

stage and at one point was hauled into audience. He laughed it off. As the excitement increased the final numbers passed in a blur the Rumour only recovering their poise for a creditable reading of *The Pink Parker's* "Hold Back the Night", before they quit the stage.

That night, back at the hotel, Parker and the Rumour were elated. It had been the perfect introduction to New Zealand.

That impression was not to last long. As they flew into Christchurch the next day, Parker observed that it didn't look much like a rock 'n' roll town. He was to be proved right.

The Christchurch Town Hall is no rock 'n' roll venue either. For despite its architectural splendour and plush decor, on this night it proved itself an acoustic hell-hole. From the circle you could see Parker and the Rumour flailing away uneasily on the stage below and it was only when, with their single "Hey Lord, Don't Ask Me Questions", a few people started dancing self-consciously around the television camera, that they visibly relaxed. But as Dave Robinson noted after the show "it sounded as though we were playing under a blanket at the bottom of a swimming pool" and the sound improved beyond that standard only occasionally. It had been a depressing sight.



The following day was free — that is there was no show that night. But for Parker that still meant five interviews on arrival in Wellington and a day taken up with various other pieces of business. That night most of the tour party went to the movies to take in *The Last Waltz*. It was the fifth time Brinsley Schwarz had seen it and he had no intention of quitting yet. When I asked his favourite part of the movie, he smiled and said, "The more I see it, I like it all more and more and Neil Diamond less and less."

Wednesday morning was spent filming two songs for *Ready to Roll* at TV1's Avalon studios. Despite Parker's strong image and the Rumour's best efforts at enthusiastic miming, it proved that one band stuck in front of *Ready to Roll's* barn-like set, looks much like any other. Only the music marks the difference.

The Wellington concert was to prove the turning point of the tour. Although plans were already being made to double the size of the P.A. for the Auckland dates, even at the sound-check that evening an improvement was apparent.

That night from the moment the Rumour hit into "Stick to Me", it was obvious we were witnessing something else again. Everything fell into place. The Rumour played at their best and, unlike Dunedin where the response had come too easily, or Christchurch, where the response had not come at all, the balance tonight was right — they proved they could deliver and the crowd was with them. Parker became not the capable rock 'n' roll singer I'd already seen but a manically intense figure glaring at the audience, all the more powerful because of his smallness.

The intensity GP could put into a song like "I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down" was frightening. He'd single out a woman member of the audience stare at her over his dark glasses and snarl:

*You think you got it all set up,  
You think you got the perfect plan,  
To charm any man you see,  
And play with every one that you can  
But I got news for you baby,  
I hope it don't hit you too hard,  
One of these days when you're at play,  
I'm gonna catch you off guard.*

It was sung with the kind of vitriol and strength that should have made the unlucky recipient shrivel in her seat.

The show went from peak to peak, Parker for the first time taking chances, changing vocal phrasing. The notes I'd been scribbling in the dark became ridiculous. I'd write "brilliant" beside one song, only to follow it with "very brilliant" beside the next.

The following day I told Brinsley how much I'd enjoyed the show, he smiled and said, "Yeah, we haven't played that well in a long while." It was the kind of show that could tempt a person to say they'd seen the future of rock 'n' roll. And I confess I did. It was hard to know what I'd witnessed — genius perhaps or some psychopath acting out his fantasies onstage. Either way it was real, staggeringly real.

Ask Graham why he has the compulsion to perform and he confesses "You just know that it's the closest to something real you're ever going to get to ... you're just trying to be a normal person by writing songs."

"It's like it's my only way of fitting in the world, you know. Before when nobody knew me, I was just totally ... an escapist really. Just do the normal things — go out and drink a lot and I knew I shouldn't be doing it. I knew I should be writing songs and when you write or perform that completes a circuit in yourself ... it's like completing yourself, you know."

Enquiring into his song writing habits, you find some disturbingly odd information. Is he a compulsive writer or could he, as Randy Newman once did, spend three years sitting around doing nothing? "Yeah, I could do that quite easily. I find I'm inspired at times and I don't even realise it. I play a guitar and suddenly something is happening where ten minutes ago I didn't even want to write another song again. I find I'm forced to do it. I am literally forced to do it ... it's



hard, you know what I mean?"

"You can't be a normal person if you write songs. You're a king hermit. I am anyway. I can't sit around with the group and get an idea and say: 'What do you think of this?' I can't stand rejection or ... interference, you know what I mean. I can't take it. I have to be a unit. You have to be lonely. You have to be on your own," he states flatly.

But this compulsion has its reward. "It's better than sweeping the road ... I mean the feeling of when you've got that song there, you know. There's nothing like it. When the band are doing it ... there's nothing like it."

Auckland, the next night, was a performance easily the equal of Wellington. But surprisingly the Friday night, the sold-out Auckland show that all the fans had booked for was, comparatively, a disappointment. Parker's voice had been giving him trouble and he had noticeable difficulty singing. Bob Andrews had also gone under to the 'flu and had spent the day in his room drinking brandy (strictly for medicinal purposes, of course). That night, Bob was reluctant

to stay behind his keyboards and spent much of his time dropping mikes or dancing inanely about. But if this final night lacked the intensity I'd witnessed in the two concerts before, it was still a triumphant evening. In front of an audience of devotees, it ended with the brass at the front of the stage blowing into the vocal mikes. Bob Andrews blowing drunken kisses to the crowd and G.P. shouting "Graham Parker and you together. Yeah."

