

What is Hamilton Keeping in The Fridge?

The Fridge is a new compilation CD of 17 Hamilton bands. It was recorded and released by Hamilton student station Contact 89FM. The compilation provides a very diverse sample of a musical scene that has yet to produce any 'big' names in New Zealand music, but, nonetheless, contains all the necessary ingredients. I recently caught up with Gordon Bassett, Fridge Studio engineer, and Graeme Cairns, leader of the McGillicuddy Serious Party, to talk about the CD and what's happening in Hamilton.

Graeme Cairns has been living in Hamilton since the late 70s and over that time has borne witness to the cities developing sub-culture. When I talked to Graeme, he was fresh from a battle defending the rights of battery, clockwork and rubber chickens from the improper objectives of Alf's Imperial Army and some strange blue people. He was kind enough to find time before attending the post-battle function to promote his view of Hamilton art, music and musicians.

"The support is what makes it really spectacular," says Graeme. "Hamilton has got that, and the reason it's got that is by default. Based on the, in my opinion, fact Hamilton is so boring architecturally, geographically, it doesn't have an institutionalised art scene, and because it's really boring to live in Hamilton and just take in other people's ideas and consume ideas and art, anyone with half an idea starts participating. Otherwise you go out of your mind with tedium. Because there is no competition, that, to me, is the most fertile ground for arts to flourish."

Given the restraints, why would anyone consider pursuing a performance lifestyle in Hamilton?

"The most remarkable benefit, and this is the reason artists from all different sorts of genres are coming to Hamilton and settling here from other centres, is because there is an extraordinarily supportive subculture here."

How do you think the musicians and artists in Hamilton perceive themselves and their work?

"Because Hamilton is basically just an over sized cow town, and not having a cosmopolitan self concept, but being quite shy, it has a cultural inferiority complex. It has a cringe aspect so that no matter what you are doing, because you come from Hamilton, you think that its not necessarily particularly remarkable."

Does being under-resourced and under-valued bring out any particular style or characteristics in Hamilton music and art?

"Being the largest agricultural service town in the country, even if [Hamilton] becomes cosmopolitan, because its landlocked and its agriculturally obsessed and kinda swamp-like, it will inevitably produce its own style of art. I'm not sure quite what that will entail, but I'm sure it will be quite funny, ironic. Quite 'I don't really give a shit'-ish because that's part of the rural personality, the redneck thing: 'We know what we're doing and we're ok, [mate]'. Even the fringe artists, even the weirdos think: 'Yep... and we know what we're doing and we think we're ok as well.' A really bizarre, naive self confidence."

Will people laugh with it or at it?

"People will laugh at it, but it will be an intrinsic part of the creation and, if done well, it will communicate effectively to the rest of the population."

Over the years, Hamilton has seen several waves of talented people leaving the city to pursue their chosen art form in either Wellington or Dunedin. Why do you believe few artists persevere Hamilton for more than three or four years?



Martin of Wendyhouse

"People who have artistic skills, or artistic predispositions, or artistic pretensions, whatever it is that draws you into this pursuit, and lord knows there aren't very many things to encourage you to do this, you are likely to be dissuaded and you are going to have to summon on enormous reserves of stamina to keep persevering. So, you either move somewhere there is that kind of support, or think: 'Enough of this torturous shit, I'm going to pursue a career,' as endorsed by consensus reality. Because of these reasons, Hamilton has witnessed quite a significant and unfortunate attrition rate from the artistic lifestyle amongst some very gifted Hamiltonians."

With that, Graeme abruptly takes leave to celebrate the recent victory over Alf's Imperial Army and attend the launching of the Mainstream Opinion Incorporated — a 1960s moral minority who are working to revive the art of scone making and ironing.

The Fridge Studio is a 16-track analog recording studio owned and operated by Contact 89FM. It's called The Fridge Studios because it was built in an old dairy fridge, in the cowshed known these days as the Waikato Students Union. Gordon Bassett has worked as production engineer since 1993, recording all the advertisements for the station and finding time to record various Hamilton bands. I met with Gordon in the studio to discuss how the CD came together.

"Firstly, we had to pick out what bands in Hamilton had recorded at the Fridge that captured the essence of what we were aiming at," explains Gordon. "Bands like 5 Girls, Boil Up, Nodrog and Aquarium, and Inchworm [and]

Tugboat were done, that really stood out and hadn't been released. Then we thought what other bands were left out that captured Hamilton. Inchworm stood out. At that time they had just pulled out of a contract with Hark, so we quickly jumped on them and offered them a place. The Widdershins and Tsunami Band, those two bands had a relationship with Greg Locke and Orange, so he recorded and produced those tracks and did quite an awesome job. Phones and Accessories was an after thought to upset the flow a little bit."

Also included are several live-to-air tracks recorded from broadcasts on Contact 89FM. Student

was going overseas and, before he did, we wanted to get them into the studio to record. It was obvious the band wasn't going to release it. They aren't working or even living in the same city, and it was unlikely they would play live again. It really was just too good a representation of something quite strange that happened in Hamilton music that New Zealand really missed out on. Basically, it came down to, if we didn't release it then, no one would get to hear it except for like six or seven people, and that would have been a real tragedy."

Does *The Fridge* encompass all of Hamilton music?

"The Plop scene was missed out, [as were] Mancini, King Biscuit, Love and Violence, REAL. There are some more dance elements happening in Hamilton, and rap, but the Fridge is an analog studio and isn't the type of digital facility to actually produce that music. The CD is really picking up a relationship that we have with a lot of bands. It's definitely not a definitive document of Hamilton music, but its a nice little slice."

What do you think *The Fridge* will achieve?

"Hopefully it will give the artists a lot of pride that they have actually got onto a CD, and



Gordon Bassett

radio favourites Wendyhouse appear in this section of the CD, alongside ska band Bwa Da Riddim, sub-urban jazz band Hand of Glory, the Lairds' own Big Muffin Serious Band and the Mobile Stud Unit (MSU). Gordon believes the inclusion of live-to-air material is quite innovative, and although the sound

quality isn't as good as the studio recordings, they are still worthwhile.

"They were moments that the bands just really gelled. We narrowed it down to five tracks from numerous live-to-airs that were quite exciting. Bits of them sound a bit rough, but that's what you get with live radio. On those few recordings there is a real energy captured that sometimes a studio recording actually misses."

How did the Dribbly Cat Attraction EP come to be included on the CD?

"In late 1993, Jon Arcus [Jon Plop] from DCA

make them realise they can do it again and that people can actually do it for themselves."

So far, very few Hamilton bands have released CDs. Do you think this is because of any lack of ambition?

"I think some Hamilton musicians have actually gotten through the phase of actually [getting] out to do something — make music and take on the world — because in Hamilton you have barriers continually put in front of you. It's very hard to get gigs, you can't really play in Auckland — well, you can, but they don't like you because you're from Hamilton! A lot of musicians are in a space where they really are just doing it for the enjoyment. You do need a certain amount of respect for what you do, but a lot of people are at the point where they just like getting together and making interesting music and occasionally performing it live."

We've all heard the phrase 'Dunedin Sound' do you think Hamilton music has anything unique?

"Short life spans, bands that spring up overnight, do something interesting, and disappear before anyone has really got hold of what they were about. There are the more enduring bands, but... I guess there is quite a freshness and lack of seriousness in what's going on. That's how I would compare it to some other cities."

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