

Riddum Circus

In a Cuba Street loft, sunlight shafting through cigarette smokes, I sit discussing music with three of the Circus Block 4 collective. The immediate impression is one of contrast. Jeff Thorp (bass) is articulate, intelligent and wears a colourful jersey. Dean Hutton (percussion) is quiet, possessed of a dry wit and clothed in low-key fashion. Darryl Rothery (manager) sports a hand-crafted leather jerkin, moustache and goatee, and sprinkles hip-isms in conversation. The differences are important; they're reflected in the melee of sound that is Circus Block 4's music.

Painstakingly crafted, the recorded songs exhibit the individual talents of the band. Though covering a variety of moods, the key elements are a punchy rhythm, innovative percussion and washes of harsh guitar. Melody takes a back seat and the lyrics have limited meaning.

As Jeff explains, the band "shy away from lyrics. We're more interested in making music and are afraid of the concept of a frontman — someone plus Circus Block 4. We probably need another guitarist so we could put more effort into singing. Now we just concentrate on the music."

The band is young. It was formed in September 1983 as a five-piece. The present team has been together since drummer Caroline Easter joined last November. Gavin McLean on guitar and soundman Mark Ingram complete the Circus Block 4 family.

Jeff sees Circus Block 4 as "a long-term band. We're not going to make a hit. We're not writing pop songs or raunchy stuff. We're going to have to build ourselves."

Darryl believes "we've resigned ourselves to creating a sound rather



Circus Block 4

than mimicking one ... We're probably making it a bit harder for ourselves because we're not applying ourselves to the pub circuit or the *Ready To Roll* Top 10 little girl syndrome either. We're not trying for those markets and therefore it's a lot harder to survive."

The two records released to date, 'In Stone In Steel' and 'Take Another Look' were recorded on 24 tracks using sophisticated technology. Both records are currently being considered for UK release by two independent labels there. According to Jeff, the next release will see the band use less equipment in an effort to realise songs as the band envisages them rather than re-writing ideas in the studio.

The next goals? "We've got to relax and enjoy the music," says Jeff. Darryl agrees:

"Yeah! We're never gonna have to do that first record again. It's our head space. Now we're going to go out and trash the road."

Jeff continues: "Our sole touring experience is 10 days in Auckland. At our own gigs we had good audiences. We also supported Coconut Rough at the Gluepot. Not a lot of people came to see Coconut Rough, but it just didn't work. We spent a lot of time fretting if people didn't want to dance. Now we're more used to the idea — and I prefer it — of people coming to listen because we've spent so many hours structuring things you've got to listen quite carefully to appreciate them."

Take a(nother) look at Circus Block 4. Theirs is a sophisticated music presented on its own terms for dancing or listening. And in case you're wondering, the band's name was adopted from a painting by a Wellington artist.

David Taylor

Into the Music

Most of us periodically reach the point where it's time for a change — some more than others. Some people might feel frustrated with Peter and Graeme Jefferies for packing up *This Kind Of Punishment* and taking it back home to Stratford, Taranaki, but they have their reasons.

Since the two brothers moved back up to Auckland last year, *This Kind Of Punishment* has become a band. The name, taken from a line in a song from the first album, originally referred to the recording pair (assisted here and there by Chris Matthews, who was in Children's Hour at the time) did after Nocturnal Projections broke up. The recording was done at home in Stratford, with the most basic technology. It was begun more as a series of experiments in songwriting than an album.

It was also a reaction against having been in a rock band for more than two years. As Peter explains: "The Nocturnals had written so many songs in that one vein that we just didn't want to have any more to do with it. It was just saturation, saturation of that one medium."

The result was the first, self-titled, record. It's an unusual record, with a slight air of self-consciousness that reflects the Jefferies' very definite desire to try and make a different music. It's mainly quiet, marked out by a lot of space within the songs, non-rock timings, the use of instruments like piano. The technical crudity (no mixer) meant that about the only change to what was on tape was some wide, extreme stereo panning — that also made it sound different to the usual equable stereo records. The mood is unquestionably introspective and dark. 'Ahead Of Their Time', with its "Here are 'the boys', wasting away / So different ..." finished the record and was the culmination of the factors that led to the brothers'

previous flight from Auckland. The boys had a few problems ...

