

# Heaven is Just a Sin Away

The Warratahs' Lament • By Chris Bourke



PHOTO BY DAVID HAMILTON

The Only Game in Town' Warratahs (L-R): John Donahue, Wayne Mason, Barry Saunders, Marty Jorgansen, Nik Brown.

**The action opens on Gore's main street. Up drives a car, four cylinders, it must be some outsiders down for the country music awards. The car comes to a halt — maybe beside the pie cart, the one that threatened to sue when a national magazine described it as "sauce splattered" — and out pile five men.**

**The Warratahs have hit town; town doesn't flinch.**

Wayne Mason, Warratahs' pianist, chortles with delight describing their arrival in Gore. "It was like the classic movie of a gunfighter coming down the street, with everyone peering through their curtains. Five of us drove into town in this van packed with gear. That looked odd for a kickoff — it looked well organised! And we were all dressed in black, with our suits on, and the ties and Nik's big leather belt . . . it was like we'd come to deal death to Gore!

"We went to the radio station for an interview. And the woman who was organising it came up and said, [whispers] 'Don't think you've got it easy — we've got some great opposition for you!' " Barry Saunders, vocalist: "They see the awards like a big School Certificate, a big competition. That's a very traditional approach. The joy of music would be . . . three or four down the list."

That was the Warratahs first brush with "the other side" — the New Zealand country music circuit. But they won the hearts of Gore, taking away several awards for their mellow, authentic honky tonk sound. Says Saunders, "They thought, Woo, these boys are serious but obviously they're not country, because we don't know them and they don't come from down here."

## Ghost Riders

The Warratahs have got it sorted. A regular gig playing what they want to play, occasional tours and a new album that because of realistic production values (ie: small PA, few lights and live recording) aren't financial burdens. Plus — believe it or not, Kemo Sabay — airplay.

But here you've got seasoned musicians who have finally found their niche. They've learnt to avoid the errors caused by ego and ignorance. Barry Saunders and Wayne Mason were both in Rockinghorse and the Tigers in the 70s; before that Mason was a key member of the Formyula. Now there's a story that should be in *Spinal Tap 2*.

To cut it short, the Formyula won the Battle of the Bands in 1968. The prize was a trip to England — "for which we were so grateful. In 1968, that was like a life's dream," says Mason.

There was a catch, however. "They needed a band for the boat, so they'd offered this prize. We then played about 10 hours a day for about four weeks! Hell no, not for pay! For nothing! They were going to have a band anyway, so offering it as a prize was a masterful coup. I never realised how incredible it was till years later, how we'd been led up a gum tree. I suddenly thought, that wasn't a prize . . ."

It got worse. While on board, the legend goes, Mason's fabulous song 'Nature' topped the charts here. In England, the musical fashion was post-Zeppelin guitar bands: Free, Spooky Tooth, Taste. So the Formyula bought new clothes, new amps, new haircuts. Running out of money, they sailed home. At the comeback gig, the crowd sat, waiting for the sweet harmonies of 'Nature.' The curtain rose . . .

"It was terrible," says Mason. "People were horrified. We'd changed personality: hair, clothes, music. The promoter rushed up and said, 'Look, can I give you a little piece of advice. Change your repertoire. You'll never work in this country doing that, mate!'"

So don't worry. The Warratahs are unlikely to carry out their threats of dry ice, silver suits, a blonde BV lineup and "keyboardists who spin round on their seats."

Mason says that when he saw *Spinal Tap* it was so real, he was delirious with laughter. Performing at the Cricketers each weekend provides a chilling reminder, however. "It's great playing downstairs," he says. "But every band upstairs, the angst they go through. Downstairs everyone's grooving along, but the people really trying to make it are upstairs. Going through the whole *Spinal Tap* trip, the big PAs and five people in the audience . . . I know where I'd want to be."

## Help Me Make It . . .

Above all, what the Warratahs have is feel. Barry Saunders' warm, true, and oh-so sincere voice, Mason's lyrical honky tonk piano, the emotional bite of Nik Brown's fiddle, and the understated backbeat of bassist John Donahue and Rob Clarkson. Together it's a unit to make your feet dance and heart sing; depth of feeling and assured playing with no hint of a "hot licks" mentality.

"This band seems to have created a need in people's lives," says Mason. "Each time we play, we're basically the same, we're consistent. People have integrated the feeling we create as part of them. We're not exceptional in that we don't change their lives, but if we've been away they seem to find it reassuring to have us back, because they've missed the feeling we generated. It's quite an unusual feeling."

For Nik Brown, being in a band of friends is the key. "We listen to each other on stage, and enjoy each others' playing. I've been in bands where people don't talk to each other for months, and I don't want a bar of it again. Also, this band is entirely committed — they enjoy it, and have a respect for the music."

He says it's no surprise country music is undergoing a resurgence. "Sincerity is the

ALL MY FRIENDS HAVE GONE TO