

After a longish period of resting on their laurels the Netherworld Dancing Toys have recently found some much-needed vigour and zest, resulting in some of the best songs to come from this part of the world.

The NDTs are in the unusual situation of possessing two songwriters, guitarists Nick Sampson and Malcolm Black, who each write separately in quite different styles.

I grabbed Nick backstage at their lively Christchurch Town Hall *Shazam* concert and asked him whether this produces any conflict and whether the pair have considered writing together.

"Yeah, we've thought about doing it, there are a lot of things we'd like to try. We're just starting to diversify now, in the past we've had a very organised, singular way of writing but this year it's very much group writing. Our ideas don't clash much at all, because we tend to write songs of a similar vein and once they've been through the NDTs' butchering machine they come out with a similar feel anyway.

"Malcolm or myself comes along with the basis of the song, the main lyric or melody line, then we mess about with them, (laughs) sometimes for weeks and weeks until they start falling into place."

What about the content of lyrics? There seem to be some quite interesting sentiments in your songs but they aren't always projected that well.

"That's something we are very aware of and we're trying to develop. But as far as lyrics go one of my new songs, 'This Town', is about going home to New Plymouth after three and a half years and seeing the impact on the place that all the energy projects have had. Everyone's wearing denim work clothes and walking round with \$100 in their pockets.

"Initially we were just writing straight, basic love songs, but even simpler songs like 'The Trusted Ones' and 'Memories' have got deeper lyrical content which we are trying to project more in the music.

"There are a lot of things I want to say, especially about New Zealand, and I'm trying to work on that. I'm not trying to talk or comment on the great NZ society but I think this country's got a very distinctive personality and I'm endeavouring to project that in some of the songs."

Are there any other songwriters around saying anything worthwhile?

"Well I really liked the Miltown Stowaways, even though their lyrics were more about people and emotions in general than NZ, and Chills' Martin Phillipps I think is one of those songwriters who deals in emotions, atmosphere and mood."

So you don't deal in similar emotions?

"Tears In My Eyes' is definitely a mood song about how people are changing. It was also written in quite a frank manner about a friend who killed himself last year. I've started to experiment quite a bit; 'The Moment is Magic' was inspired, and I don't want to sound pretentious, but last year I was right into Keats, the poet, and he believed in the emotion and enjoyment of the moment to the full and that was written about that belief. Doing English Literature at varsity for

Malcolm Black



Nick Sampson

three years I found a lot of writers deal with these types of emotions in the human environment and although I'm not trying to make grandiose statements, I'm aware of it and it comes through in some of the songs."

It's fair to say that your songs are a good deal poppier than Malcolm's, both in arrangement and lyrics.

"Well, when the band formed I already had about half a dozen songs and even when we got along I was more prolific — Malcolm's only beginning to write on a more regular basis. My early songs like 'Sheer Thrill' and 'Without You' were just pure pop songs and whilst I'm not embarrassed about them I want to develop my songwriting further. Lately I've been inspired by the likes of Pale Fountains, The The, Violent Femmes and the Psychedelic Furs."

The Netherworlds haven't done that well in the studio yet — why?

"In the studio, with both the first EP and 'Trusted Ones', we just went in, bashed it out and thought 'yep, that sounds like us'. We need to go into the studio with a producer who really knows what he wants to do. For the next single (possibly with Don McGlashan producing) we are going to rehearse the songs first, work on the arrangements and by the time we go into the studio we'll have a good idea of how we want the songs to sound.

"The live thing has happened because we have a lot of energy on stage — we've also played live a lot, whereas with recording we've done it so few times and we've always been very rushed so it's ended up sounding like the band live in the studio but without the energy.

"We've only just begun to realise in the last three or four months the possibilities — previously with some songs we just used to add horn riffs but now they are part of the songs, emphasising lyrics and melodies."

What would you like to achieve with the band?

"We either let the band die gracefully or we decide that the band could go further and we all



Netherworld Dancing Toys and crew.

get behind it with commitment to make it nationally and internationally successful.

"There is a lot more to it than touring round New Zealand playing in pubs. I don't want to become a Party Boy, just playing music to earn money. I think that the music that the band has to offer is developing into something really worthwhile and personally I think music is the most important thing to me at the moment. Since I was 12 I've always wanted to be a professional musician. Now I want the band to be successful and I want to be successful personally."

Later, much later, back at the Dancing Toys' motel, I finally get a chance to talk to Malcolm Black, who has contributed some of the band's more memorable songs. How does he view the band's songwriting?

