



SHIHAD

Boys Keep Changing

“We got great things out of them, like being able to eat their rider while they were on stage. That’s what we’d do every night ‘cause we didn’t have any money and we needed to eat. We’d go: ‘Have a good gig guys,’ then run to their dressing room and eat all their food.”

The voice of Shihad’s crafty lead singer and guitarist Jon Toogood is coming through loud and clear from the two-story apartment where the band are staying in Charlantanberg, Germany. The Wellington quartet of Toogood, bassist Karl Kippenberger, guitarist Phil Knight and drummer Tom Larkin, have just had two weeks off after an arduous European tour supporting American rock giants Faith No More.

The 21 date trip took them through England, Holland, Sweden, Germany, France, Spain and Scotland, playing to anywhere from 200 people in a tiny pub in Windsor (“we didn’t have much space on stage so me and Karl were doing the Beatles thing, only moving the top halves of our bodies”), to 4,000 moshing fanatics in Munich.

The day before our interview, Shihad were joined by fellow Wellingtonians Head Like A Hole, their partners in a 30 date European tour currently nearing completion.

Flashing back to late February, the day of Shihad’s departure to Europe is the day after their crushing set at *Strawberry Fields*. The band, and band manager Gerald Dwyer, are killing time in Auckland before their flight leaves at some outrageous hour in the morning. Jon is battling a heavy head cold, but remarkably, not the butterflies that wouldn’t seem out of place in the stomach of a 23 year old on the eve of such a mammoth experience. He’s not being arrogant, but is playing it cooler than Fonzy.

“This is a weight lifted to tell you the truth. I love the music we make, and I think we deserve what we’re getting now. It’s good timing because, even though we’d wanted this to happen for years, I think if it had happened two years ago we wouldn’t have been ready for it. But now we are, we’re tight enough and we’re confident enough. I feel that if we are at our peak, at our best, I reckon we could blow Faith

No More away. It sounds like it’s going to be real relaxed between the bands, a mutual respect thing.”

Almost two months later, Jon is able to say he hit the nail firmly on the head. Both bands were digging each other, there were no hierarchies and no headliner/support band histrionics either. And when Shihad cooked live, they lifted the performance of Faith No More.

“At first it was quite strange. They were all really nervous about their new guitarist, and they hadn’t played live for a year and a half, so they were a bit uptight. Then they just saw us rock out and enjoy ourselves and they seemed to loosen up. It was real complimentary.”

The Americans also showed their respect for Shihad in more obvious ways. Throughout the tour, Faith No More’s drummer, Mike Bordin, would play Shihad drumbeats at soundcheck. By the end of the trip he’d begun throwing the same beats into their live set. On the odd occasion, Jon would fill in for Mike Patton when the latter failed to show for his soundcheck. Perhaps even more evident, off stage, Shihad were lucky enough not to suffer the misfortunes experienced by L7 when they toured Europe with Faith No More. In one legendary incident, Patton shat in a carton of orange juice, resealed it and put it back in L7’s dressing room.

“He did nothing like that. On stage he’s so unpredictable, but off stage he was really mellow. His wife joined the tour halfway through, so he was a lot happier once she was there. She was cool. She’d cut me and Karl’s split ends for us.”

Shihad said goodbye to Faith No More in Paris on April 5. They returned to Germany to begin promoting their second album, *Killjoy*, released in Europe on Modern Music, the label with whom they (and HLAH) signed in early 1994. The label have just opened an office in Los Angeles and have big plans for the band in America. According to Jon, they are offering substantial budgets for recording and “serious” financial support for touring. After a New Zealand and Australian tour in July, Modern will require Shihad to be based in the States, at

least until Christmas.

With making inroads overseas the band’s current goal, the timing couldn’t be more perfect, for Shihad have never played with such ferocity and explosiveness live, and *Killjoy* is a work of pure genius well before its time. In both situations there’s a level of communication happening that only comes from longevity, and a sense of new-found freedom that allows a band to do nothing but enjoy themselves. A change that has come, says Jon, after they stopped giving a fuck for what other people thought.

“I just think it’s because we’re finally learning how to play rock ‘n’ roll, and realising we’re a rock ‘n’ roll band. Two years ago we were writing good music, but as a band we weren’t as powerful because we were still a bit unsure of ourselves and our music, and what effect it had on people. Now we’ve gone: ‘Who gives a fuck. Does it spin our propeller? Yeah, it does,’ and that’s what we have learnt. I’ve got faith in the band and I know we make good music; it’s nice to have people like it, but if we like it that’s all that matters really.”

Whether they care or not hasn’t stopped Shihad from writing the instantly and immensely likeable collection of songs on *Killjoy*. Recorded at York Street Studios, the new album is a lesson in achieving with what you’ve got, rather than using sequencers, samplers or keyboards to create dynamics and abrasiveness. Built on killer grooves and melodic battering riffs, sonically, *Killjoy* sounds a hundred times bigger than their debut album *Churn*, and lyrically, the mood is a million times lighter.

“I think *Churn* is a really cold, aggressive record, which I think is perfect for the lyrical content, but we just didn’t want to do that again. The music we’re making now is more like a celebration of making music, whereas *Churn* was a bludgeoning of the senses.”

Despite the unanimously excellent reviews given to *Churn*, and the initial satisfaction Shihad enjoyed while working with the album’s producer Jaz Coleman, the band had no desire to repeat the experience a second time. Numerous disputes and conflicts of interest

during the recording sessions were, at the time, too much to handle for an impressionable young band, but now they’ve wised up.

“We were pretty awe struck to be working with someone who was an influence on us. In that situation you listen to people and don’t say: ‘That’s hypocritical.’ You don’t question anything, you just let things slide. But when you realise: ‘That person’s just the same as us,’ then you start seeing the wood from the trees.”

When Shihad went back to York Street with *Churn*’s engineer Malcolm Welsford to make *Killjoy*, they were promptly slapped in the face by Coleman, who pulled out the signed contract that gave him the option to record the band’s second album. Coleman demanded a payment of \$5,000 from Shihad to avoid court action.

“He slammed us. That really fucked me off. That was just pocket money to him. I think that was bullshit. He was ringing up Gerald and saying it was pocket change, but to us \$5,000 is a fuck of a lot of money. He’s a businessman more than musician sometimes, and that’s what I don’t like about him.”

But the good guys won in the end. With Welsford, Shihad have made a masterpiece, and are having a ball taking it to the world. For the foreseeable future the band of four will be living in each other’s faces, and out of each other’s pockets, and Jon wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It amazes me sometimes, but it’s like a relationship with a girl in a way. We have our arguments and stuff, but we’re very solid as a group of people. There’s just no bullshit between us. Tom is like the solid rock who can rationalise things and chill me out, Karl smokes lots of drugs and makes us laugh, and Phil’s there to scrutinise the fuck out of things. We’re lucky to have the relationship we do between each other. We’ve all grown in different ways but our common goal has always stayed the same, and that’s to make this band big, and be the fattest sounding band that’s gonna come from this country.”

JOHN RUSSELL