



On Dunedin Time Dimmer

When the Straitjacket Fits split up in January 1994, they broke a lot of hearts. The Fits were a rock band you could believe in, and on numerous occasions when they hit the stage, they were the greatest one that existed in the world. Before a whole lot more people came to recognise that, the band's frontman Shayne Carter called it quits, and went home to Dunedin — not to wallow in bitterness and regret, but to refuel, and move forward with a new band, Dimmer.

On a sweltering hot February day, in an office at Flying Nun's Queen Street headquarters, Shayne Carter sits down with a cup of coffee and rolls a cigarette. A stack of posters advertising Dimmer's new EP, *Don't Make Me Buy Out Your Silence*, are on the floor behind him. Carter is taking a break from recording sessions for the band's first album, but one day off won't matter, as it's taken Dimmer over two years to get to this point.

"This whole thing has been a real saga," he says, "but it has been a process of trial and error, and I do feel like through all the trials and errors that have gone down under this particular umbrella, it has always been heading somewhere, and there is this philosophy that it has been shaped as well. That's what is hopefully gonna come to fruition now."

The first peep out of Dimmer came with the release of the instrumental single 'Crystalator'. Sprung on the world by the infamous Seattle label Sub Pop, 'Crystalator' was the first evidence that Carter's music had shifted tack from the framework the Fits worked within, that he was moving on. Carter has been playing in loud guitar bands since he was 15, and as he notes,

"eventually the thrill of that wears a bit thin, you just wanna find alternative ways of trying get that same kind of effect". These days, the "three-bar chords" that excited Carter in his first band, Bored Games, and the devices that became the hallmarks of the Straitjacket Fits, no longer interest him as a songwriter and musician — it's a case of 'been there, done that'. Added to that, there's little in the way of contemporary guitar music that Carter finds engaging. He's "lost virtually all faith in rock", it's become a tired and unoriginal old beast.

"So much of it seems to be second-hand or second division interpretations of stuff that's already been before. A lot of it's got to do with that grunge thing as well, it's like the whole subversive nature of the electric guitar has been undermined because it's become completely common currency — everyone's got a loud guitar. This thing that was supposedly rebellious just doesn't seem that way to me anymore."

That view is not to be mistaken for cynicism or jadedness. Carter recoils at the suggestion he may have forgotten what it's like to be thrilled by music.

"I still *do* love music. There's music that I listen to that moves me and still gives me that same feeling, but it's not some plonker standing there playing second-hand Seattle stuff. There still are qualities in music that I do find thrilling, and to me music still is the most powerful thing there is out there."

In searching for new thrills, Carter is exploring music that has certain trance-like qualities, music that is insistent and unchanging, that sounds, "really boring after three minutes and great after five". For the past two years Carter has listened mainly to early Kraftwerk and Brian Eno records, and little known instrumental bands such as Australia's Dirty Three and the European electronic outfits Oval and Autechre; "To me that is great spooky shit, and it's got a lot of qualities that I've always loved in rock music. It's got mystery, it's got intrigue, and it's got menace, but it's coming from a completely different angle."

It's a similar approach to music that Carter is attempting to bring to Dimmer. He's not interested in writing music that is predictable or feels comfortable, and gone are "those big glory chords that you can see coming at a hundred miles an hour". In its place is a sound that's simple and hypnotising, that moves in organic flows, rather than the "predictable blocks" of conventional rock. Although it appears Carter has orchestrated a major stylistic shift away from the pop music of Fits, he denies there's been any drastic U-turns made, pointing out that the Straitjackets had similar elements to Dimmer, but they were contained within more rockist trappings.

"I just think it's a natural progression really, because even on the last Straitjacket Fits album, the whole idea behind that was to write songs as simple as possible, and even though that was more of a rock kind of band, there's quite a few one-chord songs on that last record. So to me, it's not as though there's been a huge deviation, it's just a progression of what I was thinking and feeling anyway."

Nevertheless, both 'Crystalator' and *Don't Make Me Buy Out Your Silence* have drawn confused reactions. People had put Carter "in a box", they had certain expectations of him, and the music he has produced post-Fits doesn't fit with a lot of those perceptions. While it's a truism that people tend to dismiss or criticise music they don't know, it is only fair they spend time with something unfamiliar to attempt to understand where it's coming from, and what it's doing. And that certainly applies to Dimmer.

"People are resistant to change," notes Carter. "I've detected sometimes the vibe, 'What he was doing with the Fits was really great, what's happened to him?' I read a review like that recently, and that's just a denial of growth. I don't want to be the retarded sad guy, churning out stuff I wrote when I was 19."

When the Straitjackets Fits broke up in 94, Carter went home, "to contemplate what was

going on and what I wanted to do next." He was in a positive frame of mind, telling *The New Zealand Herald*, "It's a good creative place and I've got a second wave of energy." Soon after, Carter convened the first incarnation of Dimmer in a Dunedin practice room. 'Slicing the slack, fresh on attack!', stated the press release that announced the arrival of the band, who Carter predicted would record an album that October. Since then, aside from the release of 'