

Serious Set

Is Greg Johnson the hardest working man in Auckland showbiz? Four nights a week he and his jazz band Bluespeak perform at a variety of Auckland watering holes, treating the punters to a selection of Chet Bakerisms, for which he and his band each take home a decent weekly wage. But Greg's real love, his *raison d'être* as a musician, is the Greg Johnson Set, a low key pop group featuring Pagan chief Trevor Reekie on guitar and ex-Car Crash Setter Nigel Russell on keyboards.

This raffish-looking lineup have been playing around town for two and a half years. They've already released one album *Watertable* and there's another on the way, but despite their collective pedigree, the GJ Set remain curiously low-profile. They seem to fall between two stools in Auckland — being neither noisy hairy rockers nor aggressively alternative waifs. There seems to be a lack of an audience in this town for pop groups of a quiet persuasion — perhaps bands like the Greg Johnson Set appeal to the sort of people who have stopped going out to see bands.

Or perhaps people just don't know what exactly it is the GJ Set do. Perhaps people think they're a lounge bar combo or confuse them with Bluespeak. No such confusion exists in the mind of the man himself.

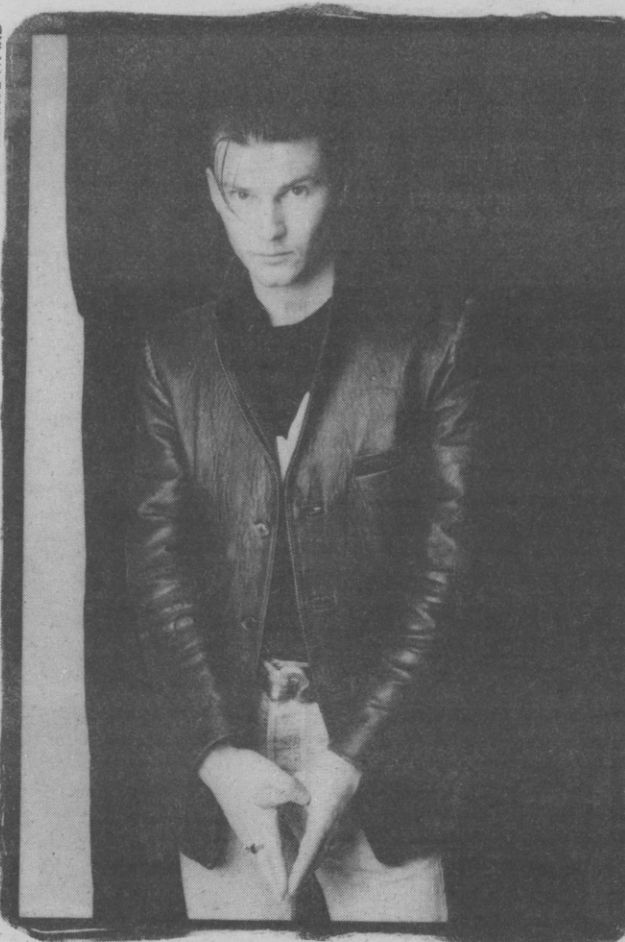
"I don't really see a great future in jazz for myself — it seems so retro to me, you'd always be an imitation of

someone else. I'm actually not a really great jazz fan. I'm doing it to make money primarily but I do love playing the trumpet and singing those songs. I'm not a great fan of a lot of instrumental jazz. I like Clifford Brown, Miles Davis, Chet Baker, I really like his style of playing."

Greg agrees that his Set haven't exactly been forcing themselves on the public of late. They've been working on a new album.

"Since *Watertable* we've had lineup changes and now I think the band sound good. We've done away with the sequencer and that's made a real difference, given the whole thing a lot more feel, a lot more freedom, it was very restricting playing to a machine, I hate it, won't do it again. And we've also consciously beefed it up for live. Some of the stuff we record just doesn't carry over into live and I've tried to harden the band a wee bit, it feels more compact now."

PHOTO BY DARRYL WARD



Are the Greg Johnson Set a pop group?

"In the same way the Chills or Straitjacket Set or Chainsaw Masochist are pop music — pop

without being pop, just contemporary music. We don't fit into a genre like Paul Kelly who's more country based but it's based around songs rather than, say, NRA

who are based more around impact and dance."

When asked to describe his music, Greg suggests it's the sort of thing he'd put on to do the vacuuming but I think what he really means is, it's music to sit down with a drink to. This raises the issue of vacuity, of which Greg Johnson has been accused, due to his tendency to pop up in glossy fashion magazine spreads, not to mention his penchant for striking screamingly louche poses (see above). Didn't he appear in Australian *Vogue* recently?

"Yeah, I was. I have an attitude towards press that I'll do anything that comes along — within reason. And the reason for that is that an article like that might tempt someone to go and buy a record, it's as simple as that."

And Nick D eat your heart out. Greg has even appeared as one of those *More 'Men We Love'*.

"I had a lot of shit for that," confides Greg. "It was a classic 'trying to look cool' photo but a photo's a photo, I just stood there and had it taken. If they want to make it look really moody then they'll do that."

With a resultant loss in credibility?

"I'm not sure what credibility is. Credibility is always in someone else's eyes. I know what I'm doing and I know that I'm serious about the music I do."

Despite the pin-up look and the aroma of High Street that wafts around Greg Johnson like Kerouac

coffee fumes, Greg Johnson is actually quite a serious young man. He doesn't draw his audience from High Street ("I don't think those people like our music very much, I don't think that crowd's really interested in music at all"). In fact, he worries that maybe he and his Set are actually *too* serious.

