



Dragon at the Western Musical Festival. Visible are Robert Taylor (rear view), Todd Hunter, Kerry Jacobson and Marc Hunter.

## at of the Street

"Before we left we thought it was some sort of crime to be commercial. It was impure. Now we're just a pop band," Marc says. "I mean when we left New Zealand we actually thought playing music was an end in itself. Oh, wow, far out... playing music." Marc fakes a spaced out expression.

"But after you've done that for 5 years and you're still carrying your own instruments, you start to think maybe there's something else."

But the change in musical style was not just an adjustment to commercial realities. "We were starving in a stinking flat in Paddington and it became obvious that the music we were playing and our situation were completely at odds. The life we were living was incredibly hard and day to day," Marc explains, "so the music got chopped down into terser statements."

Robert adds: "The whole thing gets very economical. Is this a good song? Can we do it on stage?"

Marc: "We didn't attempt to change. The environment forced changes on us. Once we changed we found that at least for the moment it suits us."

There's no doubt that their first Australian album, *Sunshine*, did reflect their circumstances. Urban anxiety in 4/4 time. And lots of catchy hooklines to deliver it.

But even after they'd recorded it, they had to bring its obvious strengths to the notice of the great Australian public.

"That album sold because we went out and sold it. We went out and played as many venues as possible, anywhere. Even now we do spots in Leagues Club, pubs and clubs. We're working all the time to broaden our audience. To keep in front of people and put bums on seats."

"As a result when our new album, *Running Free*, came out it went platinum in 5 weeks as a backlash from doing all that work." What's more all that exposure and a consistent ability to come through with the musical goods has landed them numerous awards from the Oz music papers — best new band, best album and so on.

Constant work has one other benefit Robert points out, "it's good practise for America where we'll have to do the same thing over again." Their contract with American label Portrait guarantees them a crack at the Stateside market but their strategy is unclear at this stage, though a support tour around America seems the most likely plan.

But with Dragon's matter of fact attitude, they're not worried. Marc: "Now it's a laugh. We enjoy it. Before it was serious. It was ooh, ooh man... I hit a wrong note, I'll cut my throat. Now we just get pissed and play."

And Robert adds laughing, "And let everyone else worry about us."

Allstair Dougal



Rocking Horse, Barry Saunders, Wayne Mason and Kevin Bayley (top) at Hinuera. Jim Lawrie and Clinton Brown (bottom) at the Island of Real.

## The Horse Rock Back

There's a tendency on these islands to become insulated in your own little town, so that you never know what the hell is going down at the other end of the country. Which is one reason why I hadn't heard much about R.Horse for a month or ten. One of New Zealand's veteran bands, Rockinghorse have been making some of the best music around here for years, enjoying varying degrees of favour with an audience that sometimes didn't quite know how lucky they were. They have had two albums released, and at one stage had a deal for three U.S. releases, which never quite got off the ground. The band have since left their recording company, EMI.

Apparently, the deal with EMI was for management, booking, and recording. The management side was the first to slip, and then the booking, and finally, the band were left to their own devices. I asked bass

player Clinton Brown what happened to their American deal.

"The whole thing wasn't handled very well by anyone. They wanted both albums and the rights to all our songs, as well as a third album. Ray Columbus got a really good thing happening, and put the idea to EMI". Wayne Mason continues, "The Nashville company was a production company, and they would have had to sell us to a record company. They were going to take 3 1/2%, so we would have got 3 1/2%, and EMI hassled over that. In the end there was no money in it for anybody."

The band have been working around New Zealand over the last year, and recently acquired a new manager, ex-EMI man Danny Ryan. They plan to record some demo tapes in Auckland early in 1978, using mainly new material, but also some that they have played live in the past. For the last six months they have had Barry Saunders, a Christchurch musician recently returned from Britain, adding his vocal might, as well as second guitar. Clinton Brown; "Since Barry's come in the band's got a lot more forward, more outgoing. It's another direction for the band, and it's one we're all happy with."

Wayne Mason agrees; "Probably our biggest problem in the past has been soft-sell. We used to think that all you had to do was turn out good songs. We used to do more diverse material, and I think you can overdo it. We used to get things like the publican coming up to us and saying, Unless you can play something more well known, you're out!, and now that same stuff is considered middle-of-the-road. Musical tastes have broadened."

Yet despite the more open nature of the rock audience, Rockinghorse play less original material onstage these days than when they were about the only group in NZ who did any. Wayne feels that the new approach is justified. "When our second album came out, about three quarters of our live numbers were original. But a lot of our stuff is not suitable for pubs, so we do a lot of covers. We're hoping to change that gradually. It's a lot easier when you have an album out."

With NZ bands such as Dragon and Split Enz hitting it off in Oz (and even further afield), and NZ producers Peter Dawkins and Alan Galbraith pulling good jobs over there, not to mention New Australians Mark Williams and Brent Parlano (the list goes on and on), it's surprising that any bands stay here at all. Clinton Brown; "There seems to be even fewer bands around than there was a few years ago. I think the whole scene has gone backwards. If you relate it to costs — for example, travel costs have trebled — the pay has stayed the same or gone down. The reason is that no-one belongs to the union. If all the musicians joined, the union would get the strength to act. Look at Australia. The proof is there. The union over there is so strong."

They must like it here.

John Malloy