Whereas, as Peter says, the new album, *A Beard Of Bees*, "was more trying to accept and deal with problems than just moaning about them. All the songs are, even Chris's. 'The Horrible Tango' deals with the same kind of problem as 'Washed Away' did when he was in Children's Hour, but the attitude was different, more knowing. He wasn't wallowing in despair as much."

A Beard Of Bees was recorded mostly in Stratford, but partly in Auckland, last year. Chris had become more a part of the process and, although his songwriting approach is quite clearly different

something once or twice and if it doesn't appeal to me ...

"So on the second album we've tried to keep each piece quite simple in itself — but our heads have been pushed to the limit with some of it. Some of the structuring is about as technical as we can get, or want to get. I want to make music that will last a long time, but it's also quite nice for people to be able to listen to it once or twice and get something out of it too and I can't see the point of going any further down the complicated structuring things at the moment. Because we're kind of at our limits now, with the second album. There's not enough to be gained out of trying to extend that any further."



This Kind Of Punishment

from the Jefferies', the album sounds like a fulfillment of what was reached at on the first record. Songs are precise pieces of music that run through their course, from beginning to end, without being verse-chorus workouts. The recording quality is far better, the range of moods is wider and the repertoire of instruments has expanded to violin, mandolin and other stringed instruments, as well as beer crates. It's obviously a record that demands *listening* to be appreciated ...

Peter: "I agree that you have to actually listen to it and pay attention — which can sometimes be a problem, because I know that's what the music needs to be appreciated, but I don't exactly blame people if they haven't got the time or energy to really try and understand what *This Kind Of Punishment* is trying to do. Because I don't always give other people that sort of benefit of the doubt. Quite often I listen to

"It's also really good to change," adds Graeme. "In a way we've done that already; live we're more simple than we are on record."

The original plan had actually been not to play live, but after the shift to Auckland, bedroom bass player Michael Harrison was recruited and TKP were four. Although he didn't play on all the songs, Michael's enthusiasm for playing live for the first time was a factor in encouraging the "old hands" to take the stage.

