

THE LONE STRANGER

As one of Husker Du's three, Bob Mould shaped a fair corner of eighties underground rock music with his electric guitar, voice and songs. Bob comes to Auckland to play us those songs at one show next month. Alone and unadorned, it promises to be a revealing portrait of the artist at close quarters.

Husker Du blasted their way through the early and mid-eighties, hauling hardcore into the critical and almost-popular pop conscience as they plastered melody onto their sonic squall. They were a Minneapolis-born trio who moved from a high speed 1982 debut on the tiny New Alliance label through a golden period on SST and ending in 1987 on Warners, the biggest label around. Along the route, Husker Du's musical and lyrical vision developed from *Land Speed Records* awesomely fast delivery of data control messages to a grand sweep of noise-based gesture and penetrating insight.

Bob Mould and Grant Hart, guitarist and drummer respectively, shared songwriting and vocal duties in Husker Du. Bass player, Greg Norton had a great moustache. Of Mould's songwriting at the time of *Flip Your Wig*, critic Bob Christgau wrote "Bob is still honestly confused and mad as hell. May his heart burn forever."

The Husker Du express derailed in 1988. Their last studio effort was a double album (their second such effort) called *Warehouse: Songs and Stories*, and then Bob Mould called an end to the band in the face of Grant Hart's mounting drug problem.

Bob Mould then embarked on a solo career, recording two albums for Virgin with an 'alternative supergroup' featuring drummer Anton Fier and bassist Tony Maimone from Pere Ubu.

On the phone from New York,

Bob is a thoughtful, soft-spoken guy. You just have to remember the guitar barrage of every record he has ever made, though, to know that there's nothing remotely New Age Bob or too Sensitive Artist about him. His music has always raged with the pain and emotions of his heart, but today Bob Mould sounds pretty damn happy.

The main reason for this happiness, he says, is the latest turn in his career. Earlier this year, he dissolved his band for the time being and set out to play some gigs alone with his songs.

"Initially I just wanted to get out and try to play some new songs but it has just kept snowballing from there," he says. "It is a real challenge, as I have no idea how I am supposed to sound acoustic. But so much of my material is initially written acoustically anyway — especially a lot of the really loud stuff on my albums! I think those loud songs like 'Poison Years', 'Hanging Tree' and a lot of the Husker Du songs all work very well and powerfully when I am solo."

"Playing alone means that the songs contain a much more accurate reflection of how I am feeling. With a band, musicians can be temperamental, and that energy can drive a performance on the night, but I find solo performance really liberating as it just reflects the song and me."

Along with newer material, which Bob calls 'optimistic' ("which is nice for me!"), anything that he's written is



fair game for this acoustic stuff — as long as he can remember it. "Some people," he says, "will occasionally call out for a song and I can't even remember how it goes. Sometimes a song is the furthest thing from my mind on the night, but I'll try it and end up forgetting the words halfway through and have to fake it."

Mostly Bob's playing twelve-string acoustic guitar, but there's an electric coming along too — not to recreate the wind-tunnel howl of his Husker Du sound but to accommodate different tunings. "It sounds more like country and western guitar," he explains.

And he's promising no cover versions either. "Other people's

songs? Oh no. People yell for those songs — 'Eight Miles High', 'Shoot Out The Lights' — sometimes I do a cover medley of four or five songs that lasts about eight seconds so maybe I'll do that in Auckland. I have so many songs of my own!"

After years of following the set list and knowing exactly when everyone's gonna do everything during a song or during a show, Bob has been relishing a bit of new-found spontaneity — going onstage armed with only a list of all the songs he knows and no particular order to play them in.

"It is a loose, informal thing, which is really refreshing for me," he says, adding that versions of songs can

differ radically from night to night depending on his own mood and that of the crowd.

"That has everything to do with it," he says, "They can be casual, fun shows with people down on the floor, but bigger formal venues where people are quiet and reverent — those kind of shows make me very nervous."

"It's different from night to night, which forces me to communicate with the audience a lot more. That's the real learning experience out of it."

He may make it sound like therapy, but Bob insists that it is good fun. "I haven't been this happy in years to do something," he says, "It's really so low key and no pressure involved, really a fun gig. I'm sorry in a way that people aren't getting to see an electric band, but people have told me recently that the acoustic show is much better."

Bob's two solo albums, *Workbook* and *Black Sheets of Rain*, see him working through some pretty heavy lyrical material — especially on the former, which deals pretty exclusively and explicitly with his feelings post-Husker Du. "I know that people found them difficult to listen to," he admits, "but that isn't the only side there is to me."

That use of writing as a form of catharsis seems to have developed over time. Early on, Husker Du dealt more generally with Life, and as time and albums went by, Bob seemed to be writing as a kind of bleak Reaganite Everyman as Grant Hart wrote more and more subjective love songs. Then the sleeve of *Warehouse* carried a weird rationale to keep living by from Bob, beginning "Sometimes you feel old, real old, older than you are..." and concluding that "You learn to enjoy some small facet of your predicament. Nothing too elaborate, just an attempt to adjust priorities. Revolution starts at home, preferably in the bathroom mirror..."

Phew. Bob begins to explain the pain in his lyrics to me. "The catch is," he

says, "that once you think you're done with writing the lyrics, you end up having to play the song a lot. You're reliving a little bit of it every time you play. Catharsis — that's the right word though." And it ain't easily done.

Beyond his musical career, Bob Mould is a prolific writer who has churned out "a lot of stuff over the last six years, many short stories," — some of which have been published in magazines.

As a songwriter, Bob Mould is about as far as you can get from the Lou Reed, Paul Kelly narrative tale-teller though. Reed is a writer with a knack for characterisation, something which Bob's output — recorded at least — hasn't come to grips with. He's aware of the difficulties he has, and what that means to his public, but remains nervous, saying "Well, I've got a few new things which are involved stories with lots of characters. I'm still looking at them, wondering what I'm gonna do with them, because it's so out of character with the way I normally write. Maybe that's one of the next hurdles I have to get over, taking the chance — I don't know if people will understand them or think they're nonsense, they get very involved... I don't know."

Having recently parted from Virgin, the company who released his first two solo albums, Bob Mould is a man whose career is at some kind of crossroads. He's sure, though, that there'll be "a record company out there that understands," what he's trying to do. He plans to have a new record underway by the end of the year, with a new band and some sonically "loud, quiet and different" material.

Our one chance to hear that material at its closest — an in all likelihood, most intense — is at the Gluepot next month. Don't blow it — see you there.

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