

IMD: Instrumental Manoeuvres in Dunedin



Swarm



Suka

Eventually, I make my way to Volt Studios, the home of the IMD label. It is the second day of my three day visit to Dunedin. The previous night was spent watching stunning performances by Jay Clarkson, the 3Ds and, the best of the new generation, HDU. Volt is to be found at the end of a short alleyway on Manse Street. In a former life it used to be a tearoom shared with Radio Otago. Visitors could drink tea and munch their lamingtons while watching announcers read the news every hour on the hour. The double glazing is still there, hence the space makes an ideal recording studio.

Jo Keith is the first IMDer I meet. Jo came to the label from managing the Verlaines. When she joined they told her to bring a book so she wouldn't get bored, and she's worked 60 hour weeks ever since. After a quick tour of the studio (both rooms), we sit down to a cuppa (they still make good coffee here) and talk IMD. A short while later, a tall dark figure, who I had innocently mistaken for the grim reaper, strolls in to make a coffee and introduces himself as Brendan Hoffman, engineer and business partner.

Jo's main tasks include doing all the paperwork, working with volunteers and running the import side of IMD. At this early stage in the label's development, with only three local releases, the sale of imports is crucial to IMD's survival.

Brendan works with the bands, engineering

the material. He has been with the label since its beginnings 18 months ago. They are the only two full time paid staff. There are a number of people that work voluntarily or on a part time basis, such as David Muir (co-ordinates local distribution) and Jess Jones (office aid). However, most of the operations are the responsibility of Brendan and Jo, including deciding which local bands IMD will work with. To this end, Jo believes her love of music by Patsy Cline and Emmy-Lou Harris is an asset! ("Because when I listen to music I listen to it for quality, or song structures, or sounds.")

Their enthusiasm for the music is sincere, but tempered by a business consciousness provided by Geoff Columbus, a wealthy benefactor and co-founder of IMD. However, the business is a means to an end, and that end is recording and releasing local music. Central to this philosophy is that IMD is a Dunedin label for Dunedin artists.

IMD is part of a continuum that includes recently retired Port Chalmers label Xpressway (which, in its turn, inherited a lot of the artists from early Flying Nun days). Brendan and Jo believe IMD has a similar philosophy and ethic to Xpressway. They like to work as a partnership with artists and, like Xpressway, they are trying to establish these performers overseas. Yet, there are important differences. Unlike Xpressway, IMD is adding new artists to its books as well as looking after established

Fresh from a 90 minute, misguided tour of an unknown suburb, I step from the airport shuttle onto the streets of Dunedin. The first thing I notice is this seems a particularly grey city — starved of the sun by the hills that surround it and streaked with shadows of hills and buildings. It seems impossible to find anything more than temporary warmth. However, I feel the history here more than the cold, slightly awed by a city that has produced the majority of the music and bands people still refer to as the New Zealand sound.

musicians. Their catalogue features Bill Direen, Trash, Gate and Sandra Bell, alongside new bands Suka and Swarm, two bands Xpressway would not have considered. IMD is also looking to create a market for New Zealand music within New Zealand, whereas Xpressway all but gave up on trying to establish New Zealand artists in their own country.

To achieve these goals they also draw a lot of support from within Dunedin. As Jo explains: "Dunedin is filled with people with a wealth of talent, in all areas of the industry, which is under utilised. So, having IMD here, surrounded by these people that have all of this experience, Shayne [Carter], Martin [Phillipps], David Kilgour, David Mitchell, all of these people, have all the time and heart in the world to help, and they go the extra mile every time you ask. They are wonderful. They have time to talk to these younger bands and it promotes the feeling that we'll all be in this together"

The label is still on a giant learning curve. They have made their mistakes and acknowledge they will probably make many more, but the commitment is there to see it through. Their next step is to move the label and import business into new premises, allowing Volt to record without interruptions from couriers, customers and those after a good cup of coffee. Although this will add to the overheads, they are optimistic about the future of the label and the bands it supports. Brendan in particular

believes, at the very least, they have nothing to lose. "If it fell over, we could at least say we gave it a damn good go. But I don't think that will happen. In fact, I think quite the opposite."

With that, I finish the interview and leave to spend a night in a crowded pub, watching rugby until 3AM (did we win?). Before I go, I ask them what IMD stands for.

"Independent Music Distribution, but we usually tell people it means Intellectual Manoeuvres in the Dark."

On the way to the airport I visit Records Records, the second hand record store to the stars, owned and operated by the patron saint of Dunedin music, Roy Colbert. Its through the door of this record shop that the resonance of other cities found sympathy in the ears of young musicians such as David Kilgour, Shayne Carter and Wayne Elsey. I turn the corner of the hall leading into Records Records and walk straight into the luminous blue eyes of Martin Phillipps. Naturally, I stare at my shoes as a sign of respect and shuffle past to the new arrivals section.

I leave Dunedin with the romantic thought that perhaps the naivety and passion of New Zealand music hasn't died. It may be that it has temporarily retreated, quite possibly to be restored through the efforts of labels like IMD.

ADAM HYDE