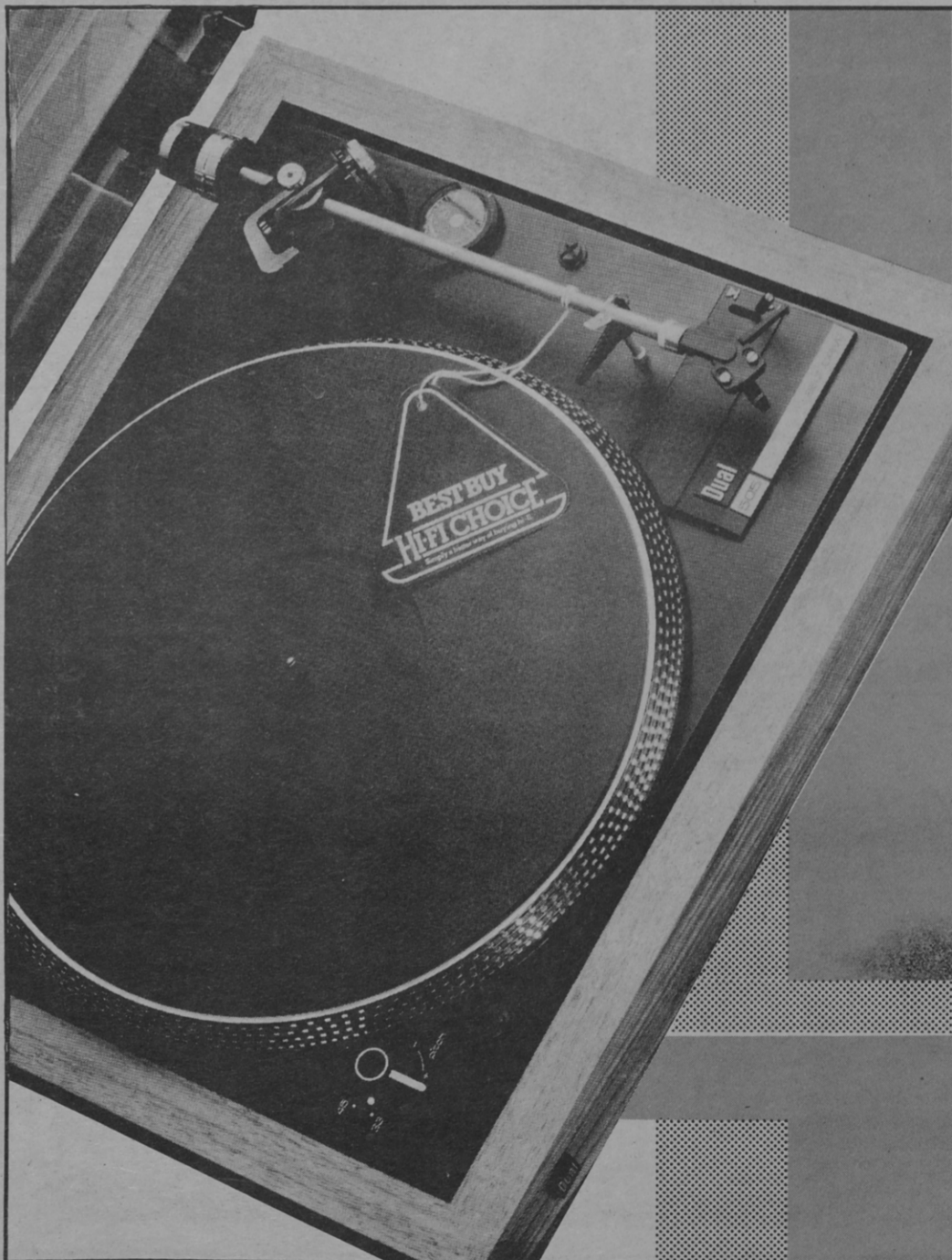
Michael has since been replaced by former Children's Hour bassist Johnny Pierce, who plays various other instruments on stage. Johnny's arrival accentuated the changes playing live has been making to the music, both in the re-arrangement required (you can't lug a piano on stage) and in the moistening up of the dryness that was the sometime result of the Jefferies' meticulous approach to

recording. Chris, of course, is in his element on stage. It's interesting, however, that while TKP may have become a "band", the performances are less of gigs than recitals. The barrier between musicians and audience is broken down with a conversational approach to between-song patter — the effect was even the same before the 1000-plus people who saw them support Hunters and Collectors. They've probably surprised themselves with how good a live group they are.

I don't think they ever thought they'd find themselves touring, either, but they head south this month with the Expendables. But what will be possibly the last performances of the current form of TKP will be at Auckland's Maidment Theatre on July 23 and 24. With theatre, film and music it should be something to look forward to. To be organised by Johnny and Chris it will inevitably emphasise their side of things — as does the new EP. Written and recorded during Johnny's first week with the band, it's a lot noisier, less ordered — "a lot more urban", as Peter (who used the phrase "I'm just a country boy" a couple of times during the hour-long interview) says.

The above is really only a small part of the talk that went on both when the tape recorder was running and before and after. The two brothers would periodically go into minute detail about a particular song, or even part of a song — the impression was one of a corridor of doors, each with the name of a song on it. Open one and behind it lies a wealth of comment and explanation — the Jefferies think about what they're doing, a lot. They thought about the decision to go back home, agreed. No doubt they'll continue to make decisions in terms of what they see as the best interests of their music, often at the expense of other things — or even other people. They'll continue to piss people off sometimes, be hard to reach sometimes. But they'll continue to make music the way they want to. They're into the music.

Russell Brown



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