



Overnight success is the stuff of the Hollywood myth machine. Too many rock musicians lost in the rut they call "the road" know it for a falsehood. The Knack are an overnight success. Fittingly, Hollywood is their home.

Formed a year ago, the Knack have an album, *Get the Knack* (their first), and a single, "My Sharona", (their first) at the top of the American charts.

At the same time as they are enjoying this enormous initial success the Knack are in New Zealand playing to enthusiastic crowds, who, only weeks before, had never heard of the LA quartet. It is an occurrence unprecedented in New Zealand entertainment history.

For the Knack it's a way to kill time before they embark on their first American tour and to test themselves before an unknown audience. It is a remarkable aspect of their quite remarkable success that it has been achieved without the extensive touring and attendant promotion usually required to launch an act.

"The time was right," says lead singer Doug Fieger. "But it has been a long gestation period for Fieger's vision of "a teenage rock and roll band."

He told *BAM*, the world's other great free music paper, that he formed the idea for the Knack eight years ago but was unable to find like-minded players. Five years ago he met Berton Averre. They began writing songs together but were met with continual rejection.

"The fact is, we're just doing the music we love, which for five years we were told wasn't commercial. Now that people have gotten around to playing pop music we're being labelled as mercenaries.

"As a band we like to think we follow in the straight tradition that goes from Elvis Presley to Buddy Holly to Jerry Lee Lewis to Little Richard to the Rolling Stones to the Kinks to Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols.

"To me, all of those bands follow the same basic tradition of playing rock and roll with a simple, small combo, making a bigger sound than the sum of the parts. And that's what we do.

"The time was right, the band was good, the songs were there, and kids were starved for rock and roll. There's not too many bands playing rock and roll."

ROCK, ROCK, ROCK

Rock and roll is life's blood for Fieger, a manic clown who, if he hadn't been a singer, would have made a good actor.

On stage, he's the fulcrum, he dominates proceedings by force of personality. On his right and left are bass player Prescott Niles, who bounces up and down under a tangle of curls, and lead guitarist-second vocalist Berton Averre, who makes a solid fist of playing in his first group. At the back, drummer Bruce Gary sweats, and sweats, and sweats. It's in no small part due to the thrashing of Gary that the Knack's live sets have the impact they do.

Fieger's impressed by the New Zealand audiences. "New Zealand rock and rolls," he yells at his clamouring first night Auckland audience. "I don't usually say this, but you're the best audience we've ever played to."

New Zealand is a prelude to America. "We want to do the US right and it's taking us a while to get the right venues together. Our manager is very particular about where we play, how we promote it, stuff like that. So he personally is going to almost every city we're playing, checking out all the promoters and that takes a lot of time. And in that time — the album was taking off anyway, it was number one without us ever playing live, without us ever doing any interviews or anything — we figured we wanted to do something in that month or so instead of just waiting to tour the States, so we figured we'd come down here, go to Australia, go to Japan, to Hawaii, have a vacation." Here Fieger laughs. He laughs frequently, his eyes gleaming, at whatever passing image tickles him.

KID'S BAND

There is also another factor in the timing of the New Zealand tour to precede the six-week American tour starting early September. American school kids are still on vacation. The US tour coincides with the return to the classroom.

"It's a kids' band," says Fieger, without a qualm, "a band for the kids. In Los Angeles, the way the album happened, it was word of mouth, kids telling other kids, radio telling kids. When kids are back in school there's more contact so we want to coincide the tour with the beginning of school.

"What we are and what kids I'm around want is fun. We stand for fun but we're not singing about holding your hand. We're talking about other parts of your anatomy. Little kids don't want to hold hands any more.

"This is fun to us. The only thing I ever really wanted to do was to have fun. It's much better than working."

Fieger and Averre write most of the group's songs together, although Fieger says, "I always put the words in his mouth because I'm

singing it."

He sees the album as an album full of singles. "We consider each song important. We didn't just write a hit and then write a bunch of filler material around it. "Sharona" is no more important than "Good Girls Don't" or "Let Me Out" or "Monkey and Me" to us.

THE SONG'S THE THING

"We believe in songs. If there is a group attitude or philosophy — I don't believe in those words; ah, attitude is cool, attitude is how you hold yourself, it's not thought out, it's something you are and you carry with you — but if there is an idea it is the idea of songs. All the great rock, pop, country-western, any kind of jazz, are great songs.

"The play's the thing in which I shall catch the conscience of the king" — Willy the Shake. And that's where it comes down to. If you don't have hit material you can't make hits. Me and Berton try to write hits and if it's not an A song, if we don't feel it's a hit, we don't do it. Because we're a live band we try the songs out in front of people and if the people respond then we know it works."

