

Skip McDonald is the stuff that legends are made of. In 1973, the Ohio-born multi-instrumentalist was a member of the pioneer dance/funk group Wood, Brass and Steel, with Doug Wimbish. Two years later, the two joined forces with drummer Kieth Le Blanc as the Sugar Hill House Band for *Sugar Hill Records*. From 79 to 82, this trio anchored such spectacular songs as Grandmaster Flash's 'The Message' and 'White Lines'. McDonald, Wimbish and Le Blanc are also the driving force behind Tackhead, while for many years McDonald has worked in a co-production capacity with On U Sound's Adrian Sherwood.

McDonald's latest eclectic project is entitled Little Axe, and like a lot of On U Sound groups, there is a massive global feeling about the music. On the group's debut album, *The House That Wolf Built*, McDonald has combined blues, dub, and rock feels, with African and Indian samples.

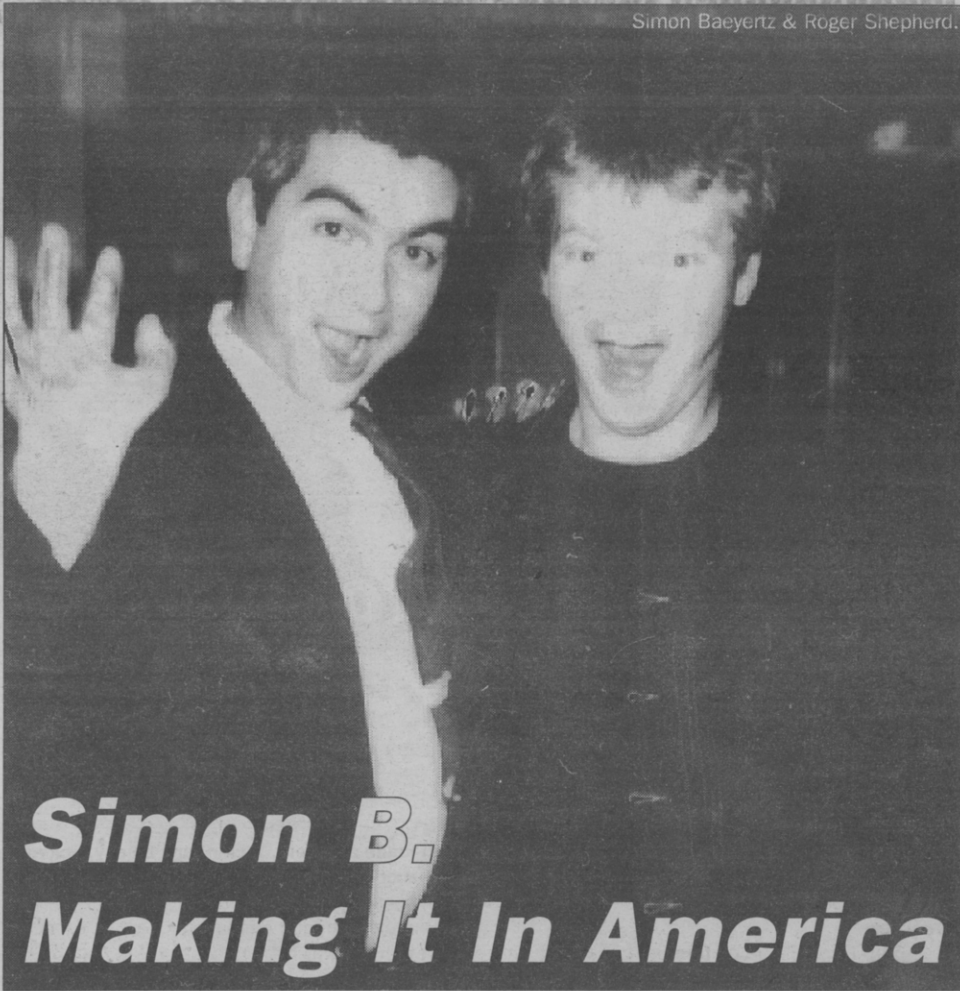
"It was a universal thing that I was trying to convey, but I didn't want to categorise the music. To me blues is funk, funk is R&B, and R&B is rock 'n' roll, they all take elements from each other. I try to acknowledge that a lot of the things I do come from music I respect and love, and hopefully I can reproduce that myself, or even better, something new might be recreated."

JOHN RUSSELL



ONE FOR THE MONEY

Joint Force is the new non-de-plumbe adopted by Auckland rappers OJ and Slave, and their long-time DJ companion, DLT. The trio are on the verge of releasing the eight-track EP *One Inch Punch* (named after a Bruce Lee manoeuvre) on BMG Records, and have already drawn considerable overseas interest. Recent visitor and Beasties Boys' producer Mario Caldato Jr. has remixed the track 'Static', giving it a "blunted jazz-hip-Beastie" flavour. The EP also features a remix of the OJ & Slave classic, 'Burntime'.



