

Testing Crueller Waters

The Cruel Sea have — much to the surprise of everyone, including themselves — become one of the biggest bands in Australia, with their *Honeymoon Is Over* album going double platinum. The follow up album (their third) is *Three Legged Dog* — an assured refinement of their unique mix of blues, rock, country and the Australian punk rock that pre-figured grunge by a good 20 years.

The band is currently in America, testing the even crueller waters there. I phoned who I thought was going to be singer Tex Perkins, but turned out to be guitarist/keyboard player James Cruickshank, the morning after a show in New York.

"It was a showcase in front of a whole lot of magazines and radio people; get them all to come along, check out the band, get them all excited."

So the Cruel Sea aren't going to try to crack America by doing 500 dates across the country in a van?

"Well, we're going to end up doing that, but it helps if you've got the radio and people behind you."

How big a priority is it for the band to crack

America?

"We're going to Europe as well, so while we're in the Northern Hemisphere, we thought we may as well go to America. We're not going to stick ourselves in a Torago and spend two years doing a million gigs. The record company believe they can get us on the radio, and then we just go to those cities that we're selling records and being played on the radio — focus it more than just ambling into town and hoping the record's in the shops and playing."

I wonder how Americans will fare getting a handle on the Cruel Sea's subtle and textured sound?

"Our sound has a lot of American influences in it, but there's no one here playing the kind of music we're playing. It's not something they're unfamiliar with because we draw on the rich history of American music."

Is the band pleased (or surprised) how it's all fallen into place in Australia?

"Retrospectively, the way it all happened, we were an instrumental band playing at parties, then we got offered gigs, and then Tex joined... so we had people coming to see us before the first record came out, and we paid for the

record by the gigs we'd done. Then we toured, and every time we went back to a town there'd be more people, so that encouraged us to come back. And the record sold over a long period of time... so it was really authentic. Coming to America, it's being tackled differently — our success in Australia is a foot in the door. Australia is our bread and butter money, but we're interested in playing to as many people as possible; but we're not using our Australian royalties to crack the American market. If it doesn't happen for us... fuck it! It won't kill us."

Australian music has changed a lot recently — the classic Oz Rock seems to have disappeared — the Cruel Sea have been a big part of that.

"You look at Australian albums that have topped the charts recently are Silverchair and You Am I... so the Midnight Oils have disappeared. People are turning on to different things — younger and fresher."

The Cruel Sea have always had great videos (remember Tex Perkins in 'Better Get A Lawyer', playing both a rowdy prisoner and a cop who gleefully snaps on a rubber glove).

Does the band enjoy making videos?

"I think because there's aspects of videos we don't like, we've managed to do the videos we've done. We try to have one basic idea and stick to that, and not have too much in them. Maybe we should do one in colour soon."

The band is doing some more shows across America, then they have a couple of weeks off before a big Australian tour. What about New Zealand? They played the first *Big Day Out*, but a sports stadium on a sunny afternoon is hardly the right atmosphere for a band like the Cruel Sea.

"I wasn't in the band then. I was in hospital..."

Ooops.

"We're playing on the twenty-eighth of July in Auckland. Oh, congratulations on the America's Cup. So many Americans are really glad you guys won it. Yachting over here is the sport of the rich and famous, real elitist. You have to have heaps of money to even think about sailing, so it's really good that you guys won it."

Um, thanks. *Three Legged Dog*, get it, OK?

JONATHAN KING

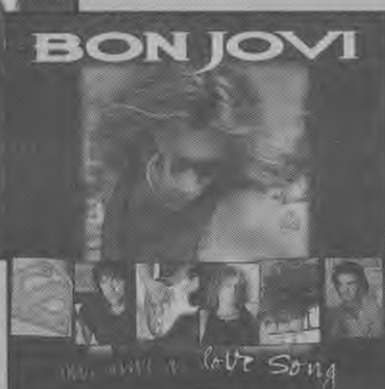
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