



Undeniable evidence of this is supplied by the new album. In 1990, *The Watertable* charmed with its collection of crisp, often delicate pop delights. Then, three years on, *Everyday Distortions* proved a magnificent exercise in chunkier, catchier pop/rock, spawning the timeless singles 'Talk in This Town', 'Two Feet Off the Ground', and 'Isabelle', as well as lesser known classics like 'True Grit' and 'Seventh Deadly Sin'. Now, *Vine Street Stories* takes off in a different direction. Johnson has opted to turn the volume knob down, deciding on a sparse, moody acoustic feel. Gone are the heavy, layered-guitar rock tunes, in favour of a collection of piano and vocal driven tunes. More than ever, Johnson himself has been sent to the front, in particular on 'Beautiful Chain' and the glorious 'If I Swagger'.

"That's quite intentional. I've been pushing for a long time to get more space and to put the voice up front, because that's how I like my songs to be, that's how they work best."

One aspect that has remained constant over three albums is Johnson's penchant for telling melancholy tales, borne of late nights in noisy drinking dens, sinking buckets of red wine, and casting an observant eye over the assembled. Practice is making perfect.

"I think most of my writing does mirror a lot of life experiences. A lot of that is inspired by stories I've picked up in bars while doing an awful lot of drinking —

Meanwhile, their lead singer was rarely seen without a glass of vodka or a bottle of red wine strapped to his person. Not surprisingly, one of his best songs worked its way out during this period. Talk turns to 'Pleasure And Overdose', a stunning song driven by a sweet piano melody that comes on subtly, almost masking the unfolding tale of the highs and lows of unchecked hedonism.

"There's a damn fine line between them / Pleasure and overdose..."

"That's why I'm in detox at the moment. If you're going to have real pleasure, it's quite a dangerous thing in a lot of ways, and not just drugs. You could be dealing with a dangerous woman in a relationship that is self destructive but so pleasurable. It's about that hedonistic idea that goes along with most enjoyable pursuits, and how far can you push it before it becomes an overdose."

With Johnson taking steps to regulate his habits, you have to wonder what effect, if any, it may have on his creative output. At the end of the day, there are basically two types of creative artists. There are those who can work fuelled only by their immediate environment, who get their highs from life; and on the flip side of the coin are those who require a steady stream of drink and drugs to act as a short-cut to the subconscious. One suspects Johnson is the latter.

"I think rather than drink or drugs altering your state of consciousness, you *achieve* your real state of consciousness, and mostly that's achieved by reaching a relaxed state. I've always thought that about any kind of drug, all it's doing is allowing what is already in there to come out. That's why pot is such a good drug, because you can really concentrate and be single minded, and push all the other crap out. Alcohol's a bit like that too, it's relaxing enough to be creative. But that said, I don't go out for a night and drink, and then come home and write. I don't think it's an important part of my creativity, but it's an important part of my relaxation."

As if to illustrate his point, Johnson outlines in great detail what he believes makes a class songwriter, then sits down to play a brand new song, 'Digging Small Holes', composed totally in a lucid frame of mind.

Greg Johnson: While You Were Sleeping

Songwriting: "A lot of that is inspired by stories I've picked up in bars while doing an awful lot of drinking — y'know, that whole other side of life that goes on when everyone else is in bed."

There's a brilliant scene in the heavy metal comedy *More Bad News*, where lead singer Vim Fuego (aka Alan Metcalfe) is visited at home by rock journo Sally Freedman. During the course of the discussion, Fuego lets it be known he's been communicating with the ghosts of dead rock stars, and decided to build a studio in his cellar to record the 'duets'. He invites Freedman downstairs to hear the fruits of his labour — a tune that John Lennon had assisted with called 'Imagine' ("It's a girl's name, the title is some sort of strange coincidence.").

