



Martin Phillipps

Chilling Out in Garageland

In Europe with Flying Nun's Bent and Brightest.

Auckland's Garageland have just finished their first stint in the UK, hot on the heels of Martin Phillipps and his born-again Chills.

Somewhere in the heart of France, Martin John James Phillipps, 33, songwriter of Dunedin, leans forward to drop a piece of fruit on the seat vacated by his keyboard player. Idle tension on the tour bus builds... Will Tom look before he leaps back into his seat, or will he — gasp — squash the banana?

OK, it's a silly game. But it's a way to pass time on the long and unwinding roads that take the band through the European leg of their world tour. And it also offers a brief insight into the world of Phillipps and his new breed of Chills. For, despite all the flak he has been through, Phillipps has not lost his childlike innocence and ability to mix mischief with the serious business of pop, rock and roll. His perfect puppy-dog pop songs roll and writhe, offering glimpses of a dark, slippery, and sometimes seedy underbelly.

The story of the Chills is well known. Basically, talented tall poppy nearly makes it big on the world stage, but crashes and burns after a series of near misses and ever changing band members. Four years pass, in which Phillipps returns to Dunedin but then decides it is not all over, puts together a new band, records a new album — *Sunburnt* — and takes off on a world tour to promote them both.

This time around the pressure is palpable — for the Chills have to prove themselves as a contemporary music force, both to the punters and, to a certain extent, to record company Flying Nun.

"I don't want to be a tired old hack, just touring and churning out the old hits," Phillipps says in an interview. "I'm trying to keep my options open and looking very hard at what happens on tour to see whether it is worth maintaining a live band."

Flying Nun, which picked up the pieces and resigned the Chills after they were dropped by Warner Brothers in 1992, considers the band one of two current major projects. The other is dealing with bright and hyped young things, Garageland.

Signed to Flying Nun a year-and-a-half ago, Garageland are Jeremy Eade, Andrew Gladstone, Mark Silvey and Debbie Silvey. Twenty-somethings Eade, Gladstone and Mr Silvey formed the band in 1992. Ms Silvey joined a year later, adding another guitar and the odd vocal, to the guitar, drums and bass line-up.

Flying Nun head Roger Shepherd says the label has in the past been criticised for spending too much time on international promotion of established acts at the expense of new blood. Now it is trying to juggle both.

"There are two things we are concentrating on: Martin Phillipps and the Chills, and Garageland," Shepherd says in London.

While Phillipps and Garageland come out of different parts of the great New Zealand music landscape, there is much cross-referencing. Australian magazine *Time Off*, in a review of Garageland, suggested the band were, 'pop masters the like of which haven't been seen in the Land of the Long White Cloud since Martin Phillipps fell into a contractual limbo a few years ago'.

Auckland-based publication *Pavement*, also in review, suggested the band could do with a few trips around the globe to add an edge to the studio sound of their album. 'As I'm sure Martin Phillipps would tell you, it takes a lot more than brilliant songs to make it out of this neck of the woods,' the magazine said.

On tour in Europe, Phillipps does his bit to promote Garageland, dropping the name into every interview.

At first Garageland sound very American, but closer inspection throws up a hybrid that is peculiarly antipodean. There's that guitar sound, that naive sense of wonder that makes New Zealanders so special, and many Cleaned and Chilled beginnings, middles and ends. Garageland have bundled up the best sonic and scenic bits of New Zealand, wrapped in some United States, and produced a package with a



Roger Shepherd



Garageland

potential cross-continent appeal.

Last month the band played a major festival in Paris, organised by influential French rock magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, sharing a bill and a 3,000-odd crowd with Neneh Cherry, Mazzy Star and Tricky. They also played five dates in London.

Shepherd's plans for Garageland in Europe revolve around a calculated tease. While Garageland's *Last Exit to Garageland* album was released in New Zealand some time ago, putting it out here is an extended form of foreplay. The band's first European single, 'Fingerpops', was released in November, a second single will be issued in early March, then the band will go all the way — moving here to live and releasing the album.

The sales target for 'Fingerpops' is modest, 2,000 copies, but Shepherd says it's about momentum. "The target is important, but it's more about building towards selling a good quantity of Garageland albums next year," he says.

With Phillipps and the Chills, Flying Nun's focus is on re-establishing the band. Shepherd says the Chills have in the past built a good reputation in Europe, but could face a tough time doing it again. "I think the current band is a really strong one, but I don't think we're under any illusions about how difficult it is. They've been away a long time," he says. "In a fascist sense, music has moved and changed, while Martin is very much doing his own thing and his own songs. We've got to get in there and re-establish the band."

While the band sold out several gigs on the American leg of their tour, crowd numbers in Europe were down from the glory days when bands like the Chills, Verlaines, Bats, JPSE and Straitjacket Fits were Flying Nun's hot meal tick-

et. In Europe the band played 15 gigs in 21 days, taking in France, Belgium, Holland and the UK, and averaging crowds around 200. Still, many devoted fans travelled hundreds of kilometres to see the shows, and several of the more intellectual swooned at the chance to meet Phillipps and tell him how his songs filled a hole in their darkened bedrooms and angst-ridden adolescent hearts.

The challenge for Phillipps, if he is to retain relevance, is to reach beyond the intellectuals to touch the sonic youths of Europe's predominantly hard-core audience. His new set of Chills — drummer Jonathan Armstrong, wonderfully tattooed bassist Phil Kusabs, and keyboardist Tom Miskin — add an edge there. Aged 24 to 26, they look a part of the 90s grunge generation, and, on stage, they rock the pop.

Phillipps himself is mindful of getting older. "Now the big problem is, I'm 33, and no matter how good the music is, people want their rock music done by people their own age, so I don't know where that leaves me at the moment," he says. "One moment people are saying, 'Isn't it amazing how young he is and writing such good songs,' and now I'm an old legend."

Flying Nun and Phillipps now have to take a close look at the legend, evaluate how well the world tour has gone, what record sales are, and whether the band should return for the European summer festival circuit. Shepherd says it is up to Phillipps to judge his market. "The new band certainly looks like a young band. It really comes back to the sort of music Martin wants to write and play, and who that connects with. There is still a market for that kind of music, it's probably just older."

All this talk of old age in this case means thir-

ty-ish, and it seems obvious there is a huge untapped market out there. Changing social fabrics mean many of that generation of post-punk alternative music listeners are not tied to marriage and a mortgage, and just need a little gentle persuasion to get out of the house.

While a band has got to be good, Flying Nun has its own challenge in pushing the boundaries. In the past, the label has cruised itself into cult status, but if it is really serious about breaking a band overseas, it needs to hit the hustle. It joined forces with Australian independent Mushroom in 1990, and has now opened its own American office, in the North Carolina university town of Chapel Hill. Shepherd says the American venture should boost the label's profile and benefit the bands, providing a pit-stop for those leaving New Zealand. "If we can do reasonably well with the American office, it will have a flow-on effect for me here. And if bands are going to America, they may as well come here, it's about economies of scale," he says.

But he believes if a band is to make it overseas, it needs to move. "I don't think it's possible for a New Zealand band to be commercially successful unless they are living here. For a young band, commercial success here means moving here and spending a big chunk of time establishing themselves."

Shepherd, for one, calls London and its second-hand bookstores and record shops home for now. "Part of the pay-off for living here and enduring the winters is that in the weekends I can enjoy what London has to offer," he says.

And Flying Nun, which he set up in 1981 with a string of credit deals to record his first acts, remains his living thing. "Even though I've made feeble attempts to have an outside life, the label is pretty central to it all really, I've just realised."

KAREEN FLOYD