

## THE BILGE FESTIVAL



## SHRIMP 'N' SURFARI

Lessons are learned every day. 'Guide to Life, Part One' for this morning is that the Bilge Festival are a surfing band. Not in the way Dick Dale imagined, but in a real way — boards, water, wetsuits, that sort of thing.

So, the interviewer meets Bilge Festival guitarist/vocalist/writer at his Brooklyn flat. He stands there looking like the geek from the press office as Mark waxes — both literal and lyrical. The chat is not immediately about the band, but about the virtues of South Island surf and the new Jesus Lizard album. Soon afterwards Peter (again guitarist/vocalist/writer) and Tim (drums) arrive. Surf is still the subject, a surfari is arranged for the next day.

Tea and jaffa cake is produced. We take our places around the table, tape recorder on. Time to start?

The reason for the conversation is *The Shrimp Boats* — the new Bilge Festival album. We've had a taster with last year's *Pave it Over* EP — a release that broke the Bilge drought since *Cape Goat* in 1994.

If *Pave it Over* was a taste of Bilge in their grinding glory (the working title for *The Shrimp Boats* was *Gravel Slide* — a highly apt two-word self description, even if it wasn't used), then the album is a feast of jagged melody over a rhythm that is either rock solid and driving to the point of hypnotic, or else chops and changes, keeping the listener guessing throughout the duration. It may not be surf music, but if 'Misirlou' and 'I Get Around' are the soundtrack to the rolling Malibu waves, then *The Shrimp Boats* is more representative of the crashing confusion of Lyall Bay.

Originally recorded in the middle of last year, *The Shrimp Boats* has taken time going through mixes and artwork decisions, but is now ready for its baptism into the public realm. The band members themselves are getting reacquainted with the album by way of a demo tape and a slightly dodgy tape deck.

"When you go and record an album the expectation is that the whole thing will be one continuous process — from writing the songs, then going to the studio, then the mixing etc. — but it hardly ever works out that way. It's good though, it's good to be able to sit back and see what you've done without being caught up in the whole thing, as you are just after recording," says Mark.

The bands reacquaintance with the album has unearthed a few name changes, but apart from that, the general consensus is that all are happy with the newborn.

The album opens with 'A Framer' — fast and sharp, the lyrics are hissed out in bursts, punctuated with a demonically mocking voice spitting out 'ha, ha, ha's! The song works so well it must be either a total mesh of band minds in a single blur of collective inspiration, or a collective operation, executed and planned with pinpoint precision.

"Some of the songs are written following the vocal delivery, such as 'A Framer'. For that particular song it was basically a coming together of what felt right at the time," says Tim. "A few of the songs were pieced together in the practice room. Others, Peter or Mark brought in, and we played them as they were."

*The Shrimp Boats* is filled with song beginnings that could be the introduction to three minutes of straight ahead rock 'n' roll, or else become something more twisted, with the divisions between verse and chorus, bridge and conclusion, being less defined, less able to be grasped.

Tim says: "If we're playing something and it's going well, we try to go with it, not stand back and watch too closely. If we do that something can get lost. But we know each other well enough, and have played with each other long enough to know when to trust what we're doing and basically go on instinct."

The lyrical delivery on the album ranges from being out in front, over everything, making the words recognisable, understandable, comfortable to the listener, to being thrown into the background, to growl and wail, causing disquiet, as the message seems buried. The listener strains to understand what's going on, attempting to find something understandable, something to hum along to. We all fear what we do not know.

But words, even the most obscured, are of importance to Bilge Festival. The waiting public will be offered a full lyric sheet to compliment *The Shrimp Boats*. More than the partial quotes given with *Cape Goat*, the full poetic vision of this album will both enlighten and surprise.

"Deciding to put vocals out front or leave them back depends on the song rather than what the lyrics say. With some songs they have to be back because of the overall texture we want the song to have. But I agree that it is hard to pick up some of what is being said in some tracks. There is a lot of humour in the lyrics, and there's some twisted stuff as well," says Mark.

One of the lyrical surprises of *The Shrimp Boats* is Peter's frantic lines of ranting German at the end of 'Bedspread'. The effect is one of

evil lunacy, but like many of their successful effects, it was just a studio whim which worked.

Peter explains: "It was one of those situations where the song needed a touch of something different. The German was used as a guide vocal track in the studio, and we decided to use it for the final mix. In the end it's impossible to decipher what the words are, or even if they are in German — but it sounds good."

He adds: "That was just one version of that song, one particular studio take we decided to use. It could have turned out any number of different ways."

For the record, the statement in question translates to: 'My long legs / My fat legs / All mine / My fat legs / Your fat cow / My nurse.' And yes, for the scholars and gentlemen who think of these things, the German is all correct.

"I wouldn't do it if the German wasn't correct," says Peter.

Language twisting and other tricks of the Bilge Festival trade are well and good in the studio, to be conjured into the finished product for the public shelf, but what is the studio to the band — an extension of their live shows, or another world to explore?

"They are pretty much separate entities. Some songs can be totally different on stage to how they are recorded. There has to be a live feel to the album, but there should also be more than that. There have to be changes, more than if someone was just recording a live show," says Mark.

"It can be dangerous. Sometimes our favourite songs can turn out flat or sound laboured, the total opposite of the feeling we get from playing it," says Tim.

A song called 'The Foaming' is brought into the discussion. It has all those elements that make a great live track, and has been blended

into a hypnotic and compelling album track — grinding and pulsing, flowing into a wash.

The Bilge Festival are returning to concentrate on music after a lay-off of three months. They are not a band to be found gigging every weekend. This is partly due to the overkill factor — it's easy to take an over exposed band for granted — and because of their hands-on approach to the entire entity.

Mark explains: "We don't have a manager or anything like that. We make our own videos and organise our own tours, so with all that it's important not to get stressed about the whole thing."

"It also seems the more relaxed an attitude you have towards everything, the easier it comes, the more music there is," says Peter.

To the band, *The Shrimp Boats* represents a time and a place. As with their previous recordings, the whole situation — life, the band, the music — is all in a general state of flux.

"The band is, and sounds, how it does on any particular day. It can mean a whole lot of different things to us at different times," says Mark.

"Listening to the early stuff now, I feel quite removed from it. There are still things I like on those recordings, but there were a different set of influences on us then. It could just as easily be the food we were eating at the time, or where we were living," says Tim.

Whether it be making videos, organising tours (watch out for the band come the end of the month), eating, making records or surfing, the members of the Bilge Festival are keeping their options open.

Lastly, *The Shrimp Boats*? Is that not too haiku-esque or Zen-like for an album that has almost everything except serenity?

Mark explains: "It's the songs... yes, a flotilla of songs..."

DONALD REID

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