



# On the Top of the World

It happens all day, from early in the morning to late in the afternoon. Wherever Pauly Fuemana chooses to roam, he's forever at the receiving end of the title of *that* song.

As he strolls across Pitt Street in Auckland, following a mid-morning coffee break, a passerby toots his car horn and hollers, "How bizarre!" out the window. At the Television New Zealand building in Victoria Street, where Fuemana is making a guest appearance on the chat show *Midday*, the receptionist shakes his hand enthusiastically and utters an identical greeting. Later, in a Ponsonby restaurant, several diners cast fleeting glances in Fuemana's direction, and whisper this year's two most famous words. And stopped at traffic lights on the way to a photo shoot at Takapuna Beach, two schoolgirls gesture excitedly at Fuemana from the back seat of a BMW that has pulled up alongside. Almost without exception, Fuemana appears oblivious to the continuous reactions he provokes, though the buzz that surrounds him leaves no doubt as to the everlasting impact he's made on the cultural consciousness of the nation.

Wholly responsible for all this, is a single song, OMC's 'How Bizarre' — three minutes and 43 seconds of extraordinarily catchy Spanish-flavoured melodies, and go-with-the-flow lyrics, wrapped up in a killer chorus. A tune best summed up by TV host and raconteur Gary McCormick; "It's a song that when you hear it, it's impossible not to have your spirits raised."

And for that very reason, 'How Bizarre's' success has been extreme. In the 12 months since it

was released locally, 'How Bizarre' has spent three weeks at Number 1 on the national sales charts, picked up four trophies at the *1996 Music and Entertainment Awards of New Zealand*, and won two awards at the recent *APRA* (Australasian Performing Rights Association) *Silver Scroll Awards*. Worldwide, 'How Bizarre' has sold over one million copies, reached the top of the charts in Australia, Ireland, South Africa and Austria, hit the Top Five in the UK, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Israel, and achieved Top 10 status in Holland, Singapore, Denmark and Portugal.

After a whirlwind year devoted mostly to a worldwide promotional tour, Fuemana is back home to launch OMC's debut album, *How Bizarre*. With time to relax, he's now taking the opportunity to reflect on his time overseas and, in particular, the reasons for the universal appeal and success of 'How Bizarre'.

"The song wasn't about politics, it didn't have a gang influence to it, it wasn't progressive anything, it had no ego, it was just a fun song and I think everyone related to that. I think people want to listen to music, they don't want to listen to your bullshit."

At the same time as OMC triumphed at the *Music Awards* last April, 'How Bizarre' was sitting at the Number One spot in Australia, and a calculated plan of attack to blanket the United Kingdom, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region was

already underway. Over the next six months, Fuemana would visit Sydney, Melbourne, London (four times), Frankfurt, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Brussels, Barcelona, Lisbon, Zurich, Dusseldorf, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Manila, Bangkok and Singapore, undertaking a hectic schedule of interviews, showcase appearances and television spots. Fuemana describes appearing on England's long-standing music show *Top of the Pops* as the most memorable moment of the trip.

"We'd just finished the fourth rehearsal and I was walking off the stage, and this guy walked out of the dark, and it was the new version of Bryan Adams. He looked like Kurt Cobain, and he said to me, 'Are you Hispanic?', and I said, 'No, I'm from New Zealand, mate,' and we talked for awhile. When I walked away it just made me realise where I was, at *Top of the Pops*, and hanging out in the dressing room with the Spice Girls. I'm not trying to bounce names or nothing, but when you walk down a corridor and you bump into Neneh Cherry, you think, 'What the hell am I doing here?'"

Though it would appear that OMC were as deserving of a place on the pop show as any, 'How Bizarre' climbed to Number Five in Britain, and Fuemana featured on *TOTP* twice more. The spectacular success of the single prompted the release of *How Bizarre* in the UK, Europe, Asia and Canada in October (prior to being launched in New Zealand), and possibly the final feather in

OMC's cap for this year is a four-star review for the album in the much-respected English music magazine, *Q*.

Bearing in mind OMC's achievements during 1996, you could understand and tolerate a degree of ego-fuelled behaviour from Fuemana. Therefore, the total absence of arrogance or pretension in his manner would surprise many. Discussing *Top of the Pops* with *Midday* host Susan Wood, he plays down her eager request for pop star-shoulder-rubbing stories; "When I'm in a room with a lot of famous people I feel really awkward and I knock over my wine glass." And later on Takapuna Beach, Fuemana reveals he's not out to collect compliments. "There's lots of people telling me I'm great, but it's like, 'Don't tell me I'm great, tell my girlfriend.'"

These days, when everybody wants to be seen with, or wants a piece of Fuemana, he credits advice from his songwriting partner and producer, Alan Jansson, for keeping his head on straight and out of the clouds.

"One thing Alan taught me is, don't believe the bullshit and don't believe the hype. The music industry is too fickle to take it seriously, especially ego-wise. I take my music seriously, and my image seriously, and my business seriously, but I don't take the bullshit. I don't have many friends, and I keep my world really small, and I don't have the fake crowd around me. I have a lot of real people around me, and I don't like pretenders, but at the end of it I still treat a brother like a brother."

All you require to cope sufficiently with the pressures of the music biz, says Fuemana, are true friends and an expensive pair of sunglasses. "A good pair of shades helps when you're facing the public."

Later, Simon Grigg of Huh! Records (OMC's label) says, "That guy has got about 50 pairs of sunglasses."

At present, all eyes are back on OMC now a finished album has finally reached the public domain. And it has been a lengthy wait. Fuemana and Jansson began writing songs for the album while in Australia early in 1995, and upon their return home, the duo commenced recording at Jansson's Uptown Studios in Auckland. In December, 'How Bizarre' began its glory run. A second single, 'Right On', was released in June. Fuemana says *How Bizarre* was "basically" finished by the end of April this year, although behind-the-scenes record company manoeuvring delayed its arrival. Priority one for the moment, says Fuemana, is to prove OMC is not a one-trick pony.

"It took us so long to bring it all together, we had the songs, but we had to do fine touches, that sort of thing, and there was other dealings going on. Everyone was saying, 'He's a one-hit wonder,' but we had 10 songs there ready to go. I'm just relieved it's out there so people can get the whole picture."

In January, 'How Bizarre' will be released in America, the album will follow a month later, and a further round of globe-trotting will begin for Fuemana, with the goal of breaking OMC in the lucrative Stateside market. Meanwhile, as 1996 draws to a close, Fuemana reflects on the year that was.

"Things have happened this year that wouldn't have happened five years ago. People take me seriously now. When we first started off, it was a big joke — the Otara Millionaires Club — now, every time that joke is played on a radio station I get paid serious dosh, the song is bigger than a joke."

In addition, he expresses no concern at the possibility that OMC may have peaked, and the phenomenon that was 'How Bizarre' is unsurpassable.

"There's a line on the album that says, 'Peace to the god of everything,' and I know there is someone watching over me. I already know what it feels like to fail big time, to be in a position where you don't have shit. So, if it came that tomorrow everything went down the toilet, so be it, I've enjoyed this, and I've enjoyed this vibe, and failure is just part of life."

In closing, Fuemana points out that for he and Jansson, the true success of 'How Bizarre' isn't measured by critical accolades or commercial success, those aspects are simply a nice bonus. The duo are far more proud the song is 100 per cent kiwi made.

"At the end of the day, we made the record in New Zealand, I sold myself from New Zealand, and I didn't have to go and live in Australia or live in London. That's the whole point, we had a chance to make some good music, we did it in New Zealand, and fired up the world."

JOHN RUSSELL