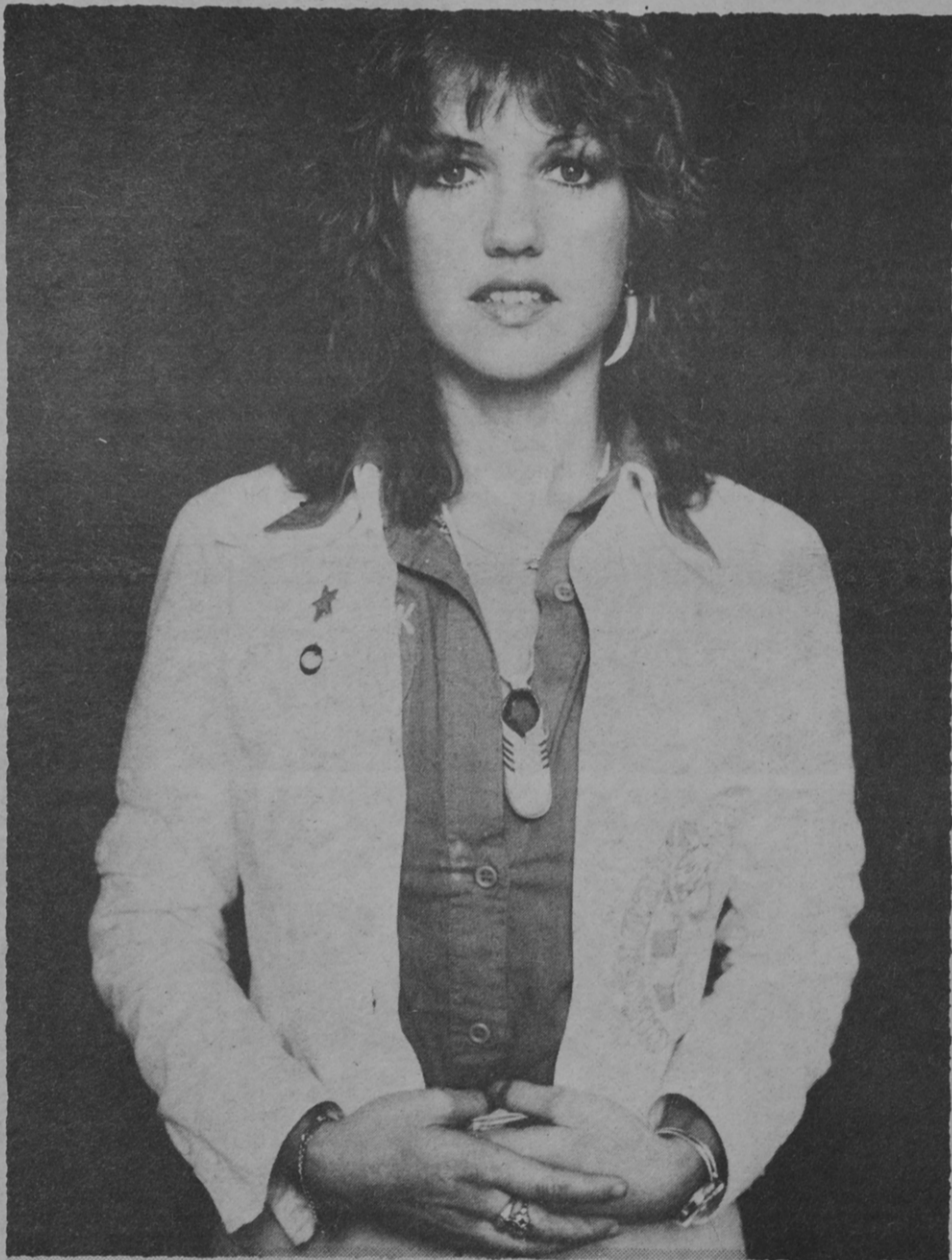




## STREET TALK TOMORROW THE WORLD

Street Talk: Mike Caen, Jim Lawrie, Andy McDonald, Stuart Pearce and Hammond Gamble.



## SHARON O'NEILL

The day that *Rip It Up* spoke to Sharon O'Neill her album, *This Heart, This Song*, made the national top twenty in its first week of release. Even more impressive, it entered at number twelve. This debut, apparently the highest ever by a local artist, is a heartening sign that New Zealanders are showing increased faith in homegrown talent. It is also a compliment to their taste as *This Heart, This Song*, is one of the freshest, most appealing albums by any female singer (and/or songwriter) to be released here in quite a while.

Certainly O'Neill's music has had considerable exposure of the past year, much of it boosted by a committed record company, but that too originally stemmed from public enthusiasm about her performance on TV's *The Entertainers*. "Luck's On Your Table" not only took her to third place but secured a recording contract and then became a successful chart single.

