

Scuba Jive

The Greg Johnson Set

The Greg Johnson Set have their new album out this month and in this morning's paper there is a BIG photo of Greg Johnson looking down, all moody and artsy, like.

"Yeah, I'm worried about that one," Greg says. "I'm going to be reaching down into the freezer at Woolworths and someone's going to go, hey! You're that guy, aren't you?"

Fame is a double-edged blade, for sure. The Greg Johnson Set are going through the mangles of the local publicity machine and the media has, well, a strange, strange view. Johnson is not the band, he's just the name and the face, he insists — even though he writes all the songs.

The Greg Johnson Set album is a hit in the sense that it's animated, quirky, layered, bright, danceable, moody, attractive, educated, whimsical and contemplative music. It falls into the category rightly regarded as one of the best: the tunes that swing and shuffle with late night musings and melancholy, the love songs that are never so gauche as to actually come out and say "I love you, yes I do-oo-oo", songs that can sit on the radio and not lose any precious "cred". Yes, *The Watertable* is pop, and pop is a great thing. Pop in the sense of Black, 'Nothing in something particular', Yello, 'Automobile Noise', 'Red Guitar', *The World Begins To Look Her Age*, Mr. Ferry, 'What Presence', Oldland & Montano, Nick Plytas, Andy Connell, 'And Then She Smiles' and the 12-inch of

'Limbo'. You won't find that shopping list in the Woolworths freezer because it's already cool.

Oops, getting a little eclectic there, wasn't it viewers? Back to the entertaining, fun and brightly coloured part of the interview! Let's see if Greg can answer all the questions correctly and win all those fabulous prizes! Here's your starter for 10: how do you like your own album, Greg?

"I'm quite pleased with it, considering. It's a good pressing. There's quite a lot happening there actually, too much in some places, in retrospect. Some of the songs are busier than 'Strange', even."

Was it difficult to decide what to leave on and off in the mix?

"No. We put everything on." Were you faced with juggling the personal interests of the band members in the mix — was everyone wanting their bit up front?

"Not really. If something didn't work, we'd turn it down. The mixes were agreements, there were no real disparities. Some of the songs, particularly 'Mysterious Gap', were just demos almost. People seem to like it though."

'Shirt And Tie Man' off the This Boy Rob EP had a very whimsical underpinning ...

"I've drifted away from that a bit. The way I see *The Watertable* is that it's got two sides, and they're quite different. But we're marrying those aspects together now that we've got the band together."

Nigel Russell (keyboards) and Trevor Reekie (guitar) tended to layer things in with their music for Car Crash Set, sometimes too much.

"I've got a tendency to do that as



Greg Johnson Set are (L-R) Joost Langeveld, Nigel Russell, Greg Johnson, Willis and Trevor Reekie.

well. Also, I wasn't overly confident in the songs while we were recording, whereas now I've built up more confidence. I can sit down with an acoustic guitar and just play it."

But surely *The Watertable* wins precisely because of its complex instrumentation. The single 'Strange' is indeed a murky mix, but it still works, it sounds great on radio. The last thing he needs is the Tracy Chapman treatment.

So, Greg has lost precious points for answering that last question incorrectly viewers. Still, maybe Greg can catch up points in the rest of the interview and win that big trip overseas, folks. Yes, money and a new car, a cocaine habit and his photo on the cover of "Q" magazine. Answer the following questions — no conferring:

The experienced Trevor Reekie would seem to be a moderating presence on the album — true or false?

"Sometimes, although his classical guitar playing is very powerful in places on the album."

He did a wild solo at your Venue album release concert, true or false?

"He's not bad when he gets going, yeah. He uses effects a lot but he's quite good at it."

How much songwriting were you doing in the studio? Was it a natural process?

"Pretty much. They did grow in the studio, the band created the sound for them. They were sketches when I bought them in — arranged sketches, mind you. We coloured them in in the studio."

Phew, viewers! Greg's made it into the next stage of the game. Let's recap and look at that winning bout in the studio one more time.

Johnson's jazz awareness has allowed him to tap into the respect and worth jazz musicians afford to the arranger, and that's a good talent.

For 15 points, Greg, how do you use those talents?

"I've gone for fairly simple arrangements — there's a real danger in being too clever."

Were you worried about ending up as being too upmarket?

"Nah. Fuck them. It's not something we contrive to be like — it's simply what we've come out sounding like. It is kind of frowned upon, the whole

thing is pretty slick, really. But we did it on the same budget as everybody else!"

A band like Car Crash Set got stuck for playing more than drums and wires, but the use of machines and samples in dance music has finally warmed people to technology, making them realise that a computer or a beatbox is just like any other instrument in the right hands.

"Yeah. Someone like the Headless Chickens, too, they've always been into it. Plus people are realising that if they package things a little bit better, record a little more carefully, that they can reach a wider audience. And that's what it's all about, I think — getting across to a lot of people. There aren't enough people in Auckland for you to enjoy a selective audience."

Well, I think you'll agree that Greg is a deserving winner, viewers. How about the main prize of the evening, that big trip overseas?

The Greg Johnson Set have a "standing offer" to make it to Sydney for live dates later in the year and Pagan is still pushing for overseas release of *The Watertable* — there's a nibble from an Australian label, but

no bite at the time of going to press.

Ohhh! A big sigh from the audience. Such an easy question to answer, Greg, yet you've gone straight back into the studio and started on the next album — true?

"Yep, we're working on the next one! It feels like we're on a roll, and we want to stay on it if we can, keep doing stuff. We hope to have another single by March, and then another album out the same time next year."

"I think it's good to keep doing singles. People forget you otherwise — you've got to have things to remind them. It's like a newsletter!"

"So we'll just keep doing it, and we'll stay on whatever level we reach. We'll keep at it, that's the point. People say, oh wow, one day you know, you might really be doing it. And we say, but we are now! We're just on a different level, a different scale. People don't realise that all these bands [in NZ] are doing it, they're real bands."

Whoop! Whoop! Pull up! Pull up! Lights flashing in the studio! Judith's fainted! You're telling us that the Greg Johnson Set are happy even though they're not soaking up the Bali sun in a Hyatt room for five with

Bob Mould Workbook

"Workbook is an excellent record for Mould to start the next phase of an always intriguing career. Let's not forget the past, Husker Du were unquestionably one of THE great bands, but new chapters are unfolding." MUSIC WEEK.

"This is to rock 'n' roll what BLUE VELVET and THE RIVERS EDGE are to cinema — dark, memorable dives into the deep end of the experience some people dismiss as 'entertainment'. Stunning." AK STAR

"Stunning" NME

Virgin