

A QUESTION OF STYLE

RUSSELL THOMPKINS FROM THE LAND OF PHILADELPHIA SOUL

Late 1977, the Sex Pistols were the prevailing fuss and somehow the successful town halls tour by the Stylistics (string orchestra and all) didn't seem relevant to *Rip It Up*.

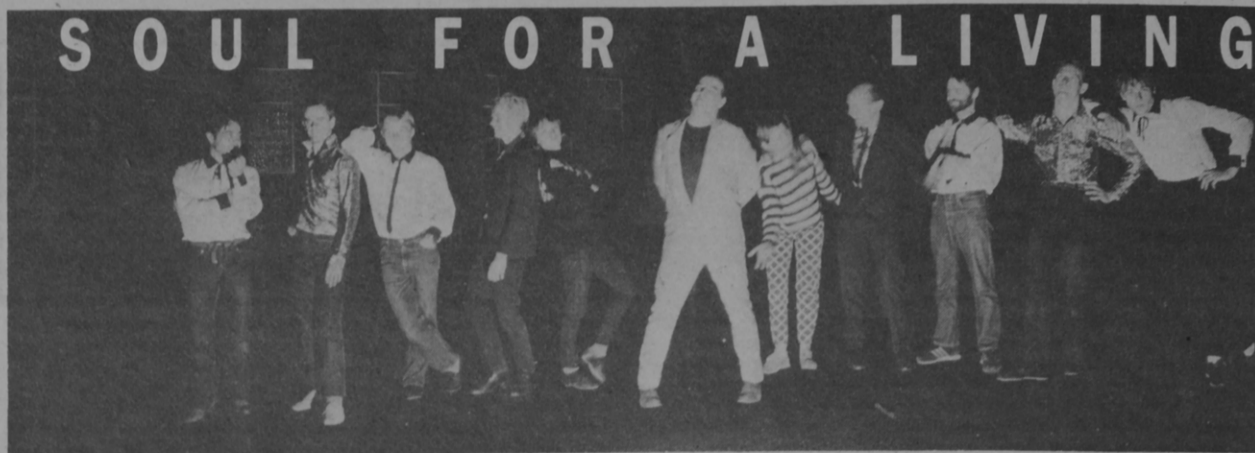
Times change and the Stylistics have returned with a back-to-basics six-piece band, after completing an album for hip New York label Streetwise (the home of whizz producer Arthur Baker). So now they're in the midst of the hip (or is it hop?), funky Big Apple. But let's look back at where they've come from and what

at its best, its driving R&B basis and committed performances overcome its sweeter ingredients to produce perfect soul music.

But the ideal balance eluded some producers. Robert Christgau in his *Guide To Rock Albums of the 70s* praised Thom Bell, noting that, compared to Van McCoy, Bell "knows the difference between strings and tomato soup."

The outstanding sweet soul voices of 70s Philadelphia music were Philip Wynne (the Spinners' lead singer, who died earlier this year aged 46) and Russell Thompkins of the Stylistics.

Wynne's hits include 'I'll Be Around', 'Mighty Love', 'Could It Be



Jive Bombers (L-R): Chris Neilson, Mike Fullerton, Jeff Hill, Wayne Baird, Merrin Smith, Rick Bryant, Janelle Aston, Alastair Dougal, Andrew Kimber, Tom Ludvigson and Mike Croft.

Soul people are people with vision, people with dreams. It goes with the territory, their music being full of dreams, broken and come true. New Zealand's Soul Man, Rick Bryant, is no exception. For the past year or so, he's been making his dream come true, fronting a bold, brassy 11-piece soul band called the Jive Bombers. At a time when economic necessity has kept local music pared down to the bare bones, Bryant is swimming against the tide, and succeeding.

"It was always at the front of my mind that I wanted to do this for a living," he says. "For years I'd been trying to do it in a half-hearted way, having soul bands without a trumpet, playing in bands that were almost soul bands. Really, it's something I've always been working towards, and as my resources and my organisational skills got a bit sharper, I was eventually able to put together something first on a part-time basis, and then more riskily, on a full-time basis."

Bryant's soul associations go back a good 10 years or more, from the days of lengthy cosmic funk jams in Mammal to the hard-rocking hybrid sounds of Rough Justice, Top Scientists and the Neighbours.

