



**Salty. As in the sea. That's the title of the Mutton Birds' new album. So, a tribute to the ancient and continuing maritime heritage of Aotearoa, is it then chaps?**

"No," says Don McGlashan in the eloquent, expansive manner to which we have become accustomed. "It's to do with mutton birds. We were throwing names around and different attributes of mutton birds came up. *Greasy* came up and we thought, well, maybe not... *Oily? Fatty? Salty* floated to the top."

What's wrong with *Fatty*? *Fatty* would have been way cool...

"*Salty's* a nice word, too," continues guitarist David Long. "Sort of gritty. But I don't think it's got anything to do with New Zealand and its heritage."

"That said..." ponders McGlashan, "there's quite a few songs about the sea; 'Anchor Me' and 'No Telling When'... and, um, 'Davy Jones' Locker' and 'Ahoy There Me Hearties' and 'Splice the Mainbrace 'n' Shiver Me Timbers'. They're all quite seagoing."

"But subtly so," adds Long. "Very subtly..."

Enough. Shut up already. This is the kind of mood the Mutton Birds are in of late. As we speak, mother (band) and baby (al-

be definitive," says McGlashan. "It's like performing. If you went into every performance thinking 'I've got to get this absolutely right or it's a disservice to the idea,' you couldn't do it. It's a much more spontaneous way of working."

"I guess with the first album I was thinking, shit, this might be the only album we ever make, because there's that feeling of clinging to a cliff face as a New Zealand band. I tend to get pretty painstaking about it. I think now I'm discovering that you don't have to be."

"He's been damned shoddy lately," Long notes approvingly.

"I've been really shoddy lately!"

The backdrop to *Salty*, however, is a spell of about a year when the Mutton Birds didn't know whether or not *The Mutton Birds* would be their first and last album. Everyone was supportive but no one was waving around an album budget. They talked to indie labels in Australia who were very matey but couldn't promise any more than to take the first album for no advance and, maybe, in a couple of years' time, come up with some money for another one. Eventually they settled with EMI Australia and they confess to being pleasantly surprised at finding so many kindred souls within the company's corporate bowels.

"But that time, from late 92 to late 93,



should ever go there, we had to face up to the magnitude of the thing," he says. "The hierarchies that don't exist here, the fact that there's no sense of history for you — and a real resistance to New Zealanders. We've managed to get through that to a certain extent. We've gotten some good reviews for the first album and the responses have been really fresh — people coming fresh to the ideas and the songs and trying to work out where we're coming from, rather than having a ready-made bag to put us into." Back home, *Salty* should help dispel the idea of the Birds as Don McGlashan and band. Bassist Allan Gregg brought four of his own songs along to the recording sessions and the first single, 'The Heater', was a bona fide group composition.

"We liked the idea of not putting out an obvious, beautifully crafted pop song for the first single," Gregg explains. "That song just by accident turned out quite different to anything we'd done before." It's sort of, well, psychedelic, too...

"Yeah, someone else said that to me," says Long, frowning quizzically. "I thought of it more as being harder-edged. But it's got the swirly sound of the euphonium, which I suppose does that. But me and Ross (Burge, drummer) don't change what we do throughout the whole song — that's not very psychedelic, is it?"

"Ross and David can play it in any kind of disabled state," McGlashan explains. "Ross plays only one beat, David plays only one chord. It's the sort of Django Reinhardt approach — you can play it even if most of your fingers have been removed."

"Yeah! Django!" yelps Long.

'The Heater' is typical of an emerging pattern in Mutton Birds' recordings — someone, usually, McGlashan, provides

member of the Texas legislature who was asked a question about bilingualism in schools with a high percentage of hispanic kids. He replied with those very words. I heard that at the time of the Gulf War and there were a lot of people rabbiting on about the New World Order and how the UN and by extension America was moving into a new role as the world's policeman. The idea began to run around in my head of who exactly would be in charge of the New World Order and what sort of people were they? It's just the idea that swarthy dictators with funny names don't have a monopoly on self-seeking attitudes and ignorance."

But if 'The Queen's English' is weird, then



other tunes, like the forthcoming single, 'In My Room' is elegantly songwriterish in the manner of, say, Simon and Garfunkel. "Really?" says Long, sitting up in his chair. "A friend of mine said it sounded like Neil Diamond! I took that as a compliment..."

"I'll just leave now, I think," McGlashan frowns.

"She thought my guitar line sounded like a Neil Diamond song."

"So it wasn't like my singing sounded like *Hot August Night*?"

