're dealing with those people in suits and budgets, and music somewhere loses its edge. "Obviously, you need to have a roof over your head and food on the table, but a lot of people who all of a sudden get a lot of money, it starts to go up the nose, and that's not helping the creativity at all."

What's good about the Christchurch scene then?

"Particular bands, I've made a list, the likes of Trawler, Disgraceland, Rainy Taxi, Delirium Tremors, Cultivation and Leonard Nimoy, but again, that's entirely subjective. They're just bands I've seen and liked."

Are there any particular failings of the Christchurch scene?

"I don't think it's too bad as far as venues are concerned. It could do with more and better mixers, and PAs. In the last eight years that I've been back in the scene, things have been worse. The thing that does bother me is that hundreds of thousands of dollars goes through the 'Summertime' scheme, but never goes to bands doing original music. It goes to jazz or classical bands that aren't playing original music."

As a record label/distributor, what's your philosophy about music?

"Just get out there and do it, and make it available — put it out. It's a fan philosophy. What I'm bitching about, I guess, is the fact I've reviewed 56 tapes [in *Sunburn*], of which 30 hadn't been reviewed elsewhere. That's not op. They don't get any recognition."

What about the likes of Failsafe? Would it be a bad thing to lose?

"It's something that doesn't really impinge on my life at all."

As a fan of Christchurch music, you can surely see it serves a purpose, and some people do appreciate that music?

"I'm not a fan of pop music. That's getting back to the two sides of the city thing. That's a social scene I just don't really have anything contact with."

But shouldn't music in any form be available?

"I don't know. No, let's be frank. I actually see pop music as being something that is quite oppressive."

How?

"It's a drug. It prevents people thinking about their lives. It's not stimulating. It's like aspirin or something. It deadens people's perception."

Rob Mayes

Failsafe/Musician/Sound Engineer

Is Christchurch losing its indie edge and becoming too commercial?

"What's too commercial? You mean like in Auckland, and based on bands trying to grab a dollar? I don't know and I don't really care."

In like bands abandoning indie labels to sign to major labels.

"The two cases that I know of recently are Pumpkinhead and Loves Ugly Children. One, I think, is wishful thinking, and the other is probably a good move."

Which one's which?

"I think Pumpkinhead is wishful thinking. Well, probably both have elements of wishful thinking, but one, I think, is a joke, and Loves Ugly Children are just doing what they are doing. I don't consider that selling out. They are getting a better distribution deal with Flying Nun, to get their music out to people. That said, they're also getting promoted by the hype machine which is not so cool. But then, so is everyone else."

Is commercialism part of the parcel?

"Yeah. The other side is it's part of the parcel for creating serious music, for Loves Ugly Children, but for Pumpkinhead, it's playing part of the game. They want to play the rock 'n' roll game, and that requires budgets and labels and a cell-phone and videos and whatever, and that's what they're into, so that's cool. But I don't see that Loves Ugly Children sold out to anyone. Flying Nun is hardly selling out, anyway."

Do you think the Christchurch music scene is in a healthy stage at the moment?

"I don't know. I don't go out into it much. There are some very unhealthy, decaying bits in the music scene, but no more so than anywhere else. At least they've got something good to decay, which is not necessarily the case elsewhere."

From May 93 to Aug 94, Christchurch was on quite a high.

"There were quite a few venues, quite a few bands, but the rote had already set into a number of the bands who had missed the boat. I think most of 93 was a pretty interesting year, but, towards the end of it, the promises that were offered by a lot of those bands flew out the window."

Why do you think that happened?

"Because musicians are just that. They write songs. They aren't business managers, or necessarily know what's good or bad about themselves; ie. they're not producers, they don't know. In Loves Ugly Children's case, Simon McLaren writes a hell of a lot of good songs, then, a few weeks later, throws those good songs away because he doesn't know how good he is. That's too bad."

So, is that what Christchurch is lacking? Producers?

"Yeah, but Christchurch is also lacking any support from outside its 300,000 population. That is because our musical network has been based on a magazine that ignores what's happening within its own shores, and that's *RipItUp*."

Are you still running Failsafe?

"As far as *RipItUp* is concerned, it's business as usual. What difference does it make? As far as I'm concerned, I'm just doing what I enjoy doing, and that's aimed at a market of people who are interested enough to get off their butt and find out what I'm doing. The rest of the industry, like *RipItUp*, is attached to the commercial market. You're just out to sell papers, so, if you're talking about selling out in Christchurch, then *RipItUp* sold out a long time ago. Part of my fiasco last year, when I tried to shut down my business, was because I was thinking about how many years I have done this because I like it, and how it ends somewhere when someone fucks you over one too many times, and you continue to get no income, and be denied an income, from something that is providing New Zealand with a service by documenting their musical history."

Where do you see yourself fitting into the Christchurch music scene then?

"I know I'm perceived as being 'in the scene', but I'd prefer not to be seen as part of a scene or of an industry, because that pisses me off, because it leads to people taking what I do for granted and abusing it, which I'm not interested in. What I do is as purely a music fan. That's where I'm coming from and that's not going to change."

ROBYN PETT