

BABBLE

The huge neo-colonial house commands the land on which it stands, standing sentinel over a secluded, private bay. It would be idyllic if the house wasn't half-finished and splashed with primer paint and if the rain wasn't turning the bare clay at its feet into a bog. Your correspondent will later have to do his best impression of Possum Bourne merely to exit the mudslide that is laughably called a driveway.

"We tried to build a house by fax while we were in London," says Alannah Currie, gesturing over her shoulder. "And this is what happened... We're running a little late, nothing's really together yet, but it'll be alright."

Indeed, the house could probably slide gracefully into the water and Currie and her partner would feel less aggravated than they did the first time they visited New Zealand together - in 1984, as two thirds of the Thompson Twins. While the press mounted a proto-Rod 'n' Rachel campaign, the rain fell incessantly on every outdoor show, Currie's mother fell ill and the Thompson Twins, one of the most successful pop bands of that fruitful era for pop music, were coming apart. Even the little things went wrong...

"When we played Western Springs, I was so tired I did the soundcheck and went backstage and fell asleep," sighs Bailey. "I took my glasses off and put them down, then someone woke me up just before the show and I stood on them and broke them. So I played the whole show pretty much blind."

"It was the end of the Thompson Twins, really," says Currie. "It all sort of fell apart and we had nervous breakdowns. We went to Japan, Joe (Leeway) left the band and we all fled in different directions. Tom and I went and lived in Ireland after that."

The couple eventually began to work on other projects. Bailey made and remixed dance records as Feedback Max and, "a little bit behind Warners' back" a new, ambientish project called

Babble coalesced. It's Babble which brings them here, north-east of Warkworth, and determined to chill. They look healthy and happy. Currie, with her dreadlocks, is barely recognisable as the skinny, eyebrowless woman the *NME* dubbed "the hatstand from New Zealand"

When everything is completed, this place will be Babble HQ. The group's debut album, *The Stone*, was recorded in London, but work on another will begin at their own studio here when the group's third member, Keith Fernley, arrives from London. For Currie, who joined the haemorrhage of young blood out of New Zealand during the Muldoon era, it's exciting.

"I ran away screaming 17 years ago. There was no youth culture here, so I went to London, which was Mecca. Now coming back is like a great discovery."

"The babble thing didn't seem to fit an urban environment. It needed hills and sea and trees and space. We wanted to live in a space where people could come and do stuff - not only a studio, but painting and building and whatever mad ideas. I needed an empire! Already, people are turning up and building shrines and making plans for the Tower of Babble in the top fields - and the electric sheep."

"You can analyse it too much," Bailey adds. "But when it comes down to it, we just wanted to have fun making records, to do what we want to do rather than be forced to do it some other way. It's selfish, but it's the best way to do it creatively."

They've only been living here a couple of months and Bailey and Currie are, inevitably, a little light on ideas as to how they'll interact with the local music and arts scenes. But that, perhaps, will be the test of their venture - whether they're wealthy former pop stars living in paradise or a useful thread in the cultural cloth Aotearoa is cutting for itself these days.

But hell, there's no hurry and they've got a house to build first.

RUSSELL BROWN



POP ART TOASTERS

We called Martin Phillipps in Dunedin to talk about the Pop Art Toasters, his nifty 60s covers combo, but within minutes we were talking about something even more pressing, the future of Martin. For the Pop Art Toasters are but a side project, a bit of fun for Martin and pals like David Kilgour and Mike Dooley in-between projects, and a chance to pay homage to favourite 60s acts (in this case, the Dovers, the Avengers, the West Coast Experimental Band, the Squires and the Who).

But Martin's big quest now is to get a band together and become a performing-touring- album-releasing musician again. He wrote two albums worth of songs while hibernating at a friend's house on the isolated Otago Peninsula but next time he records, he wants to be sure the songs sound

like they do in his head, not like somebody else's idea of how they should sound (a problem with the Chills). More recently, Martin played solo at Wellington's Bodega on Saturday night but he says his strength is as a band leader. He talks quickly, as if he has a lot on his mind and a lot to achieve. But things are looking up. The financial and contractual furnace he found himself in after the demise of the Chills has started to cool and he's confident he won't be trapped in a 20 year pay-back package. But he will be more realistic and careful about the way future work is ushered to the public. Expect to see Martin Phillipps and band recording a new album in Auckland in a few months.

"I'm determined to make a career out of this," he says, "I feel I've done enough work to be in a better situation."

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