



Warren Ellis can abuse his violin like Hendrix did a guitar, or caress it like Korchińska stroked a harp. He fronts the Melbourne-born instrumental trio, Dirty Three, and alongside Mick Turner on guitar and Jim White on drums, creates the most extreme, immediate, beautiful, and affecting music around. A grand statement maybe, except where many bands can claim one or the other, Dirty Three are all four. The emotion in their songs comes across so directly and strikes some sort of core in your psyche, you simply don't need to hear the sentiments expressed verbally to understand them. And that's what makes Dirty Three so extraordinary.

The seeds of the group were sewn long ago, when Ellis got his first taste of playing music at age nine, after he found a piano accordion at a rubbish dump, and taught himself the basics. A year later, a chance opportunity saw him introduced to the violin.

"When I was about 10, a guy came around to school and asked if anyone wanted to learn the

violin. So, I looked around the room and I remember seeing most of the girls had put their hand up, so I put my hand up too, thinking I'd get to meet some girls. I got a violin and when I got to the first lesson, there weren't any girls at all, there was just this other guy called Craig, who had a pointed ear so he said he was a Martian, he was pretty out there. So, I was stuck with this fuckin' violin and

Dirty Three

Take A Bow

this guy who thought he was a Martian, and no girls, that's when I started playing."

In the time-honoured tradition of youngsters learning an instrument, Ellis was taught classical pieces, though recalls feeling he never had enough "emotional experience", to play with anything other than technical precision. It wasn't until he left school and spent nine months in Europe, playing folk music in bars and busking on the street, that he began to relish playing the violin. Returning to Australia in 1992, he formed Dirty Three, and started writing songs.

"A friend bought a pub and asked me if I wanted to play there; 'There's no PA so you can't have a singer, why don't you do something different.' I met Jim and Mick and we got the group together, and we played background music there every week for a few months to get some extra money, though we never thought we'd play on a stage in a rock setting."

Back then, Ellis was also playing in a band with noted Aussie singer Kim Salmon, who invited Dirty Three to support his group the Surrealists at a gig in Melbourne. In a short space of time, through word of mouth, Dirty Three garnered a reputation for fierce live performances, and were soon headlining shows across Australia's East Coast. Securing label interest to record, however, proved fruitless.

"We had so much trouble trying to get a record out in the first place because we didn't have a singer, because we were an instrumental band, and because there was a violin and no bass guitar. So, every time we'd been in the studio it wasn't to make a record, it was just to document what we were doing."

Thanks to a small bank loan, Dirty Three's debut record, *Sad and Dangerous*, was made, "because we wanted to put down what we were doing". Similarly, 1994's breakthrough, *Dirty Three*, was conceived simply so Ellis and co. wouldn't forget the many songs they'd written. By that stage, the group had signed to indie label Torn & Frayed, and shortly after secured American and European releases for their second album. With overseas interest escalating, Dirty Three travelled outside Australia for the first time in early 95, across the Tasman to Auckland.

"We got lost going to the *Big Day Out* in Auckland and we ended up arriving really late. We were driving down the highway, it was pouring with rain I remember, everything was flooded out, and we were listening to the radio saying we were meant to be on stage then — it was really ludicrous."

After that inauspicious introduction to life on the road, America beckoned, and Dirty Three soaked up the remainder of the year "living in a 1966 Dodge Palara", touring around the States. The following year, they based themselves in London, and kept up a rigorous schedule of gigging throughout the UK and Europe. Midway through 1996, the band spent less than a week recording their third album, *Horse Stories* in London. The album was recently voted third in the US *Rolling Stone's* critic's poll of the best albums of last year, ahead of REM, Johnny Cash, and Nirvana. Although stunned by the result, Ellis is quick to point out reasons for *Horse Stories'* charms.

"You can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on recording and spend months doing it, but to me music should be about capturing a performance. We're not a band that does overdubs or worries if a cymbal crash should be there or whatever, because what you gain in accuracy you lose in feel, and if the performance is good and the feel is good then that's it. And the Dirty Three has always been about feel."

