



Nothing's Happening!

A year ago last summer, and Auckland trio Nothing At All! are sitting in the back seat of a van that's zooming over the Newmarket Viaduct toward the city. Returning home after the first leg of the band's second nationwide tour (this one with the Dead Flowers), Tony, who played furious guitar over the previous four evenings, is moved to dismiss the sprawling metropolis before him as, "a shit-hole covered in smog".

Really, he's only describing my neighbourhood, for on a lazy Tuesday in mid-October, I've been brought to a setting not far from Tony's North Shore home, that proves the grass is much greener on the other side. In the four or so years since Tony, Dion (bass), and Paul (drums) discovered this hill-with-a-killer-view high above Castor Bay, they've never once encountered another human being. The "Nothing At All! place" is where it's at.

Just as it would be impossible to explain why so many key people were all in Dunedin at the same time, during the initial explosion of Flying Nun, it would be equally difficult to explain why, in the past two decades, so many of Auckland's 'left-field' guitar bands have sprung from the environs of the North Shore. In the late 70s and early 80s came Blam Blam Blam, Screaming Mee Mees, Arms For Children, and the Dabs, while later on Goblin Mix, Bygone Era, the Battling Strings, SPUD and the Nixons flew the flag. Nowadays, Muckhole, Pacecar and Nothing At All! make up the best of the new breed.

The latter's story begins in 1990, when serial bad behaviour led to Tony's expulsion from Auckland Boys Grammar. At 14, he'd already been bitten by the rock 'n' roll bug through a steady diet of the Pixies, the J  sus and Mary Chain, and Dinosaur Jr.

"I was just discovering music then, and it drove me to want to be able to write songs and play that sort of music. Although, at that stage, I wasn't aware of developing your own style."

The new kid at Rosmini College in Takapuna found common musical ground with Dion and Paul, and Nothing At All! was born. Starting with six members, the group was soon chopped in half, and the trio began writing songs and practicing in earnest downstairs at Paul's house —

much to the distress of the surrounding neighbours. It was obvious they began as they meant to go on.

"Loudness just came naturally. I suppose a lot of it was me trying to compete with Dion."

Forced to hunt for rehearsal space elsewhere, and also on the lookout for someone to help with recording, the arrival on the scene of John Baker and Z Bob, the architects behind the Frisbee recording studio, proved timely. Familiar with Baker from his previous career as frontman with the legendry Pyschodaisies, the two parties struck an immediate rapport, and it wasn't long before Nothing At All! had notched up their first recording, a song called 'Journey' ("I don't know if you've ever heard that. One day it will be a Number 1 single, it's got a catch to it."), and played their debut gig in Northcote with Frisbee bands Smak and Gestalt, in March that year. Tony has crystal clear recollection of the experience.

"That was really scary. I was really nervous, but it was quite natural... I didn't feel out of place, or that people were looking at me in a weird way."

Nothing At All! confined their live appearances to areas north of the Harbour Bridge for the duration of 91 and 92, when they played countless shows in churches, war memorial halls, sports clubrooms and at

parties, steadily building a loyal following.

"We really worked hard to get that fan base on the Shore, and our Shore friends stuck with us even though they were listening to the same set for over a year. It got to the stage where we could stick a few posters up and we were guaranteed to get a good crowd. We were doing shows that were just full-on, like there was a couple of shows that there were stabbings at, stuff like that."

Throughout 1993, Nothing At All! continued to set records for 'the most gigs played', by now having made the journey into downtown Auckland to perform. They recorded the raw and raucous four-song cassette *Loophole* early in 94, and followed it with a nationwide tour in April. Sleeping on floors, the band played every night for three weeks, staying true to Baker's claim, "we'll play anywhere there's a plug". Often they performed to extremely small crowds, and were even paid \$200 in Motueka to keep the amps turned off. Yet, the weird got weirder still.

"Somebody put their shitty underpants in our dope bag. There was a virus that went around, I think we picked it up somewhere in Christchurch. Anyway, somebody shat their pants, and the next morning we went to roll up a big joint, but there was these underpants full of shit in our pot. Therefore, we had to chuck it out

— I wasn't about to smoke it."

With fresh weed secured, Nothing At All!'s remaining main event for 94 was the five week tour with Dead Flowers that delivered them from Whangarei to Invercargill. Upon completion of this outing, having proved themselves masters of brash, speedy, belligerent, pop music, the image that had built up around the band — one, it must be said, not of their creation — threatened to overtake the music. Example: 'Nothing At All!, they're that punk band, just like the Sex Pistols and... Green Day!' Rightly so, the trio wanted no part in the resurgence of designer punk rebellion.

"We never ever decided to play punk music. We did not decide: 'Hey, we're going to be a punk band.' I find it quite weird, 'cause a lot of the stuff we're doing is far from punk, it's just rock 'n' roll. I listen to what they call punk music, but I personally wouldn't call us that."

"When a band gets categorised the first time, it sticks for awhile, so I suppose we'll be known as a punk band for a lot longer yet. It's never really got to me that much, but I don't see why people have to put a name on things. If there's this great band, check 'em out no matter what they play."

This 'not-punk' band released a second cassette, *Busted*, but cut down on live shows during 1995, particular on the Shore, after a string of hassles with the City Council, and the bad behaviour of punters who were attracting the attention of the Police, not only on the ground, but in the air. A show at the Takapuna War Memorial Hall was attended by the Eagle helicopter when the crowd drinking outside the venue grew to what was considered an 'alarming' number.

The fruits of this year's labours are best visible in your local record store, as the band have just dropped their self-titled debut through Festival Records (who are currently negotiating to sign the band directly). *Nothing At All!* captures spirited versions of live favourites 'TV Generation', 'Grand Central', and 'Nothing At All', and reigns in none of the frenzied energy of the band's stage (and sometimes floor) show.

With a third 'pub' tour just completed, they'll see the remainder of the year out with an "all all-ages tour" of the country in December. It's been proven by Supergroove that the way to conquer New Zealand is to relentlessly tour your ass off; Nothing At All! view that as a wise MO, and are also looking toward the bigger picture.

"I'd love to go to a Supergroove level here, that would be awesome, and we all wanna take it overseas and go the whole world over. We've got the stuff, and I don't doubt it for a second. We've got the product and we've got what it takes to do it, all we've got to do is find the people who wanna do it with us."

JOHN RUSSELL

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