"Rough Justice was half-and-half soul with enough Stones covers to make us popular in provincial pubs," he recalls. "We also did some pretty strange originals. In Mammal, we played soul material because we had the vocal resources. Only Quincy Conserve had a horn section in those days. I used to play sax, but it wasn't the same thing."

The Jive Bombers were assembled last August, as an experiment, since Bryant was still part of the Neighbours at that time. Favourable audience reactions to the

mixture of Motown/Stax/Atlantic cover versions, with a touch of the blues thrown in, prompted Bryant to put his soul vision on a more permanent footing. So did people think he was crazy?

"Well, I've always known this," he laughs. "It's barely defensible as a rational plan, I think it's entirely understandable as an insane plan. The thing is, enough sponsorship and it'll work. It's not as if we don't gross well. Our expenses are high, but the earning capacity is there, and the earning capacity can increase. It's a new band, and the longer you keep a band together and the identity together, the better you tend to do."

"That's especially true when you keep the repertoire fresh while retaining the original appeal, as is the case with us. This means there'll always be covers of classics and things which deserve to be classics. But there's got to be room in it for originals, and that's not just because of the need to preserve some sort of respectability with the critics. Every band I've played in has had original material, it's just that it's never been demanded 100 per cent. It doesn't have to be all that high, if you've got a few good songs of your own, you're going to do better for the audience than if you've got three or four good songs, a dozen mediocre ones and a couple of covers which everyone likes."

Bryant may have his dreams, but he's certainly not envisaging the Jive Bombers as a big money-spinning international act. There are too many people involved, with too many other commitments. The band keeps going through playing live, bringing the money in at the door. Costs are watched closely, staying with friends rather than in hotels, wherever possible, even handling its own management and promotion. Bryant was cutting up tickets when I spoke to him, and band members are often pressed into service sticking up posters.

Motown era, and the music there set the trends for all the things we do now."

Thompkins cites Bobby Riddell, the Four Seasons, Len Barry and James Darren as some of the many artists who recorded at the old Cameo-Parkway studios in Philadelphia. He sees the influences that shaped the Stylistics' sound as largely "from the local music, but Motown had a big effect on us. In the early 60s, when Motown first

started doing their thing with Smokey Robinson, the Temptations, the Four Tops — when we first started singing rhythm and blues music we were singing their songs in talent shows. They had a tremendous influence — one of my favourite vocalists is Eddie Kendricks of the Temptations."

Though the Stylistics' sound has been described as neoclassic soul, Thompkins sees older harmony groups as only a minor influence.

The Smirnoff/Just Juice sponsorship has helped keep the band on the road, as well as recording its first album. Bryant has no illusions about the problems of maintaining such a large organisation.

"Only continued sponsorship will make that possible over the next few months. We can survive better in summer, business really picks up then, it's a seasonal industry. There's no problems having a band working from December till March, but the rest of it is pretty crook."

The album, *When I'm With You*, comprises three studio originals and live cover versions. The studio work was done at Wellington's Broadcasting House, the live material at the Wellington Town Hall. The title track goes back a long way.

"I wrote that when I was in Rough Justice, with a very definite feel in mind. I'd written a few songs before that, but it was the first one that gelled for me. We did a version of it in Rough Justice, and I kept working on it over the years, twisting it around a bit. I wanted to do it in Jive Bombers because it needs to be played by a funk band."

'Gotta Have It' is written by keyboards player Tom Ludvigson. The contrast is sharp, between Bryant's earthy Wilson Pickett style and Ludvigson's more sophisticated riff, not unlike Johnny Bristol.

"He had a very definite idea about how he wanted it produced, he uses a lot of keyboard tricks. I think he was after the big reverb, the sort of slap sound, a very contemporary feel."

The third original, 'Can't Stop Loving You', is a joint effort from Bryant and guitarist Wayne Baird, featuring some sweet sax from Andrew Kimber.

"That's just something I felt like writing a couple of months ago, it's just a feel thing. I think the originals we play are stylistically compatible with the general drift of the repertoire. We're probably going to be doing more contemporary funk

tunes as time goes on, decreasing that very heavy bias towards the 60s material that is there at the moment."