It was clear that when Graham Parker and the Rumour won an audience too easily, they eased off. Present them with a cold crowd that has to be won over and they could blow you out of the back of the theatre.



In a band that has not yet had the success that it so obviously deserves, everyone around Graham Parker is possessed to some extent with his determined spirit. As Graham puts it, "I



feel the same as when I started, I feel as though nobody quite understands me, you know, nobody quite understands us. I liked the Eagles when nobody did. Little Feat when not even America liked them en masse. I liked the losers. When they become winners something happens ... it's a fight, it ain't easy. I know what it takes and it excites me ... every new person that gets into our music excites me."

But what happens if you're career stalls pretty much where it is, Graham?

He becomes thoughtful and taps his coffee cup with his spoon. "I don't know. I'll have to wait and see. If record sales don't keep on accumulating ... I don't know. I just think I'm talented, I can't help thinking that. It's really hard to know what you should expect to have ... it's too ...", he trails off.

But he gathers his thoughts and resumes. "So far the fact that we haven't reached masses of people has really inspired me. I'm on a mission," he laughs self-consciously at the use of the word, "to get as many people on my side as possible. Cos all I want is to be loved really like any other child ... you just want to increase the chances of people understanding you and understanding themselves."

"It is profound. You can put it down as just rock 'n' roll ... I don't want to analyse things but it does have an effect on people. It is real."

The audience Parker has won so far has to a large extent been the audience he's gone out and won. Can they sustain this constant work load? Brinsley Schwarz has his reservations. Now 31 and married with two children, he's been on the road for the 14 years since he left school. "We've done an awful lot of work. We've done more in three years with Graham than I did in six with Brinsley Schwarz. In the first year with Graham we did two albums, six tours of England, two tours of Europe and two tours of the States. Which is ...", he laughs, "... a lot."

"I look for an easing up. It cannot go on at the pace it has done for very much longer. I mean if we're going to spend a year in the States next year then that's it. There's nowhere else to go after that that needs any intensive work. We can't play England any more, that's saturated."

So is he with Graham if that intensive work becomes a reality? "Yes I think so. I'd go to the States and try it. I don't know how long I'd last. You need time. It sounds like you're whining but a musician needs time to sort things out, to gather yourself together before you do it again. If we get time enough then I think we'll last, if we don't then I don't think we've got much longer."

Ask Dave Robinson, Parker's manager, if he's prepared to accept that they might only be able to sell as many records as they do at the moment and he gets mad. "I won't accept that. I think Graham Parker has the potential to be the biggest thing since fried bread. I know we can do better."

A lot of the blame has been put on Mercury Records. Parker has even written a song for them. As Graham says "It wouldn't matter if I was singing *Saturday Night Fever* with Mercury, it would still be a flop.

"Mercury Poisoning" makes his attitude even clearer:

*Is this a Russian conspiracy,  
No, it's just idiocy,  
Is this a Chinese burn,  
I've got a dinosaur for a representative  
He's got a small brain and refuses to learn.*

I comment that it sounds like he wrote that with a great deal of glee. Seems that's an understatement. "Glee ... I was grinning my head off. Especially the part: 'Their geriatric staff think we're freaks/They couldn't sell kebabs to the Greeks.' Terrible rubbish really but it's true."

But the most encouraging aspect for the future must be the quality of the songs he's written that will feature on the next album. "Protection", "Love Gets You Twisted", "Passion is No Ordinary Word", "Nobody Hurts You Harder Than Yourself" and "Saturday Night Is Dead" are fully realised, adult songs.

Graham admits he's happy with the new material and if pushed concedes that, as the titles make obvious, "there is a bit of a thread running through them. I've been sitting around in my parents' place and I've suddenly come down from all that New York vibe that ran through *Stick To Me*. I've got back to simple things that are happening between people. The album will reflect all those kinds of things ... it'll actually be a bit more sensitive, you know."

But could it be the one to crack it for them? Graham doesn't know and doesn't intend to lose too much sleep about it. "With every record, I've felt it'll be the one that cracks it. It could be a great album but after the relative non event of our other albums I'd be surprised if this is the one. I don't care as long as I can make a living and reach more people every time. A little bit more ..."

Graham Parker is convinced of his talent. He's not brash about it as many performers with barely a hundredth of his ability are, it's a quiet self assurance. If pushed, he'll concede he's brilliant. After two of the shows I saw, I'm prepared to agree. At it's worst, Graham Parker and the Rumour put on a great rock 'n' roll show but at its best there was another dimension that went beyond the music into that area, overused in the Parker vocabulary, *reality*.

After the Wellington concert I asked Brinsley whether they were capable of getting any better. He replied, "We actually can get a lot better." I'd love to see it.

Alastair Dougal