

Children of the Revolution

PHOTO BY WILLIAM WEST



Chris, Children's Hour.

There's a spectrum in musical performance that runs a gamut of shades from whoredom to masturbation. At one end lie those for whom music is merely a job and at the other, the serious artist who refuses to compromise his integrity by ever leaving his bedroom. They all have their place.

In between, but definitely at the introspective end of the scale, like Children's Hour. They enjoy playing before an interested audience that gives feedback but aren't exactly interested in going out of their way to win over a dead crowd. Likewise, when an audience is listening, Children's Hour can be very exciting — if not, performance may be uninspired.

It's for reasons like these that Aucklanders aren't likely to see Children's Hour again for several months. They're keen to play other centres but want to avoid playing in their home city for a while. Recent gigs at DeBretts and, more especially, the Windsor Castle prompted the decision.

"Where before people came to the pub to get drunk and see the band now they seem to just come and get drunk. If the band's there, that's fine, but they don't take much notice," explains singer Chris.

"Judging by the Windsor (a Saturday afternoon) there are not that many people around who are that interested in music. Even at DeBretts, which was quite a bit better, there were people who'd spent an hour getting their hair ready before they went out. It sort of makes the whole thing pointless if they come there to be looked at rather than to enjoy a band.

"We'd rather people yelled abuse than just sat there."

Their stand may seem negative but how many bands do you hear moaning about pubs as venues? And how many actually have the nerve to call a halt to it?

But obviously there's a danger of growing introspection if there are few public appearances.

"Yeah, but I suppose our music has been more introspective than that of most bands. There is that

danger of totally losing contact with an audience.

"A good live gig is probably one of the best experiences you can have. You can be totally straight and come off the stage feeling like you've taken all the drugs in the world. It's great, it's religious, it's better than anything else I've experienced."

Enough opinion for now. Some facts: Chris and what was then the band (Bevan, drums; Grant, guitar; Johnny, bass) discovered each other one night at the Windsor and set to practising at Progressive Studios. They were "discovered" by Chris Knox and Doug Hood (don't stop reading here) and asked to support the Stones. Chris came to the group with:

"A vision of the way things should be. The way I'd like them to be."

There's a certain arrogance in that of course?

"Of course. Bands I admire, like the Fall and the Birthday Party, are very arrogant. But it's an arrogance ... founded on talent. They know they've got something. And I think we've got something ..."

Children's Hour have sounded at times not dissimilar to the Birthday Party and others and it's a debt Chris acknowledges. He himself has a kind of Nick Cave intensity, if not that man's overwhelming confidence.

"In the last three or four months we've become a band. It was sort of like wearing somebody else's coat up until then. But Children's Hour has actually now taken on a personality and I'd like to develop that."

After a tour, preferably with a new, promising band in tow, the band will settle down and write

new songs. The disciplining of the five songs on their new EP *Flesh* ("We had to properly work them out for the first time") has spoiled the songs for them and they want to write different, fresher ones.

They're pleased with the EP and extend much of the credit for capturing much of the essence of their best live performances to the production help of Doug Hood.

At least three of the tracks have choruses strong enough to disgrace most "pop" singles but the new material is less traditional in structure. His lyrics, however, remain important. There's a lyric sheet with the EP and it's meant to be read.

In the near future, Children's Hour will be playing periodically and trying to make each gig special.

"I'd like to make each one something that means a lot to people. If they want to wait a few months before we play again they're probably going to enjoy it a lot more than if we played every two weeks."

In between they'll be writing new songs.

"Ideally, I'd like to play a completely new set of songs each time but that's probably not possible."

Band members will probably be involved in independent ventures in music and other fields.

"If somebody's got more sides to their character I think it can only add interest to what the band's doing. There's so many bands around that just play music and that's it. They have no character, they're not interesting people. The only reason they're well known is because they play in a band. And people who play in bands are not special. The only thing about them is they can play a musical instrument. People tend to idolise them and that's really sick."

In their talk Children's Hour seem to relate more to South Island music than Auckland's industry-dominated scene. They're signed with that most unindustry of labels, Flying Nun. But that doesn't mean they lack ambition. They will be depending on the promise of recording an album by the end of this year to give them purpose and cohesion and, eventually, they would like to head out into the big, wide world.

Children's Hour are serious and not humourless. Self belief, tempered with self criticism and constant development and variation of their music approach will be keys to their goals.

If Children's Hour want to be startling with every performance then that's a very good thing. It's also very difficult.

Russell Brown

Another Armatrading visit — that's two in two years! This '83 tour, billed as 'The Key Tour', has taken her round England, Europe, Ireland, America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. It's no secret that Joan Armatrading is keen to make it in the States, so how did it go there?

"It was good." A non-committal, I-don't-want-to-be-drawn feel comes into her body language, but not her voice. She's not one to blow her own trumpet, even if she does play her own guitar. *The Key* has been the most successful of all her albums in America and 'Drop the Pilot' made the charts.