In the face of such popular acclamation and the strength of the album it seems hard to credit that until "Luck" was down on acetate O'Neill

was somewhat unsure of her writing abilities. As she puts it:

"Until I could play it to people and they said they liked it objectively as a song I couldn't have that final belief in them. But once that happened I was away, writing a lot more songs, feeling a lot more in control."

As a performer, however, she already had the confidence born of long experience. She began ten years ago, singing and playing acoustic guitar in a folk trio, "We did a couple of songs I'd written but," she laughs, "they sound funny now." In 1972 she turned professional, joining Christchurch Golden Disc winning group Chapta. After they split, the next three years were spent on the road with different bands, culminating in eight months of 1976 in S.E. Asia as vocalist for Shiner. Of the years touring, O'Neill remarks, "I loved every minute of it and found it very hard to settle afterwards. But travelling is tiring and I did almost no writing. Not even in Asia where it was easier. I'd get blase: get up about eleven, laze around the hotel pool then do a gig. I didn't really write until I was back, settled in one place."

Nonetheless the years on the road were invaluable in learning to handle being a woman in a male lifestyle. "It took me a while to build up the answers," she says cryptically. "I'm not what you'd call an aggressive person anyway but I had to learn to say what I mean." As a writer-arranger-performer she needs that strength. "Now people consult me right from the word go in the studio. The road toughened

If the old blues maxim about paying your dues still holds true, Street Talk are in the black for sure. They have survived numerous personnel changes (eighteen musicians in all) and years of gigging on the pub circuit. They started out at fifty dollars a night as a three piece blues band at the Windsor, and within weeks were a cult with Auckland's blues'n'booze freaks. Not too long ago I was watching them at a Northland pub when a particularly obnoxious drunk walked into the room and fired an empty bottle their way. Such are the joys of a musician's life around here.

So I guess that being discovered by Kim Fowley is OK by Hammond Gamble, singer, guitarist, writer and founder-member of Street Talk. We sat around the living room of his Ponsonby home, took in a sunny Auckland evening, and talked about it over a cold beer.

"He's just an incredible producer. He's light years ahead of anybody I've ever been associated with. He really did some amazing things with us as far as getting us to work at speed, and he got things co-ordinated really well. He has an incredible ear."

Longtime member and bassist, Andy McDonald was equally impressed. "He's quite capable of having his mind on two or three things at once. He'd be listening and jotting down lyrics in his mind on what would fit the tunes. The studio is his thing. He thrives on it." According to Hammond, he keeps typical rock'n'roll hours as well. "We got four tracks down in the first night. We were finished at five in the morning, and we didn't start till four or five in the afternoon. Kim's wide awake at seven o'clock in the morning after being in there for fifteen or sixteen hours. Glyn Tucker engineered it all really well, while Kim sort of directed, arranged, and produced the whole thing, and promoted it, along with WEA."

Although three or four of Hammond's songs were complete before they recorded, much of

me for that. Before I'd beat about the bush on something or just leave it. You have to know what you want and say it if it's wrong. If a male musician sees you're floundering he'll walk all over you. It's a situation that can crop up so often."

1977 found O'Neill back in New Zealand, committed to writing and pursuing a solo career. That year had its frustrations. She made demos of three of her own songs (including "Luck") for EMI and even went to Melbourne — "on my own with just my little bag and my songs" — but without success. She (with guitarist Brent Thomas) also joined Mark Williams final tour in 1977. But it was not until May '78, as support act for Leo Sayer that O'Neill first performed her new compositions on stage.

Her writing is done at the piano. "Its in the lounge and I can't pass it by. If I'm not playing through songs I'll sit and fiddle with some chords. If a song appears it usually comes in a rush. Sometimes it races ahead of me and I get a bit confused trying to get it down in such a hurry." She tries again to describe her writing process. "It sounds a bit corny to say the ideas pour out but they really do. I can't keep up. It's like the song's all there and I just have to pick it up off the floor and play it. But," she adds quickly, "that only happens maybe ten minutes in a week."

The vocal arrangements are worked on afterwards and occasionally an adjustment is made; for example a verse was later removed from the album's title song. The lyrics are usually written with the music. "They're going round in my head while I'm finding the chords. Very often its the mood I get in with the chords."

Although the songs on the album are personal O'Neill doesn't see them as autobiographical. "Only the title song is about me and that's more on the business than a love situation." Nearly all the other lyrics share a theme of love's transience, of women suffering

the album was cowritten in the studio by Fowley, Mike Caen, and Hammond. "Kim either patched up lyrics and wrote whole verses, or he wrote the whole lot, so what we did was put music around his lyrics, with his direction."

