

HAUNTED BY GENE



It's been more than a good year for Gene. A year ago, they seemed just another indie band with a Smiths fixation. How things change. A year on from their first shows, the band have swapped the Splash Club for the Forum, gig guides for Candian TV, and that Smiths tag for something all their own.

Gene are back in their home town after an extensive national tour. In the words of bassist Kevin Miles, it's "cup final time", their first home show since their debut album *Olympian* was released last month.

Miles, vocalist Martin Rossiter, guitarist Steve Mason and drummer Matt James are meeting and greeting. A documentary crew has been following the band around England, and now sits taping exciting footage of London band meets New Zealand journalist. Rossiter, the man who has fielded more than his fair share of the spotlight's glare, is often resting his vocal chords for the night's performance. The other three, politely friendly, chug away on alarmingly regular cigarettes.

It's unfortunate much of the band's profile arises from their resemblance to the Smiths. It is there — Rossiter's Morrissey-like inflections, Mason's guitarmanship — but while Gene nod toward their influences, they won't take the accusation that they are plagiarists lying down.

"I don't think we are," Steve Mason says. "There have been a few law suits recently — I'm not naming any names of course — but I know there haven't been any lawyers on my door."

While Gene write emotive songs, there is, in fact, little of the bedsit misery of the Smiths. After the arrogant defiance of Oasis, and the

light headed geezerness of Blur, it's almost strange to hear songs aimed at a different temperament. Gene spent a long time — 18 months, in fact — fine tuning their material before they even took it to the stage.

"We do write emotive songs, we're not trying to be brazen," Mason continues. "We are fortunate not to be compared to our contemporaries. In a sense that's because we haven't become locked into that kind of scene."

"We aren't the kind of band that are happy just getting people to jump up and down. An emotional song is much more important. But, then again, it's also important for us to be able to do both and give people whatever they fancy!"

It would be a mistake to give all the credit to Rossiter's lyrics, however. The other big link to the late lamented Smiths is Mason's guitar — from country styled meandering, on 'Still Can't Find the Phone', to the understated melodies of 'We'll Find Our Own Way' and the crashing power chords of 'Sleep Well Tonight'. It's part of the reason the provincial paranoia of the latter single, and the buzzing, Clash-like clatter of the follow up, 'Haunted By You', made such excellent singles.

"I don't think *Olympian* is such an immediate album though," Matt James says. "I think you have to sit and listen to it a dozen times before you can really appreciate it."

Mason agrees: "We've always thought it important to have some depth. So often you can buy an album, play it for a week, then it goes straight to the back of the pile."

"I think that's why we had 26 different instruments on the album," chips in Kevin Miles.

"But it's also why you wouldn't think we had 26 instruments. It's all done very subliminally. I think it makes the listener have to think a little bit more. It's also very different to how we come across live. *Olympian* was very much different from how it comes across live. We were trying to transpose how we would do it live and it sounding boring, there was no drama."

Drama is something Gene try hard at. The combination of ringing glam guitar and stunning cross harmonies on 'Sleep Well Tonight', the climaxing chorus of 'Olympian', and the gay anthem 'Left Handed' are unashamed showmanship. Months before *Olympian* hit the shops, Rossiter was already stating how artistically advanced they were compared to U2. Music mag *NME* gave them an award for the best new band. It certainly didn't come as much of a surprise to Gene to be told this.

Much of this self confidence seems to come from the well clothed shoulders of Martin Rossiter — mixing a strangely avuncular vocabulary, ambiguous sexual stance, and a healthy dislike of the mediocre into one package. With the Rozzer himself out of the room, his three fellow band mates defend his hard won reputation with quiet good humour.

"Well, he is the guy who writes out lyrics," Myles says evenly. "We told him at the start that he should be doing the interviews. But what he is saying is what we all think. Plus, he's the singer, and that's the way it's always been with singers," a sideward glance to Mason, relaxing on the bed, "and guitarists."

"I don't see why the guy should apologise for being intelligent," James says. "He's been constantly hassled for coming across as this arro-

gant guy who uses long words. I think he speaks in very simple terms, it's just that he talks rather a lot."

The conversation meanders form there. There's news of their promotional tour to the States, which follows in a week, then a 28 day tour of mainland Europe after that. Already the plans for a jaunt down under — possibly including a New Zealand visit — are being made for early next year.

Then the pop star is back; Rossiter returns to the fold after giving his tonsils a rest. Cup final nerves? There is the hint of expectations amongst the cigarette smoke.

"A year ago we were playing tiny crowds in the Splash Club, and tonight it's 2000 at the Forum. This is something we have really worked for," Mason says.

A few hours later, I am with those 2000. The Forum, a barn of a building in north London, is bubbling with bodies. Radish clothes horses rub shoulders with their less sartorial, indie kid brethren. Yes, there is the odd be-quiffed Morrissey look-alike, and lots of bunches of flowers. This is all starting to look very familiar.

The show itself is a blinder. It kicks in with a rousing 'Haunted By You', energetic and full of life. There's an atmosphere here I haven't seen in a long time. Rossiter pouts, preens, dances like a madman, and still manages to sound like a bloody angel.

Sure, the Smiths may rate high on the agenda, but tonight we are seeing *Gene*, and it's a performance that does them proud.

Cup final? They shoot, they score...
STEPHEN DOWLING



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