

For All the Saints

Talking With St Christopher



Although (not knocking Band Aid) he's said some god-awful stupid things in his time, St Bob Geldof wasn't far off when he said that the face of rock and roll was changed by just three bands — the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and the Saints. The *who*?

The Saints were the youngest of all three back in '77, a bunch of long-haired teenagers from Australia, who appeared in London trailing after the success of their first-ever single 'I'm Stranded' — a punk rock classic. There followed three stunning albums, line-up changes, traversals of the globe, holidays in France and more LPs of varying quality. And now Chris Bailey, singer and songwriter (it's his band, basically), finds himself with *another* classic album, 10 years on an' all that ...

All Fools Day, being the first New Zealand's heard of the Saints for a long time, is immediately striking for being such a wonderfully crafted artefact with a strong rockin' R&B heart ...

"I don't know," says Bailey. "I thought that about four albums ago was the most R&B-ish we've done. I mean, over the time that the albums have been done, the only thing I see changing is in technical expertise rather than mood or feel. If anything, *All Fools Day* was a more catholic record."

In a sanctifiable sense? "That's catholic with a small 'c'. Because there's an awful lot of influences there, from very early Bessie Smith-type blues through to, if you use your imagination, sort of pop-reggae in a way."

"I've got very wide music taste myself personally and then the four other members of the core of the band on the album are similar, so everyone's input just obviously made it a broader sounding record. There's one thing I've never been preoccupied with though, and that's the 'sound', and particularly so if a certain tune needs certain instrumentation, then go for it, cos the best way to make records, I think, is to be very open-minded."

Lyrically, Bailey shows himself on *All Fools Day* to be both aware and erudite, and as the cultured tones of his English-French-Australian accent begin to get drowned out on the crackling bad line to Melbourne, the subject of his lyrics is broached ...

Bad Buzz

Where, I wonder, are the depressing scenes of 'Celtic Ballad' set — the "empty vessels that have lost their way"? Through the interference comes the reply.

"I think any major city in the world has got that sort of imagery — easy to conjure up, whether it's Soho in London or the Cross in Sydney. I'm sure even cities in idyllic New Zealand ..."

A social conscience to the fore ...?

"No way!" through the static. "The telephone seems to be blowing up

— it's the bloody CIA!"

We decide further conversation on this trans-Tasman line is futile — I hang up, get attacked by the cat, and then ring back. Further "nasty little xenophobic" comments about NZ are lost in the still-crackling phone, and then we're back on course — this time wondering about the 'Temple of the Lords' ...

"The 'Temple of the Lords,' Bailey continues, "is a quaint old Glaswegian expression that I made up myself a year ago. It means 'the body' and that ["you can't temper with the Temple of the Lords"] translates in my mind as simply, 'don't fuck with me, you bastards.'"

Oh yes? Well, ah, what about 'Big Hit (on the Underground)'? How do the Saints fit into the 'underground'?

"The Saints have a very peculiar little niche, which I'm glad they have, because whilst it may mean fuck-all to New Zealand, I have been able to make albums over the last 10 years and that's my main interest really. I don't really want to be a pop star or anything crass like that, but I do want to survive well and basically keep making quality albums. Some people say that the Saints are rock stars and some say they're just a cult act or a joke, and in between those two parameters I don't particularly care what people think, as long as the Saints survive."

"Humour has always been a fairly essential part of the Saints, even in their most depressing moments. 'Big Hit' is a piss-take of the whole new spate of bands that seem to have come up over the last couple of years who've been living off the myths of the American-type psychedelic underground basically, and rehashing it and turning it into a new form of music which is, to me, not *terribly* progressive."

Songs vs Sounds

What about music in general, 10 years on from the Saints' beginning?

"I don't know that popular music, as in pretty young boys wearing mummy's clothing and mummy's mascara, has changed much over the past 10 years. From an aesthet-

ic point of view there seems to be a lack of songwriters these days, and too much reliance is being placed on technology, so you're actually hearing technicians making use of inventions, not performers performing songs. That's not my personal preference in music — I do like something a bit more earthy. You can never use a tape recorder to be more important than the thing you're putting on the tape recorder."

Ten years ago, would you have seen yourself here, with the Saints still, and *All Fools Day*?

"No. When I started off I was a teenager and just didn't care basically, like most teenagers."