Simon Baeyertz & Roger Shepherd.

Now representing Frente and Paul Kelly in New York, Simon Baeyertz has been one of the key movers behind the scenes working to see New Zealand acts such as Straitjacket Fits, Headless Chickens, Chills, Bats and JPSE succeed both in Australia and in the Northern Hemisphere.

Since leaving Festival Records in Auckland in 1989 to work at Mushroom in Melbourne, Baeyertz sought to help develop the Flying Nun roster and record bigger budget albums suitable for the USA market while he also worked with Australian bands building the White Label for Mushroom and he even chased cool USA music to sell in Australia via Mushroom's Liberation label.

In total, Baeyertz was involved in the recording careers of 20 bands including representing Ween, Sugar and Frank Black downunder.

A registered phone-aholic, Baeyertz is never far from an office phone, a mobile phone or a car phone. While attached to a phone, he puts deals together with bands, producers, foreign labels and friends.

When Baeyertz left Mushroom last year to manage Frente's conquest of the USA, many White Label and Flying Nun acts were surprised and some were angry. What prompted his departure?

"It wasn't out of frustration," says Baeyertz. "We were really starting to get somewhere, particularly with the Chickens. Our faith in the Chickens has been vindicated and [despite Fiona's departure] I think the strength of the Chickens can continue."

"A lot of my motivation in my shift to New York was a desire to work on less, rather than run a label."

Baeyertz joined a management company in New York adding Frente to their existing clients Helmet and Ween. He put his twin-talents of good-phone and good-schmooze together and Frente were on their way.

Even though Mushroom has been the leading Australian indie label for decades the only significant foreign success they've had has been with soap stars Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan. Worldwide success has instead gone to rival labels with INXS and Midnight Oil.

Mushroom's first major success in the USA is Frente with sales of 300,000 albums.

"Part of my move to America with Frente was to see that project through with people who were interested in succeeding and are into re-evaluating constantly the parameters of what they do. They are prepared to learn the whole time."

"The Flying Nun acts want to take exactly what they do and keep it as it is. There's a tendency for bands here in New Zealand to see any change as being a change brought about by outside forces — i.e. the record company — as opposed to being changes that an artist might make to what they are doing."

In picking up Flying Nun, Mushroom hoped to build on the existing cult appreciation in the Northern Hemisphere for many of the label's acts. There was an early success, finding an Arista A&R man Ken Friedman who "loved Straitjacket Fits."

"I've come to realise such a signing is very

rare. Now a band is signed because an A&R person heard that another A&R person wanted to sign the band."

Is it easy for an Australian record company to place acts in the USA?

"No, the American A&R scene is totally self-obsessed. Bands get signed because other record companies want to sign the band."

"I was at a showcase the night I left New York. I walked into the room and every A&R person and every publisher I know was there. She will sign an enormous deal and the reality of it is I think Jan Hellriegel is in every way that woman's equal."

"The reality of it is why should an A&R person sign a New Zealand act when they can go down the road and sign an artist for which there is already a buzz on. An A&R person will score brownie points by winning against other A&R people, as opposed to going out and finding something in the middle of nowhere."

What's the greatest barrier to NZ bands succeeding overseas?

"You have to say distance. But also the realisation of what hard work goes into succeeding. Frente played five nights a week for seven months."

With Frente, Mushroom took a novel approach, instigated by Baeyertz, to sign to a USA indie Mammoth (distributed by Atlantic) rather than to a major label who could offer a bigger advance. Baeyertz already knew the Mammoth boss Jay Faires as Liberation represents his label in Australasia.

"Having an independent label between us and a major gave us the power to move outside the major's priority structure," says Baeyertz. "So in the early days when we for very obvious reasons weren't Atlantic's main priority we were Mammoth's No.1 priority so we'd have their radio and sales people working to make it happen. Ultimately we proved to Atlantic we had something happening and then Atlantic got excited."

Is there still a vibe for Flying Nun in North America?

"Yeah, Flying Nun still has a fantastic reputation. There's a huge vibe for Flying Nun but the label needs more presence. But there is a perception that New Zealand bands are hard to deal with."

Is that true?

"There's an element of truth in that."

The distance?

"If you live in Dunedin you can't go and play a radio station show in San Francisco and Americans have absolutely no understanding of time difference. For the average American the concept of a 13 hour plane flight to New Zealand, is beyond their comprehension."

Do you find the New Zealand music industry Mickey Mouse?

"There's not much difference between the Australian and New Zealand music industries. The Enzed industry is more musically volatile which is a good thing. Per capita New Zealand is a far more active market."

So is Simon Baeyertz looking out for a comfortable USA record company job?

"I didn't leave one record company to go and work for another."

MURRAY CAMMICK