One of the most striking songs on *Horse Stories* is the cover of 'I Remember a Time When Once You Used to Love Me', a song that gifted Ellis one of his most thrilling musical moments. Ellis discovered the song, whose writer is unknown, on a cassette made by a Greek singer considered a national hero in her home country, called Iletta.

"We played in Greece with the Bad Seeds and when we played that song the whole place just erupted, people were singing louder than we could play, it was one of the most extraordinary experiences I've ever had playing music, to this day it's unforgettable. Five-thousand people we'd never played in front of, dancing and singing and yelling out, it was amazing. I looked at Mick and Jim and their faces said it all, grins from ear to ear. I sent Iletta the CD and she got in touch saying how much she loved it, and then I said, 'I'd really love to do a version of it with you,' and she's agreed to do it, so hopefully this year we'll be going over to record with her. Later, I went to South America with the Bad Seeds, and when I was leaving Chile, Nana Mouskuri was on the plane and I started talking to her. She knows Iletta really well, so she's agreed to be my chaperone when I go to meet Iletta, and she'll maybe even sing with us which would be fantastic."

If music is all about making a connection, then the above story casually illustrates why Dirty Three are home free. They may not speak the same physical language as their audience, but the band's ability to communicate with music is second to none. Indeed, Ellis says he'd prefer to let his violin do the talking.

"I find language such a futile way of communicating a lot of the time, it's quite useless in a lot of situations because you never really know what anybody's saying, because words have different meanings for each individual. For me, music is about communication, it's a language all of its own. Good lyricists are fantastic, they will write in a way where they are getting a personal idea across, but leave enough room for you to apply your own images to it so it's relative to your life. With music without words, it's allowing a lot more room for you to put your own character or experiences into it, and that can make it really powerful."

Power is something Dirty Three possess in endless quantities. Within one song they can envelope you in a shroud of almost overwhelming sadness, then lift you up on a wave of limitless exhilaration. And their mood swinging journeys can be uneasy ones, for the source of their music comes from strong emotions, some more pleasant than others. Song titles like 'Everything's Fucked', 'Hope', 'I Knew it Would Come to This', and 'Sue's Last Ride', suggest a lot of songs are drawn out of desperate situations, and sometimes it feels like being granted a glimpse into Ellis' soul.

"Probably 90 percent of our songs have evolved as a result of trying to come to terms with something, or there has been a real life experience for one of us that has caused the song to be made up. So, almost every song has some pretty powerful memory that goes along with it. I think for me, intense situations, whether it's when your ridiculously happy or ridiculously down, things come out. I've always liked extreme things, I don't like complacency. I think if you're going to do something you should really do it, and get right into it and follow it really strongly. I like people like that and I like experiences like that, and I like to hear music that has extremes in it, real highs or real lows."

In addition to writing songs in order to cope with life's nasty slights, Ellis says being on stage in Dirty Three helps keep him sane.

"I find playing a fantastic release, if I didn't play I'd probably end up sitting and punching myself in the head a lot. Sometimes it's such a great release for frustration or sadness or joy, and it's good to get those things out sometimes."

On the eve of returning to Europe, Dirty Three arrive in New Zealand mid-February for a brief tour, taking in Auckland and Wellington. They rank in the top three live bands I've ever seen — Ellis in particular is a spectacle to behold, and there's never been a better time than now.

"It's been in the last four years that I've been discovering my voice on the instrument, that's when it started really opening up to me, and I've really said, 'The violin, that's for me.'"

JOHN RUSSELL

DIMMER

DON'T MAKE BUY OUT YOUR SILENCE

OUT NOW ON CD-SINGLE,
CASSETTE AND
SEVEN INCH VINYL

VISIT THE FLYING NUN WEBSITE AT
<http://www.flyingnun.co.nz>

