

The Great White Sharkey

From the Undertones to the *Top of the Pops*

"So you think you're so clever, never in doubt," ('Family Entertainment') was the first line I ever heard Feargal Sharkey sing. It was the first song off the first Undertones' album, 13 songs that weightlessly and innocently lifted the pop crown from the Ramones and the Buzzcocks. That was in 1979, and even then it was obvious that Sharkey's rasping vocal was the ideal means for conveying the pathos and sense of tragedy that lay beneath the surface of many of the O'Neills' songs.

This perfect marriage lasted for four albums and 13 singles, each record being more serious and more ambitious

than its predecessor, an evolution Sharkey was more than happy with:

"I think *The Sin of Pride* was the best album the Undertones ever made. It came as a great disappointment that it wasn't as successful as its predecessors. I felt that we had done a helluva good job on it and I can remember vividly that it was very hard work. We deliberately tried to go off on a completely different direction by writing deeper songs and we set ourselves a long list of tasks and I felt we achieved all of them. But not everyone seemed to agree with it."

Salad Days

The release of Sharkey's first solo album prompted this phone interview a week before Christmas. Entitled simply *Feargal Sharkey*, the



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album leaves his Undertones' past well and truly behind, not only in styles, but in the fact that he's co-written half the songs with the Eurythmics' Dave Stewart. Didn't you have the desire to write songs with the Undertones?

"No, it was something that didn't fascinate me at all at the time. Plus there were a couple of guys in the Undertones who were doing quite well for themselves without me interfering. At that stage I was more interested in learning about production and that sort of thing."

So what influence did you have on the Undertones' music?

"Quite a big bit. The Undertones were unique, five very different characters and if you'd taken away any one of them it wouldn't have been the same."

"What we did was we would go into the rehearsal room and someone would come in with a chord structure or an idea for a chorus and we'd battle it out for days on end and produce a finished song."

Being Irish, the Undertones were often compared to Stiff Little Fingers, whose ham-fisted barbed wire descriptions of the Irish troubles contrasted with the more subtle personal politics of the O'Neills at their best, as in 'Life's Too Easy', 'You're Welcome' and the title track from *The Sin of Pride*.

"Politically, I don't think it does any good trying to ram things down peoples' throats," explains Sharkey. "I think it's more important that people make their own decision on a particular subject as then it has a more lasting effect. If I get up and start shouting that this and that are wrong people may listen but in a short space of time they're gonna turn around and say 'Who the hell are you,

telling me what to do?' I would prefer to open peoples' minds and make them more aware and maybe then they'd try to find out for themselves."

Since the Undertones split in May 1983, the O'Neills have formed the more explicitly political That Petrol Emotion and Sharkey has gone the other way, into the vast mid-Atlantic marketplace. Was this division a reason why the Undertones split?

"No, sorry to disappoint you. I left as there were other things I wanted to try and I felt I had done as much with the Undertones as I possibly could. And in actual fact 'Ghost Train' (on the solo album) is about politics but in a very subtle sense."

After leaving the band did you find it difficult settling on a musical direction?

"Yeah, that's why I haven't. I decided I didn't want to write just one good song and then carry on and do 12 different variations on that and call it an album. I try very hard not to have one musical style and that's why the album covers such a broad range of material."

So with the Undertones you felt you were being trapped in one style?

"Yeah, I felt a little bit like that."

And that was probably because you weren't writing any of the songs?

"Yeah, probably."

Testing the Water

Feargal (pronounced Fur-gul) Sharkey was born into a large working class family in Derry, Northern Ireland, 27 years ago. He was blessed with a voice that could strip paint and the stereotyped Irish temper that I was to be on the receiving end of before the end of the interview. So he's sensitive and sometimes garrulous and some-

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