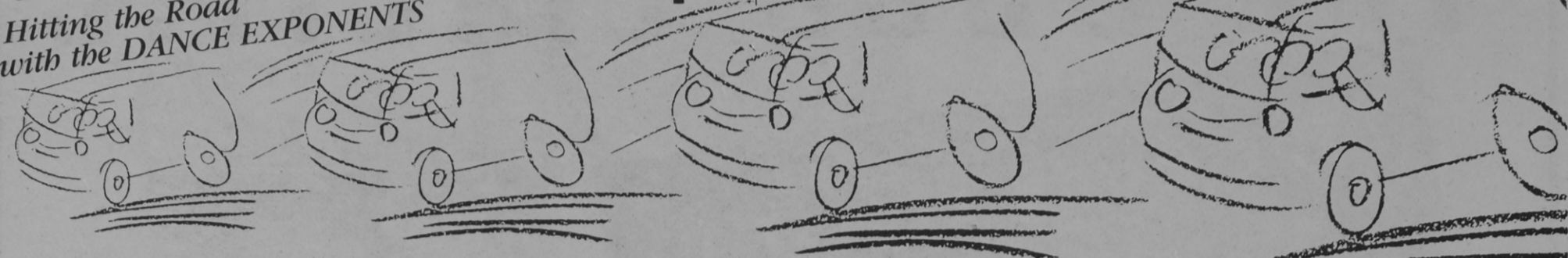


From Airway Spies to Railway Pies

Hitting the Road with the DANCE EXPONENTS



It's a beautiful day in Blenheim and down the street are Jordan Luck and Brian Jones. They're smiling, natch. "Giddy Russell, how's it going?" Oh, not too bad. I've been checking out the bars for you. "We've been taking round posters. They took no time to get rid of — there's lots of lovely young women in Blenheim."

For every begged, stolen or borrowed tour poster on every bedroom wall in every town there are a million broken hearts, maybe more. They swarm the surface of this globe, effortlessly drowning the fools who refuse to fall in love. Jordan Luck knows that. The Jordan Luck of the Dance Exponents who writes songs and sings and pretends to be funny people has a heart of the most fragile glass. What the real Jordan Luck's heart is made of is quite another matter and shouldn't concern us now. Jordan Luck once wrote a song called 'You Dropped Me But I Got What I Wanted From You'. Love songs? Only Nick Cave writes 'em better. Jordan flips the postcard over and begins, "Dear Catherine ..."

Flight cases litter the floor of Blenheim's Woodbourne Tavern. The PA has been set up and that most tortuous of rock rituals, the drum check begins. Michael Haralambi (henceforth to be referred to as "Harry") has just bought a \$7000 set of Simmonds electronic drums. Everyone teases him: "Where'd you get them? Out of a cornflakes packet?"

"When do you think you'll be able to get rid of those biscuit tins and buy some real drums?" They'll take him a long time to pay off but by the middle of the tour drum checks will be unnecessary. Being electronic means always sounding the same.

"Go round the toms once more ..." says soundman/manager Ben Free.

Jordan disappears into town to do an interview with the local radio station. Brian takes him in — Jordan's not allowed to drive the van any more. He doesn't concentrate too well.

The interview comes on, Ben plays it through the PA. A breathless female interviewer asks Jordan Great Big Questions: "Where do you get the inspiration for your songs?" Jordan's all charm, inquires as to the correct pronunciation of Renwick (where the pub is).

It's over in five minutes (cynics among you might say it always is) and the activity recommences. It's a tough pub for lights technician Donna Warrington. She can't hang anything from the roof so she has to improvise. Donna's been with the band since way back. That shows in the way she's always been able to present a show that meshes in perfectly with the brash silliness of the music.

Eventually it's time to go to the motel, where there's a rush for the best beds. Other touring bands tend to have orders of precedence (often dominated by the roadies, who need their sleep) but on this tour it's first in, first served — main act, support band, crew, freeloaders, journalists.

