



Wheeler's on Fire



With only a handful of days off the road this year, Ash have been redefining what's meant by the work ethic. It's typical of their manic touring schedule that Tim Wheeler should be phoning from Norway where the band are, yup, in the middle of a tour.

Why have the band taken on such an insane on-the-road pace?

"Because we're mental," chuckles Wheeler, in his best Belfast accent. "We just like to work and get around, and we find it hard to say no. We end up doing everything because we're stupid, but we call all the shots and if it ever gets too much we'll cut back."

Earlier this year the word was you almost cracked up with the pressure of Ash's commitments.

"That was pretty true. It was around the time of the album release and we were working so hard and going crazy, there was a lot of pressure. But since then we've toured the States for two months and that was what turned it all around, as we could relax as were getting out somewhere where we were starting again doing small clubs. Got the endomorphines going, sorted me out."

And sorted out enough to tackle down under on their up-and-coming tour with Garbage.

"It should be good fun, Antipodean action," Wheeler laughs. "I think I've got some cousins in Wellington or somewhere. I've got cousins everywhere."

Flashback: Belfast, seven years ago, Tim Wheeler meets future Ash bassist Mark Hamilton. Tim picks up the story...

"We met when we were about 12, and we decided we'd become really famous as a great rock group. We were so bad for the first few years, but we were so determined and I think we were a bit crazy, and here we are now. To start off with stardom was the attraction, but now we're doing it because we love the music so much.

Rumour has it you were into Iron Maiden? "Yeah, definitely," Tim admits, with some embarrassment. "I don't really regret it, but I hate

Iron Maiden now — they're bollocks really."

And metal has died.

"Yeah, a gruesome death. It's been coming for some time as it was really going up its own arse, it became a parody of itself. I like bands like Black Sabbath and Thin Lizzy, but the rest weren't up to much."

The title of Ash's debut album, *1977*, celebrates a special year; Wheeler and Hamilton were born then, Space Invaders made their appearance, and so did the movies *Taxi Driver* and *Star Wars*. And there was punk.

Did you ever get into punk?

"Not really," explains the reformed metal fan. "I like bands like the Buzzcocks and the Undertones, and I was into the Sex Pistols for a while but they put me off recently with all this stuff they've been doing. And the Ramones were good."

But speaking of the incomparable Undertones and their Londonderry 'teenage kicks', there was a band that were the true precursors to Ash's early batch of kinetic, infectious, totally natural singles.

"I ended up discovering them after other people compared us to them, but they weren't really an inspiration to start with. I remember someone lent me one of their records at the time I was into heavy metal and all I saw on the front cover was these five geeks, and I thought, 'Aw, man, this doesn't look very cool at all.' A few years later I did get into them.

Right from the outset Ash have made it obvious they're the spring chickens of pop. 'Guaranteed real teenagers,' boasted the inner sleeve of their *Trailer* mini-album. And this wet-behind-the-ears, still-at-school angle has been hammered by the press.

"I don't care what angle they take," explains

Wheeler, "they have to pick up on something. The music is what we're really about in the end, and people don't write about it perhaps because they find it boring. But we're developing a lot, we're writing better songs and the music's getting better."

The initial burst of singles — 'Kung Fu', 'Girl From Mars' and 'Angle Interceptor' — showed the band's instinctive knack for quick fire pop, but it was the slower grinding, irresistible undertow of the *Goldfinger* EP that signalled here was a band capable of crashing into a higher dimension.

"I don't like the idea of suddenly maturing, but I think 'Goldfinger' is a strong development. When we started out with the song we took the middle section, the instrumental break chords from a James Bond song we thought was 'Goldfinger' but wasn't, but that became the working title. In the end we stuck with it as it has a lot of mystery."

On the same EP Mark Hamilton contributed a big dual fragile/pounding melodrama in the shape of 'I Need Somebody'.

"It's great, I'm really into it," Tim enthuses. "I had little to do with it as it was done during the album sessions, when I was writing lyrics and stuff. So, Rick [McMurray, drummer] and Mark put it together, and I just went along and did the vocal and a guitar line, and that was all I had to do with it. At the start I didn't pay much attention to it, but it's one of my favourite Ash songs now."

And to the album, *1977*, the pinnacle of what Ash have hoped to achieve in phase one of their ambition to rival the rock intelligentsia and durability of an REM. The early singles are there, providing sharp jabs of adrenalin in between the measured pop mastery of 'Oh Yeah' and 'Lost in You'. *1977* may have minor flaws, but it's grown into one of the best albums of 1996. Yet it certainly wasn't the best planned, as Wheeler appar-

ently wrote 'Lost in You' in the studio to complete the album.

"I like to work with loads of pressure. We'd been on the road non-stop ever since we'd left school, so we didn't have a lot of time to get the album together. We wouldn't have gone into the studio if we didn't think we could come out with a great album, but we knew could wing it in the studio and it would still come out really good.

"We did put a lot into it. I took two days off to do non-stop writing, so it wasn't completely rushed, and if we hadn't finished it to our complete satisfaction we would've taken more time."

So, have you got a backlog of stuff up your sleeve for the next album?

"No, after we did the album I decided to take a long break from songwriting and clear my head, because I'd been thinking about the album for about a year-and-a-half, so I was going crazy and I needed a break. I haven't written a song in about seven months, but I'm starting to think about getting into it again, as writing songs is a big sense of purpose in my life."

Tim Wheeler has lived his 19 years in Northern Ireland, hardly your safe European home, yet he hasn't written songs about the political situation there.

"I never really wanted to touch on it because I've always been apathetic since I grew up with it. I've always wanted to escape it and not talk about it."

I thought you might've been scared away from writing about it by the way the Cranberries handled it.

"Yeah, they've made the whole thing very ugly. They did it with so little style."

For style to burn catch Ash, with Garbage and Superette, at Auckland's North Shore Events Centre on October 11, and Wellington's Queens Wharf Events Centre on October 12.

GEORGE KAY