"Firstly, Nick and I come from completely different musical backgrounds. Like, I missed the whole punk thing, I was playing in a blues band, before that a cabaret band and I'd never heard of the Clash or anything like that. My idols were Lowell George, Leon Russell, Ry Cooder and Joni Mitchell. I got hold of the Jam about five years too late so I suppose Nick and I go about writing songs differently because of our backgrounds. I tend to write around my guitar playing and my melodies."

What about the lyrical content of your songs?

"Well, I've been thinking about that and I've come from a comfortable upper middle-class background and I can't write about things that I don't have any idea about. Like I haven't had any really bad times, like being hungry or out of work. I find it's easy to write angry songs or cynical songs and the only things I know about along those lines are personal relationships.

"Can We Get Away With It?' (one of today's modern classics, in this hack's opinion) is about people sucking up to fashion, which sometimes makes me feel as though I'm not writing anything important because I've never done any-

thing really important."

Tell me about 'Change to the Contrary'.

"I had the chords to it but couldn't think of anything to say so I picked up on the lyrics written by a friend of Nick's, Peter Fanning. Once again, it's a personal relationship, which I can identify with. I level this accusation at a lot of New Zealand writers in that it's bloody hard to write songs about things you don't know anything about, like writing about Brixton for example. All my lyrics so far have been one person's look at a group of other people, because that's what I do most."

Most of your songs have been perhaps the band's most memorable ones. Do you find the lyrics or the sheer power of these songs more important?

"It's one thing calling me a songwriter but I've only written about six songs, whereas Nick has written fourteen or fifteen. But as I've said you've got to write from what you really feel — I've tried otherwise but the results haven't been convincing. Also I found I had a problem when I started in that all my songs were what I called epics, in the way they were all bloody big bravo numbers, all big climatic songs. I wrote 'Bored to Death' intentionally, thinking I'd like to get away from that and keep it as a nice, smooth pop song. The reason songs like 'Change to the Contrary' are the way they are is probably because I write the music and lyrics at the same time and build up to the big idea, sort of like Bruce Springsteen. I think that's a fault of mine."

Even in something as orthodox as the NDTs there seems to be a lot of diversity in the music. How has this happened?

"I like the diversity — it all stems from the fact that when you're learning you've got to try out new styles. I think, though, that all of our songs sound like us because of the arrangements, the brass and our voices."

So it's not contrived?

"No, I don't like the horns as a window dressing, I hope we are losing that. And all of our songs are melodic because of the way we write them. Nick and I sit down and actually write a song, whereas some bands jam for a while and come out with an idea that way. Often there is not a song in what they are doing — there may be some clever pieces of musicianship, but I prefer a song that can sound good either played by a band or alone, on an acoustic guitar."

Whilst on the subject of other songwriters and while Nick gets me a cup of coffee, are there any NZ songwriters who you admire for their lyrics?

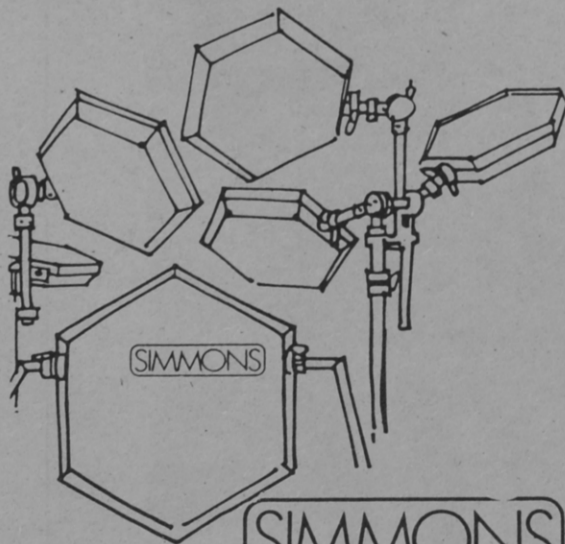
"Martin Phillipps, definitely, and I've also got a lot of time for Don McGlashan. I do think our songwriters have something to say because NZ is an unusual society in many ways but I don't think what they've got to say is earth-shattering. That also applies to myself, life is just too comfortable for me. But I suppose Martin Phillipps has a way, he can get into his own mind, he would be a good songwriter wherever he lived."

What would you like to get most out of the NDTs and what would you like to achieve with the band?

"The band for me fulfills an artistic lead and a bit of ego — people don't admit it but that's part of it. As far as the band goes I would like to see that it goes as far as the individual talents will take it; I feel we've got considerable ability. CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

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