Are you satisfied with your progress to this point in time?

"Personally, yes," says Bailey. "I mean, I could bitch about certain things I've done — with hindsight you can always see your mistakes, but I'm certainly glad the Saints have evolved the way they have. I personally have more freedom now, 10 years down the road, than I had when I started — I had a *delusion* that I was totally free when I was young, but I'm more independent now than the early Saints were when we signed to EMI."

Where are you up to in the Saints' story now then?

Laughter. "Probably page two ... of a very large book! It hasn't stopped for me in the last decade, and I had no idea that people would be so enthusiastic about it now, so let's hope the same thing applies for

the future."

And 10 years from now? "Christ knows! Having a pre-occupation about the future of your rock band is pretty silly I think — you have to be slightly Zen about the whole thing, cos survival itself is hard, but you're only as valuable as your latest product."

Hopefully we'll be seeing the Saints in New Zealand soon. Reports from Australia say the live show is stunning. How do the Saints live compensate for the absence of the lush string and woodwind arrangements on the album?

"Well I've always thought about making records and performing live as two very, very, separate things, and obviously when you're playing live, it's not as 'hi-fi' as someone listening to it in their living room. There is a certain 'raunch' or something that you can use live to create overtones — I mean, electric guitars are basically symphony orchestras. I wouldn't say they're exactly Sydney conservatorium, but they do create a helluva racket so that subtleties like woodwinds and strings can't compete with 'em."

The live set also includes a solo acoustic bracket from Bailey, and if you want some of the old stuff, call out for it, cos he says the band is versatile enough to play them ... so be there and we'll have 'I'm Stranded', 'Know Your Product' and more — make it *boss*, people.

Paul McKessar

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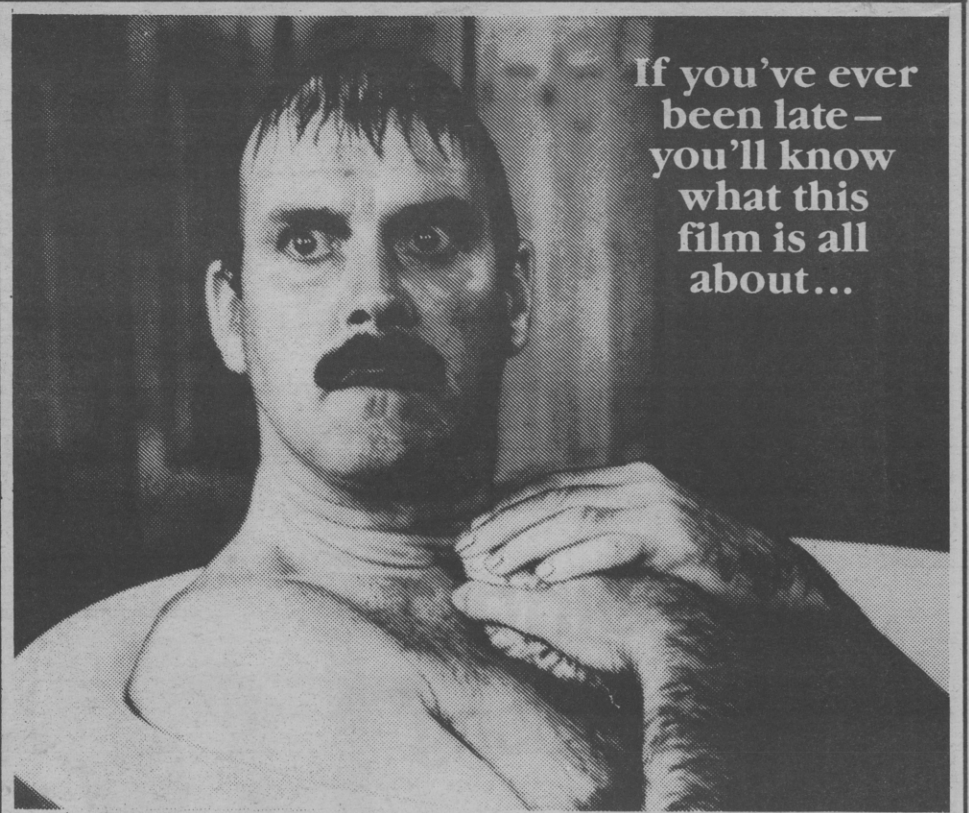
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