"I got Saturday nights off recently and started going out watching other bands, which I hadn't done for a while. We saw Honey Love and Semi-Lemon Kolas and These Wilding Ways, and the other weekend we saw Supergroove and MC OJ & Rhythm Slave and Emulsifier at the Powerstation, and I suddenly thought 'my god, we're very serious, aren't we!' But I think that's just the nature of the music. There is humour but it's black humour if it's anything. I guess these bands I mentioned are all 17 and 18, they've got more energy."

More than just a pretty face, Greg the 25 year old ex-architecture student does not dream of attaining Push Push like pin-up status but of making music that "comes from the soul" rather than some marketing angle. A novel concept indeed in this town.

"My ultimate ambition," he says somewhat wistfully, "is not to be a pop star but to live well off making records and to travel around. If I can make one album a year to the best standards possible and then tour, I'd be really happy."

DONNA YUZWALK

bars with macrame plant holders where you don't have to be wearing five hundred dollars on your back to get served. Had dinner at Sandra's, listening to an excerpt from her new tape coming out on Xpressway soon, then she dropped me at Sammy's nightclub in town for the big night of judging. Now this competition had garnered a lot of interest with \$7,000 worth of prizes to be won (not to mention the prestige) and Sammy's was packed.

The finalists were (in order of appearance) Cynthia Should, Das Phaedrus, My Deviant Daughter, Fun House, Hedonist, Windows, Tin Soldiers and Stink. Each group played

a 25 minute set, which struck me as the perfect length of time for almost any band to be on a stage, "always leave 'em wanting more" is the secret to most things in life but it is particularly apt when applied to rock bands. Quite a mixed bag, here are some nutshell reviews: Cynthia Should were earnest and wistful as House of Love, cleancut in image and song, English sounding; Das Phaedrus were uninspiring alternative heavy metal or intellectual thrash, best thing about them was the fact that the bass player wore glasses and looked nerdy; My Deviant Daughter fucked up their first song 'Sister Ray' because their drum machine conked out but they more

than made up for the false start, their 18 year old bass player is really something, both girls in the group are painfully shy looking, the boy spins from drumkit to guitar like a human top; Hedonist were great, maybe I'd have liked to see them win, they were dirty speed metal, rough and slick and the guitarist in the baseball cap with dirty long hair was sexy, I thought they were more messy and consequently more alive than, say, Shihad; Windows, hmmm, naff clothing but we're not here to judge bands by their appearance, sort of a funky Exponents, I believe some of the other (all male) judges were impressed by finger pluckin' bass technique and

vocal diction but those sort of things don't impress me and besides, I hate funky bass lines; Tin Soldiers reinforced my theory that there are much better vocalists down south. These guys are in the sixth form at high school but the lead singer has this raspy voice like he's been living hard for quite a few years, he looked like an un-dissolute Shaun Ryder, similar bowl haircut and the white jeans gave them that English Happy Mondays look, they had An Edge, and the singer had some mean repartee for a heckler; finally Stink, who were funky in parts and like ELP in other parts with that organ. I won't hold the funky part against them because the guitarist was another

charismatic vocalist and although he was cute his intelligence was what came through.

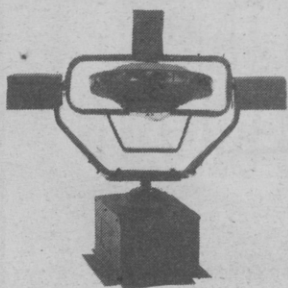
So at 1.35 the judges adjourned to the office to tote up their score sheets and the decision was reached with little argument (well, I was very tired by then). The first place getter was Windows, second was Tin Soldiers, third place went to Stink, then My Deviant Daughter and fifth place went to Hedonist (yey!!).

SUNDAY

Apparently some Radio One people weren't too impressed with the final decision (do we really need another Exponents?) but take it from me, you

can't please every one all the time. Me, I had a blissful time in Dunedin, it didn't rain and it wasn't even cold, my green army parker was completely unnecessary and I'd live there tomorrow if I could. My weekend was wrapped up with one more band, Rampant (with Doug and Steve and Billy and the old bassist from Pain) playing at a V8 Club benefit in the North East Valley. We only stayed for five songs before leaving to get our plane back to Auckland, but Rampant were excellent, featuring yet another passionate, intense vocalist in the form of Billy. They just don't make them like that up here anymore.

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AUGUST 17: SCOTTY'S TAURANGA
AUGUST 23: AUCKLAND, CACTUS JACKS
AUGUST 24: AUCKLAND, CACTUS JACKS
AUGUST 30: OHOPE BEACH RESORT
SEPTEMBER 3: AUCKLAND, CACTUS JACKS
SEPTEMBER 4: PALMERSTON NORTH, ALBERT MOTOR LODGE
(with The Exponents)
SEPTEMBER 5: HAWERA, FURLONG HOTEL
SEPTEMBER 6: WELLINGTON, CAR PARK
SEPTEMBER 7: MOTUEKA, SWANN HOTEL
SEPTEMBER 9: CHRISTCHURCH, CARLTON HOTEL
SEPTEMBER 10: CHRISTCHURCH, CARLTON HOTEL
SEPTEMBER 11: DUNEDIN, SHORELINE
SEPTEMBER 12: NELSON, CACTUS CLUB
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