The Shazam montage of contestants in the video section of the Battle of the Bands provides

a diversion. Everyone sits around the television: laughter, indignation, murmurs of appreciation, cruel jokes ...

Going to a restaurant is discussed but it ends up with takeaways. It usually does. After "dinner," bassist Dave Gent tries to garner enthusiasm for a kick-round with the soccer ball (the Dance Exponents team beat all comers last season).

There's speculation about how many people will turn up for the gig. Somebody goofed and there's no ad in the evening paper.

The pub's full. The Nuns try hard to stir some reaction in their opening slot. They've only been together a week and are principally made up of the former band of the Exponents' new guitarist, Chris Sheehan.

That band was the Dumb Waiters. The Dumb Waiters originally hailed from Palmerston North, but chose to seek fame in Christchurch. The singer decided the Garden City wasn't his karma and went back home. The night the news was broken, Chris went to the pub, bumped into Exponents axeman Brian Jones and asked if they needed another guitarist. Brian said maybe and soon Chris was the fifth Exponent. He's not as fresh-faced as the rest of the band. His pale features are topped by a black beecave and he's skinny. Looks like someone in a rock band is supposed to. He's good-humoured but a little more quietly spoken than his fellow members.

Blenheimers are a little slow to respond even to the Exponents and one of the town's progressive couples has the floor pretty much to themselves for the first half of the set. But by the end it's full of jivers — 'Airway Spies' having dragged most of them on.

The show ends just after 10pm and the punters file out. For the band there's the harsh reality of the load out. Now. But everyone does some lugging on a Dance Exponents tour and it's done pretty quickly. Mark Stewart of Stewart Sound stands in the back of his truck calling out which bit he wants to pack next.

The van ride back to the motel is a fairly merry one. Singing 'Pearl's A Singer' and a couple of Monkees' tunes. Back at the motel, a handful of locals and a few beers. My bottle of whisky seems a little out of place. Doesn't make it any less popular.

Bed, about 1.30am. Get up, 6.45am. Ben, looking disgustingly well-groomed and wide awake, goes around the rooms and rouses everyone. The PA truck left about two hours ago for Greymouth.

Breakfast is had at a shop/post office/tea-rooms in the middle of nowhere. The woman serving passes on greetings from the occupants of the truck, who had been the day's first customers.

Jordan covers his pie with a blizzard of salt and Ben tells him it's bad for his blood pressure. "Don't you worry about my health," Jordan says quite firmly.

"I have to mate. You're my livelihood."

Don't believe a word they tell you about Greymouth. It's beautifully sunny as we roll in. It seems almost too bright.

The band bar at the Golden Eagle Hotel is

small — there won't be room for much of the PA. The first problem is that there is only a single width doorway. Mark calls a glazier to take a window out so the bass bins can be lifted in.

There's time to kill, time to check out the town's two opportunity shops. Small town op shops can be a hipster's paradise but today's only coup is a stylish pair of shoes to Nuns' singer Kelvin. Back at the pub there's rivalry over Galaxian and Breakout and games of shoddy pool. More burgers, this time from the pub's own restaurant. Unorthodox (a strange pattie mix and a standard two of them per burger) but not too bad at all ...

Accommodation has been provided by the management and it's not exactly palatial. The unlucky ones get to sleep in a room with six bunks. The mattresses are covered in plastic.

"This is like a bloody scout camp," someone mutters, but no one's too worried.

By the time the Exponents take the stage the bar is jam packed. It's easier to leave it and go to the house bar for a drink or a piss. But, surprisingly, the room's not as stiflingly smoky as might be expected. Few people seem to be smoking cigarettes. No one in the entourage smokes either.

Trying to keep your feet in a writhing, sweaty crowd is silly and so is the Dance Exponents' music. Relentlessly, relentlessly silly. Jordan grins, tells his little stories. The new lineup is working very well. There's nothing worse than a tired Dance Exponents (well, a few things ...) but tonight they're bursting with bounce.