Production for the album was handled by Nigel Stone and engineering by Tony Burns, both of whom have worked with the Pelicans and their forerunners, the Hulamen. Bryant is satisfied with the results, although he prefers the live tracks; James Brown's 'Too Funky', Ike Turner's 'Finger Poppin', Otis Redding's 'Pain In My Heart', Sam and Dave's 'Wrap It Up' and Bobby Bland's 'Love Light' and 'I'd Never Treat A Dog'.

"We were after something to promote live work, as well as being a record of the band as it was at the time of recording. It was always meant to be mainly live, the studio tracks are there because we wanted to hear how we sounded in a studio. But I don't really enjoy recording, I prefer playing live and most of the songs we cover have been learned from live records. The liveness of the sound is very important. We weren't aiming for a hit single, though we are getting some airplay. Basically, we're a live band, and that's the way I prefer it."

If you have a decent-sized venue nearby, you're bound to see the Jive Bombers sometime during the coming months. Touring is their life blood and for a good night out they're pretty hard to beat. In the new year, Bryant has more plans, including a collaboration with Limbs and expanding the performance to encompass other musical styles. Some of the band already do some jazz covers as a warm-up, and Bryant wants to broaden the scope. For him, the performance is everything.

"Sharing is what it's all about," he says. "I know it sounds sentimental, but that's what should happen. You've got a band and an audience and something is being shared. Nothing happens unless that is the case."

Duncan Campbell



PHOTO BY MURRAY CAMMICK

Stylistic's lead singer, Russell Thompkins Jr., and musical director Joel Bryant.

they bring to the modern mix that you can barely define and can't synthesise — the richness of the vocal group tradition, the sound of a city.

As Detroit, with its Motown sound, dominated R&B music in the 60s and scored high in the pop charts, so Philadelphia, with artists like the Stylistics, the O'Jays, the Three Degrees and Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, was the major force in 70s soul music. Its only rival was the grittier southern sound of Stax Records, Memphis, a label that sadly folded in 1975.

Even out-of-town acts in search of a bit of Philly magic recorded at the city's Sigma Sound Studios — Wilson Pickett (1971), Detroit's Spinners (ex Motown), David Bowie (1975) and Elton John (1979).

The top Philly producers were Thom Bell, who recorded the Stylistics for Avco and the Spinners for Atlantic and Gamble and Huff, who recorded numerous acts (including the O'Jays, Tramps, Teddy Pendergrass) for their Philadelphia International Records (PIR).

The Philly Sound, unlike the raw Southern soul sound of Memphis or Muscle Shoals, is smoother, sweeter soul in a lush setting — yet

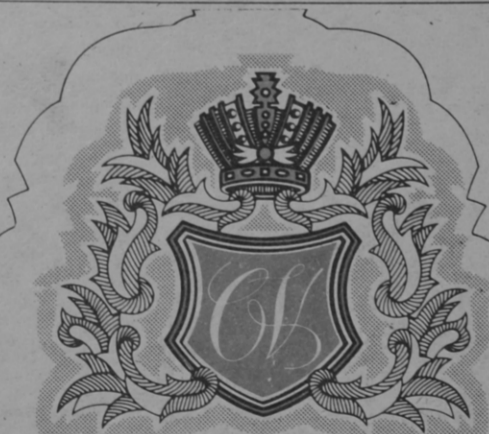
'I'm Falling In Love', 'Rubberband Man' and Thompkins' tracks include 'I'm Stone In Love With You', 'Betcha By Golly Wow', 'Rock 'n' Roll Baby' and 'You Make Me Feel Brand New'. (By the way, the standout gruffer voices of Philadelphia were the O'Jays' Eddie Lavert and the Blue Notes' Teddy Pendergrass.)

At the Stylistics' recent gig in Auckland, Thompkins' performance was captivating. The crowd erupted as he sang his lines, as he cut through the driving rhythms of the band, his unique voice overshadowing his fellow Stylistics, showing that as a soul vocalist he's up there with the Clyde McPhatters and Smokey Robinsons.

Although Thompkins doesn't speak between songs, off stage he's friendly and assured about his music. When asked whether the Stylistics have a specifically Philadelphia sound, he says without qualification "Yes it is," and notes that the group (three of the current four date back to the 70s hits) grew up together, same neighbourhood, same schools.

"When we were kids, growing up in the late 50s and early 60s, the Philadelphia music scene was doing something very tremendous at the time, right before the

"Have you heard about..."



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