"I don't think I've ever had a single in the charts there before, so that worked."

We edge round the question in other ways. Speaking about the introduction of American Val Garay to produce 'Drop the Pilot' and 'What Do Boys Dream', Joan says:

"I'd finished doing *The Key* and I'd written a whole lot more songs — 'Drop the Pilot' was one of 'em — and wanted to do that and thought in terms of a single. So that's all we were doing and Steve (Lillywhite, producer of *Me, Myself, I*) had gone off to work with another band so the record company came up with some different guys and Val was one of 'em. We met and worked and it worked and that was it."

She had originally recorded 'What Do Boys Dream' with Lillywhite, then rearranged it and re-recorded it with Garay and different musicians. What is Garay's particular strength?

"I dunno. Gets good sounds."

'Call Me Names' is out in Australia as a single, along with 'Drop the Pilot', but that's the record company's business not hers:

"I don't really do singles. I write songs and put them on the album."

Last year when talking to *RiU*, Joan said she was beginning to compose songs using electric guitar. She wanted to make her songs more accessible, a bit simpler. She feels she's achieved that with *The Key*. Most of the tracks are composed on electric guitar, "apart from, 'Everybody's Gotta Know', which I wrote on the piano and 'Love My Baby' which was on synthesiser. Yeah, all the rest — 'Telltale' was obviously acoustic guitar — apart from that everything else was electric guitar."

Well, how does the composition process work for her?

"How do I write a song? It depends on the song. Some songs come like that, some songs you get the music first, some songs the lyrics first, some songs both together."

"There's no set way I have of doin' it. What I try and do is be very prepared for going into the studio. So I do the demos and I do the arrangements on the demos so when people hear them there's a bass part, there's a guitar part, there's a synthesiser part — all the bits are there on the demo. So it's very controlled, really."

"At the same time I try and give people the freedom to be as good a musician as they are, so that I don't sort of stifle them, y'know, and say 'this is exactly how you have to play it'. Although they have all these things that they have to play and they have to stay within the arrangements I want —



PHOTO BY TERRY HOBIN

Joan, Logan Campbell Centre.

but at the same time certain people like to do little passing notes and little fiddly bits and I just let them do the bits that they want."

"Sometimes, even though it sounds the way you arranged it, it will sound different simply because it's different people doing it. Even when you do it all on your own it sounds different. It never is exactly as you hear it in your head."

What about backing musicians? Is there anyone she wants to use regularly? Only a shake of the head on that one:

"I haven't got anyone working with me that I've had since 1972."

What kind of emphasis can we expect on the next album?

"It's hard to say. I think it'll stay pretty rock sounding — I think. But again, it's difficult for me to say because some of the stuff I've been writing recently isn't like *The Key* — it's more like earlier stuff. So it's difficult to know."

"I have to wait and see (laughs). Some of it seems to be going back lyrically and musically, but again, y'know, it depends on the songs I choose in the end. If, when I've written all the songs I've written a load of rock songs, a load of stuff that's like the old stuff and some reggae and I'm making the album and I sit back and say that one's obviously better than that one and it turns out to be all rockers then that's it. The last time I was writing like *The Key* all the time, whereas this time there's more sort of choice — it could go anywhere now."

And the shift in lyrics? Joan was a bit taken aback at the comment that the lyrics of 'Call Me Names' had been greeted with some antagonism by some of her followers, especially the women.

"I don't know why. If they listened to the lyrics they'd realise they should be laughing their heads off."

What about those who don't think it's a joke?

"Well they're idiots!" (Laughs) Previously Joan had made her lyrics delightfully ambiguous but on *The Key* they're very much more heterosexual. Any reason for this?

"The point of that is — when I used to write the songs before I'd always try to write the songs so that a guy or girl can say what they want about the song. So that a guy could come up to me and say, 'Joan, this song means so-and-so' and the girl could come up and say exactly the same thing, which happens often. The thing about all the songs through all the albums is that they're not about me."

"Rosie" isn't a heterosexual song — it's obvious it's a guy in drag. I read in one review where the girl was saying that 'Rosie' was me confessing to going out with a transvestite. It was so stupid! (Laughs). Anyway, this time again the songs aren't about me but I've just decided to write 'he' or 'she' in the songs. Again, it's not something that's going to continue, I don't think, 'cause a lot of the songs I've written recently are more like the other stuff again."

Joan Armatrading — past, present and possible future. Her concert at the Logan Campbell Centre (packed out of course) was even better than before. One of its features was the rearrangements she'd done of old songs. Even the most seasoned Armatrading follower had difficulty recognising the opening bars of songs like 'Love and Affection', 'Show Some Emotion' and 'You Rope You Tie Me'. There was lots more action on stage too, with Joan and the band members in black and white.

Dynamic, developing and defying distinction — and that seems to be how she goes down best.

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