At Auckland's Mainstreet it certainly does work. The show is mainly the LP, but delivered with a good deal more force. Live, the Knack are a rock and roll band with a lot more bite than is apparent on the album.

Fieger is happy with what Mike Chapman did for them as producer (their ideas on how to present the band and the songs seem to coincide), but he acknowledges that the group in person is something more.

"That always happens. When I saw the Who it was the same thing. They were great on record but their live show had their personalities right up there, up front. Any really great live rock band will be that way. The record will be one thing, but the live show will be that, plus something else."

RAVING UP

Even though they are a lot punchier live than on record I still don't go for their ballads. Perhaps they remind me too much of better-forgotten American wimps like Tommy James. As always, my preference is for the rockers, especially "Frustrated", "Siamese Twins (The Monkey and Me)", and, of course, "My Sharona". The band also throws in a few oldies, Buddy Holly's "Heartbeat" (on the album) and "Rave On" and Eddie Cochran's "C'mon Everybody", as well as a rager called "Saving Up to do some Raving Up". I thought I'd heard all the great rock and roll songs, but it's a new one on me.

Surprise, surprise. Fieger and Averre wrote

it. "I went to Berton and told him I wanted to write a kind of Little Richard song to end the set to make sure people know that's it. And I said I wanted to call it 'Having a Raveup' after the Yardbirds' album because that was always one of my favourite albums. He came up with the music and I wrote lyrics to it."

The group's white shirt-black tie appearance and the three-minute, close-harmony song they specialise in has drawn comparison with the Beatles. They're on the Beatles' old American label, Capitol (At the height of Beatlemania a group called the Knack was signed to Capitol, but that group has long since vanished), and *Get the Knack* has reportedly sold more copies than any debut album since *Meet the Beatles* broke the mop tops in America 15 years ago (God, is it that long ago?).

BEATLES' PARODY

"We love the Beatles, the Beatles were the best," says Fieger, "but for people to ask us if we want to be like the Beatles is like asking a rookie baseball player if he wants to be like Babe Ruth. Of course he wants to be like Babe Ruth, if that comes from the stance or if that comes from the way you swing your bat. But if they say that, I just go yeah okay, because music stands up on its own and the band stands up on its own."

Fieger admits that with tongue firmly in cheek he arranged the back cover photograph of the album to parody the Beatles of the *Hard Day's Night* period. "I'm cheeky and I don't care."

Since the band formed last year it has been a meteoric rise. "I met Prescott, the bass player, just a week before we did our first rehearsal. We played our first gig on June the first 1978. By our fifth gig which was in the middle of the second month we were together we were the biggest band in LA and were drawing the biggest crowds."

New Zealand expatriates Hello Sailor regularly opened for the Knack. Fieger says the Knack asked for Sailor to open for them because there was no other band in L.A. who could do the job as well.

He gets wide-eyed and wondrous extolling the virtues of Sailor and Mother Goose, whom he saw several times at the Starwood. These two bands were all he knew about New Zealand before making the trip.

NEW ALBUM

After the American tour the Knack start rehearsals for their second album. "There's no concept for the second album. Just more good songs. There will be progression, definitely. We're going to do a piano song, it's about a guy pining for his wife in Jamaica. We have another real strong song (like "Sharona") on the next one. We don't do it live because we're sort of saving that one to unleash on an unsuspecting public.

"We may also include "The Hard Way", a very obscure Kinks' song. We love Ray Davies. He's a great songwriter and the reason he has stayed great for so long is that he never really made it so big and got lazy. Very few people can do rock and roll longer than 10 years."

The Knack plan to keep working. They expect to be back in this part of the world in January when the northern winter makes touring in the States and Europe impossible.

So far success hasn't changed Doug Fieger. "It's made no difference. I'm living exactly the same way I lived before. I haven't seen any money. None of us have, really. The only thing that has changed is girls. More girls think I'm desirable. Not that I'm that promiscuous or anything, it's just that people see you in a different way. Not my friends or people that I've known a long time. They see me exactly the same as they always did, because I've always been an arrogant asshole. So I'll never change.

"I don't look at rock and roll as a pressure. It's fun. We know there's gonna be craziness. Last night a fight broke out in the audience. It got a little hairy, kinda scary in a way. But that's part of it. It's fun and when it stops being fun I think we'll stop doing it. It's never stopped being fun for me or the band. Maybe if you ask me in two years.

"When this band is no longer having fun we're not going to do it any more. We're not in it for the money and we're not in it for the glory. We're in it for the fun. And yet money and glory comes with the turf and we'll accept them. We're not going to turn them down, I assure you."

Ken Williams

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