

Strait jacket Split s



feeling any sense of failure so I don't see why it should be a depressing example for anyone else. I just felt there was a need for change to feel inspired and motivated to keep doing music."

were the

Cambridge stud yearlings of the Flying Nun stable. Led by Shayne Carter, the boy with the million dollar cheekbones, everyone thought the Fits were bound to blaze a trail to international stardom, especially after they signed a big-time deal with Arista in 1990. In band terms, signing with an American major is like winning Lotto, you've just passed Go in a major way. All of a sudden TVNZ are filming you leaving for the first of several American tours, you're peering moodily from photographs in *Rolling Stone*, your single gets reviewed glowingly in *Melody Maker* and *NME*. Back home your rare live performances are jammed to the gills with pallid youths mute with awe at the spectacle that is Straitjacket Fits.

To think that this mighty alternative juggernaut have decided to split - well, put it this way, local music fans are in shock. Especially since the last Fits shows have been so incendiary.

But the real story isn't why the band have split-up - that's the nature of the beast. Egos are on heat, quarters are close, money's too tight to mention, there's going to be tension. Shayne (allegedly) yelled at David Woods on stage in New York for setting up a pile of effects pedals: "You don't need all those, you're only the fuckin' bass player!" So what!

Why does the New Zealand band who've come closer than any other to achieving international success decide to quit three-quarters of the way up the slippery slope? Are the pressures too great on a New Zealand band trying to make it overseas? If so, the Fits split sets a depressing precedent for aspiring young bands.

"That's a complete load of bollocks," retorts Shayne, "I've had a good time. It's been a good experience and I haven't come out of it

But Debbi Gibbs, Straitjacket Fit's manager, concedes that their last album, *Blow* didn't drag them as far up the ladder as they planned.

"It's a really hard level to kick over from, there's a plateau between the college and alternative radio market in the States, and AOR."

It wasn't for want of trying. Straitjacket Fits toured America twice. Two years ago at their own expense, sleeping on friend's floors and trying to eat in New York on \$10 a day, coming home skin and bone. Last year they stayed in motels and spent \$20 a day on food but they failed to get crucial support slots and ended up playing their own shows only. What went wrong?

Debbi: "I'd been working on trying to find us the right tour since November of 92. The big problem with the States last year was following on from Lollapalooza. All the bands were going out in packages of four bands and it meant that there were half as many club and theatre size shows as there should have been and it made it really difficult to try and get a support. That's why we got together the Noisyland thing but we ended up playing to our own fans."

Arista put plenty of time and effort into the band, but with white bread super-stars like Whitney Houston and Kenny G dominating the roster, they lacked an established formula for working an alternative rock band like Straitjacket Fits. Says Shayne (back living in Dunedin): "Arista's not exactly a cutting edge label. If I picked up a record and saw that it was an 'alternative' band on 'Arista' I'd probably regard it with some suspicion too. But we didn't know that when we signed. We were sitting in New Zealand and we thought this was the way to get your records out."

So it's an advantage to be on a label which boasts a Soundgarden or Nirvana?

Debbi: "It makes a huge difference, and to be honest, it was a huge problem for us."

As for MTV, Shayne and co only made it onto the specialist shows.

"Which really surprised me," continues Debbi, "because I thought 'Cat Inna Can' was a real shot at getting MTV support but MTV were in the middle of this looking for quirks in videos kind of thing, like the bee in the Blind Melon

clip. That was that band's third single off that album. The record company had virtually given up and they put a silly little girl dressed in a bumble bee outfit in their video and MTV loved it to death and all of a sudden they're HUGE."

You have to second guess what's going to hit a nerve.

"But you can't. A lot of bands get amazing opportunities that they aren't in a position to take advantage of. You have to have all the other things in place ready to move the second something breaks but you need something to click through."

The official line is that Straitjacket Fits have split amicably and are very happy to be walking away with their instruments, no debts, and a proud body of work. But to play on the cult Conan O'Brien TV show in front of millions one day (Shayne wearing a brown polyester salvation army suit he'd had couriered over from Dunedin) and to retire the next seems perverse. Just when they were so close . . .

"So close to what?" retorts Shayne, "The bottom line is that you've gotta really like the music you're playing and feel really comfortable with it and everything else that results from it is a spin-off. If you're doing it primarily to appear on massively syndicated American television shows that's not a very good reason. I just wanna play cool music."

Were you sick of being broke?

"Well no, I want to continue making music so I'll probably continue to be reasonably broke. I'm not rich, in fact I haven't got very much money at all, but I haven't starved either."

Is it worth touring America? Wouldn't it be better to stay here and pack out the Gluepot than play to 50 people in Ohio?

"Ever since I started with the Double Happys, our first press release said our ambition was to go to America and abuse Americans for being so dumb. I can't think of a better way to see the world than through something like that. It's a cool feeling playing your stupid music to alien beings on the other side of the planet."

Are you a difficult bastard Shayne?

"Who? Me?"

An egotistical firebrand, abusing your bass player on stage in New York.

"He'd be all those things just as much as I am. Yeah, we occasionally say things to each other but god, if you're living in each other's back pockets and you're tired and under pressure of course you're going to have arguments. Nah, there wasn't any really difficult shit and as far as me being those things, you'd have to ask the other members of the band."

(Which we did. Despite Mark Peterson's promise to "dish the dirt" to another writer, all he'd tell me was platitudes and that he's forming a new band with Philip Moore and James

Stevenson. Meanwhile, David Woods is making jewellery in a shed in Debbi's backyard and drummer John Collie is lying low in Auckland).

Shayne hums and hahs when asked to name the most exciting thing that happened to him in the Fits, but he laughs long and hard about the dangers of falling down the black hole of Dunedin - late mornings, hard drugs, cold weather. I picture him there, clustered around the fire with Martin and Bob, reminiscing about past glory. Shayne comes back with a typical Carterism: "I'm planning the rock cabaret circuit tour of central Otago. Me and Broughy are going to get together and do some of our golden oldies, pull 'Joe 90' out of the bag and 'Down In Splendour' and a few other bits and pieces. No, I'm not worried, I think Dunedin's a really good place. I want to get away from bigger places and record labels and just concentrate on writing some music. The really cool thing about this place is so many people have practise rooms in their houses and you just go around and have a cup of tea instead of going out to a coffee bar and hanging out. Well, you can do that too, and have cheese rolls."

As for forming a new band, Shayne says he likes the idea of a three-piece and hints at a future Battle of the Power Trios with King Loser. But at 29, don't you feel you've peaked, that any artist only has so much great work in them and as a rock musician that work is more likely to happen when you're young?

"No. I'm not that pessimistic and I don't think I'm that ancient. And no matter how dramatic it seems, it's virtually a compulsion so I've gotta keep doing it."

On a more personal note, are you still going out with Angie from Frente?

"Who told you that?! It was a complete lie! I'm going out with the twins from Neighbours."

DONNA YUZWALK