If you lump Dance Exponents in with the Narcs or Auckland Walk you're making a very grave mistake. I'm not ashamed to say I love seeing them live. How often I could do it doesn't really matter. The Exponents may not move like the Verlaines, Children's Hour, Sneaky Feelings, but there's a vitality, a happiness, an uncoolness that makes them the best straight pop band in the land. While Andrew Fagan makes a fool of himself toying with images, the Dance Exponents are simply themselves. There's an unstoppable charm that has its parallels in bands like Fishschool. Yes, really. All this isn't to say they're perfect but don't just write them off for the sake of hipness, okay?

"This song's for anyone out there in the audience who's in love tonight," says Jordan. (He often says things like that.)

"Love's bullshit!" screams a Greymouth punk rocker perching on a chair.

"Anarchy!" she screams later.

Around the side of the PA a couple of the Nuns are trying to chat up some local girls (sounds strange, doesn't it?). The evening is gearing up.

At one minute past 10 the house lights come up. The audience barely has a chance to get their calls for an encore together before Jordan says: "Okay, we'll do one!" The band hadn't even got as far as taking off their instruments, let alone leaving the stage. You're easy, Jordan.

Someone wriggles up to the stage and tells Jordan there's a party, he announces it over the PA. An unexpected bonus on a Wednesday night, but then this is Greymouth. But, of course, the PA and lights have to be packed up

first. There's no gig the next day so fortunately it doesn't have to be loaded into the truck but it's a while before we get away.

Dave and Donna retire to bed, Jordan has disappeared and everyone else gets in the van to go to the party. Only nobody knows where the street is. After some fruitless driving around Ben produces a map and we arrive in the street at the same time as a couple of girls who'd said they'd see us there.

"Oooh, they've all got the same haircut!" says someone as we walk into the party. This is a punk's house (the words of 'God Save the Queen' form the basis of a large mural on one wall) and they obviously feel an obligation to be rude to a band like the Dance Exponents. All the six or so punks had paid their five bucks and stood on chairs to see like everyone else did. So about a minute into the party we're off again. This time one of the girls takes us to her parents' restaurant where there's free snacks and some wine when our Steinies run out. At least four in the party can play piano but no one can be persuaded to have a spin on the restaurant's grand, despite urgings from Mum and Dad.

It seems to be bedtime when we arrive back at the hotel but as we venture into the house bar for one last drink a Dick Clark show featuring artists like James Brown (twice), Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, the Platters, the Beatles ... even the Grateful Dead comes on the giant video screen. Unbelievable stuff, huh? *American Graffiti* is next up. The hours roll past and eventually it's down to Jordan, myself, a few hardy locals and Cozzie, the compleat barman.

At 6am I totter out and off to a Blaketown (the other side of the sewage ponds) house for a cup of tea. A cup of tea ...

I understand the bar stayed open until about 7.30am.

When Thursday morning officially begins (about 10am) the showers aren't working very well. Loading out the gear is a very slow process, stories about the previous night are exchanged. I'm not telling tales ...

The glazier arrives to take the window out again. In the process he somehow manages to transform it into two large, roughly triangular pieces of plate glass.

"I'm having a smashing time today," he grins.

Eventually we're on the road to Christchurch. The scenery through Otira is magnificent but, naturally, there's a lot of sleeping done. There's a break at Arthur's Pass to have lunch and read the entertainment page in the *Press*. And then it's back on the road. The trip's enlivened with taped music and, later, a quiz and a silly game involving reading out newspaper stories substituting "sausage" for words beginning with S and "mash" for those beginning with M.

It's here that my story ends. An enjoyable one it's been to research and relate, too. A tour with the Dance Exponents isn't quite sex 'n' drugs 'n' rock 'n' roll but it's not boring either. I think it must be pretty rare to strike such a brace of positive, cheerful attitudes as sported by this entourage. There wasn't that strict demarcation between band and crew that many of the coun-

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DANCE EXPONENTS

the debut album

Prayers be Answered

out late November

Includes current Hit 'Know Your Own Heart'