Midway through last year, a mutual friend took me around to the St Mary's Bay home of singer-songwriter Greg Johnson. Within minutes we were down in the basement, listening not to half baked ghostly compositions, but to the first recordings of songs that would later comprise Johnson's third album, the soon-to-be-released *Vine Street Stories*. One thing I was sure of at the time was it was going to be a top class record. Almost a year later, we're back sitting in the studio, and having listened to the completed package for several days, it feels good to say I was right.

Recording of the new album began in Vine Street in July 1994. Wellington producer Nigel Stone trucked a tonne of equipment up from the Capital, and installed it in the makeshift studio, using "enough wiring to rework Telecom". The drums and bass were set up in

the upstairs kitchen, and the vocals and guitars were recorded from a room next to the studio. The initial recording process ran more smoothly than expected, vindicating Johnson's decision to avoid using a recognised recording studio.

"I thought it would be good to do an album at home, because my favourite recordings were ones that I did by myself on a cassette deck. I thought to capture the vibe under which the songs were written, we should record here."

Later, the mixing of the album at Marmalade Studios in Wellington was plagued by technical hitches. Combined with the obligatory record company hassles, the completion of the album became a long, drawn out process — and one that Johnson is obviously glad to put behind him.

Technically, *Vine Street Stories* is his solo debut. The two previous albums were recorded with the now legendary, hard living, heavy drinking bunch of blokes known as the Greg Johnson Set. Today, only guitarist Trevor Reekie remains from the original line-up that formed in 1989, and recorded the albums *The Watertable* and 1993's *Everyday Distortions*. Not for the first time in rock history, the split in ranks was due to differences à la musical.

"*Vine Street Stories* signals the end of the Greg Johnson Set really, but it's a mutual sort of thing. Those guys are fantastic players, but we were just shifting apart in the styles we wanted to play."

y'know, that whole other side of life that goes on when everyone else is in bed."

It's to Johnson's credit that each of his 'slices of life' smacks of being intensely personal about himself or those most close to him. As with the best of songwriters, he's 100 percent believable, whatever way you choose to interpret the lyrics in his songs, though his take on this is vastly different.

"Despite how it may seem, I never write songs for people. I never try and tell a specific person something through a song. If I do, it's not conscious anyway. It's a favourite thing of mine to say all this stuff and then deny it all in the last verse, because it leaves you a little ambiguity. I like to put some kind of weird twist in there, like a good short story should have; it's like leading someone on, then changing your mind. Ultimately those songs are there for my own therapy. Some songs are me trying to justify my own bad lot, not trying to open up someone else's. That's what it's all about really: justifying to yourself what you've been doing... or what you should be doing."

Perhaps with an almost-30 sense of self reckoning, Johnson is discovering what he has and hasn't been doing is taking its physical toll. At the time of our interview, he's enduring his fourth day of a self imposed two week detox. In the heyday of the Greg Johnson Set, their drink and drug intake was not far behind that of Irish group the Pogues, and tales of the Set's excessive behaviour were legendary.

"The key to being a good songwriter is having the ability to use words, combined with the right chord, to evoke a whole plethora of details in emotion. There are a lot of different words with dictionary meanings that go around in circles trying to explain the finer details of human emotion, and that's why I reckon music is the strongest art form, because you don't just have words. It's not just a poem and it's not just sound — when the two are mixed together in the right place, it's very powerful."

Johnson is currently treading solo through the wringer of the local publicity machine to promote *Vine Street Stories*, and a nationwide tour with a new band is due to follow. The 1995 version of Greg Johnson appears pretty happy with his lot, regardless of the fact he's gasping for a cigarette, and his excitement at putting out a new record is barely affected by the anxieties accompanying withdrawals. But he doesn't call it contentment — as with the first and second albums, Johnson's mind drifts constantly to thoughts of leaving on a jet plane.

"It always is, always. I wish I could say we were going off to play in Paris, but at the moment there's nothing, and that's not through lack of trying. I think [travelling overseas] will be a big part of my maintaining sanity in the next couple of years. I don't feel that I need vindication from the rest of the world, but I really would like to see what they think."

JOHN RUSSELL