"No. But sometimes... But anyway, he

# mutton birds

bum) are both doing well, six songs have been delivered already and the others are fairly racing down the birth canal. They're sitting in manager Daniel Keighley's Auckland office musing on what a fine thing it is to have a recording budget.

"This album has been so much easier than the first one," Long explains. "It's been real fun. We had two months at Shortland Street (that's the old TVNZ studios in the central city, not the medical soapie by which we gauge our lives) and that was just fantastic, a great environment. We put heaps of stuff down all together. Last time we had such small rooms that we couldn't put down a guitar as well as bass and drums. This time we had a room the size of a basketball court."

Indeed, so fertile were the recording sessions that the band had 20 songs on tape by the time two months was up. From there it was over to Sydney for mixdowns with American Tchad Blake.

"He put a T in front of his name so it had more tops," McGlashan explains. "He's been part of having so much fun making this album," Long continues. "Mistakes can be good. Tchad'll bring up something in the mix and you'll say, er, that's a mistake and I was thinking of cutting it out. He'll say 'sounds fine to me' and you listen again and think, yep, it does. Fresh ears — nothing sounds wrong or right to him — it's just good or bad."

"Tchad's been helping us, me in particular, realise that a record doesn't have to

took its toll," says McGlashan. "We were facing a situation where people in New Zealand are very quick to institutionalise you. If you look at the overseas bands in your record collection, they're all into their fourth or fifth albums. Whereas here, somebody who's made one album and been moderately successful can be discussed as if they've been a part of the furniture for years and years."

"It's the same way that the assistant on a game show is a celebrity," Long interjects. "We've fallen into the same thing as Lana Coc-Kroft, maybe. But Lana's work is probably much deeper than ours." Signing with an Australian company means, perforce, that you'll try and sell a few records there. This holds some appeal for McGlashan — partly because no one across the Tasman has him pegged as Mr Serious Arty Theatre Type. He's just another singer-songwriter in a band. "Once we'd decided not to do the normal thing and dismiss Australia as a ghastly mistake that should never have happened and therefore no New Zealanders



the song and Long adds the atmosphere, colours it in, if you will. Long nods approvingly:

"I guess that's the kind of thing I'm interested in — atmosphere sort of stuff. I really like filmic things, so I do think in that way. That was the perfect thing about starting work with Don. His songs had an atmosphere already, so it was sort of like trying to find what was underlying what the song was about."

Another of the early songs to emerge from the mixing sessions, 'The Queen's English', owes its atmosphere as much to Blake as the band. His mix bears the swampy mark of a man who has worked with Tom Waits.

"I really like the mud-pool bass drum," says McGlashan, "After we've spent all this time wondering what sort of head to put on the drum..."

"He puts it through a *guitar distortion*," Long concludes.

"He's got a fantastically playful approach in the studio," McGlashan continues. "He has all these shonky toys, including the most low-rent stuff, things you'd buy from Dick Smith's. He just loves screwing up well-recorded songs."

It should be noted that 'The Queen's English', even without Blake's intervention, is a strange, lurching *mother* of a song. The eerie chorus, "The Queen's English was/Good enough for Jesus Christ/And it's good enough for me," comes straight out of real life:

"My brother-in-law told me the story of a

wrote 'I'm A Believer' and 'Steppin' Stone' too. He toured Australia recently and he sold out *huge*."

"I just hope some of the royalties from that film get back to the seagulls," says McGlashan. "But, yeah, we do listen to a lot of songwriters, that's one thing we have in common. I used to listen to a lot of Paul Kelly — and then I met him." And what? You hated him?

"Yeah. I hit him. It was sort of a male thing. No, we correspond, actually."

McGlashan will probably have ample opportunity to see his mate Kelly in the flesh over the coming year. After a NZ tour for *Salty*, they'll be back across the Tasman to play in support of the first album and, thereafter, backwards and forwards on a pretty constant basis. The band and Keighley will also be working towards scoring some sort of support or showcase gig in the US towards the end of the year. If that goes well and they sell a few records in Australia, then maybe there'll be an American release. And, even more maybe, a weird hit single like 'The Heater'. I mean, face it, a pop song about some sitting in his flat receiving commands from a two-bar heater is pretty strange...

"You find that strange?" McGlashan growls, his street-fighter streak coming to the surface. "I don't. I don't think there's anything strange about that. I think you should look to *yourself* there, Russell." "Yeah," snarls Long, "What he said. In fact, my heater did that to me *just the other day*."

**RUSSELL BROWN**