The band are very happy with the finished product, and unconcerned about the possibility of alienating some of their diehard blues fans. Hammond: "I think the album has really strong blues overtones. In America you get loads of people who play this sort of music or that sort of music, and people would rather pay more money to see B.B. King or someone like that, but they're not going to pay to see the likes of me play blues. And that's fair enough."

"There's more blues in that album than anything else, apart from rock'n'roll. It's not full of guitar breaks but guitar solos are more of a live thing. Half the time, doing a guitar solo in the studio is not going to come off with a good feel. This last ten or twelve years people have had guitar solos up to their necks."

There's no doubt that the blues feel is there, but a close listen to *Street Talk* reveals a solid rock'n'roll basis to the songs, with the bass and drums right up front in the mix. Andy: "The idea of this album is accessibility. As Kim said, at this stage, no-one outside of Auckland knows you. You've got to put down something that is the essence of what *Street Talk* is, but that a wide range of people are likely to listen to. Lets face it, you've gotta have airplay before you can sell records and create an audience for yourself."

Apart from the obvious importance to the band, *Street Talk* is a milestone in New Zealand recording history in that it has the full backing of a record company with international connections. That it takes an L.A. producer to bring this about is less important than the fact that it's happening. It has already been released in Japan, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Hong Kong (at the instigation of WEA head Tim Murdoch, who pushed the album very hard at a recent Kuala Lumpur conference). Fowley is pushing for release in the USA, UK, and Europe. With all that muscle behind them, I wondered if the band felt in danger of being hyped in the same way as Springsteen was with the 'Future of rock'n'roll' tag. Andy doesn't think so.

"Its not hype. Its only a continuation of the kind of level that he (Kim Fowley) tried to take things up to. New Zealand is a very low key place, and so is Australia, but its not like that in the Northern Hemisphere. If you compare that (the WEA press release) with press releases say, in America, it wouldn't appear as hype."

Nor does the band lose a lot of sleep over the suggestion that one or two songs are Springsteen influenced. Hammond: "Bruce Springsteen hasn't been a big influence on me, and I don't believe he's been a big influence on Andy or Jimmy or Mike or Stuart. "Street Music" is a song that Kim wrote with me and Mike Caen. Kim had a pile of lyrics — real American type lyrics. I sang it in a way that made sense with the lyrics. What it's all to do with is the phrasing of the lyrics."

What knocks you over at the first listening to this album is the sheer professionalism of the playing and the recording. The more you hear it, though, the more songs sink in. The first four songs could all be singles, with good hooks, ace musicianship and Jim Lawrie's powerful drumming. My favourites are "Poison Letters", a comment on the more mercenary aspects of divorce, and "Lazy Pauline", a Hammond Gamble song that's more NZ than DB Lager or mediocre politicians.

Andy got the last word in. "As time goes by, there's a demand for a certain style, and people can market almost virtual crap and feed it to the people if that's particularly what they want. They'll buy it. Music's got to that stage. We're trying to retain our artistic integrity, but we don't wanna starve. You gotta balance it up. There's a market out there as well as an audience."

John Malloy

through male disregard and becoming hard in order to survive. "They're more things observed and compared to my own life. If I've seen something come out in other people's experiences and thought, well, that's obviously how it is then I may end up writing about it." She ponders. "Strangely, since the album, the songs I'm writing now are becoming more personal, more about music and the business. I don't quite know why."

She is using Wellington's Marmalade Studios to get down some demos of new material. "It's important because a song will only stay in my head for so long. I don't write things down and if I get sick of playing it I may lose it." At the moment she has enough for another album and "there's still the odd one or two floating around."

Meanwhile we have her first album to enjoy; eleven fine songs sensuously sung and admirably supported by a hand-picked crew of musicians led by Brent Thomas. The overall standard is so high that even expected highlights such as "Luck" and the title track don't shine above the rest.

If the album has any shortcoming it is in the production. Radio NZ producer Dick Le Fort has obtained a clean, crisp sound but the fact that the basic tracks were originally recorded in a mere couple of days for 2ZM's *Group of the Month* programming means that the instrumental presence is lacking in punch.

New Zealand artists cannot, of course, enjoy the same budgets for recording as top overseas stars. Because, say, Linda Ronstadt can command the world's best studios for months just in order to get the rhythm tracks right, that doesn't mean her album is going to be superior. There's also the question of talent and *This Heart, This Song* shows that Sharon O'Neill is definitely in world class. Forget roller-skating in the U.S.A., there's more original and enjoyable music being made here at home.

Peter Thomson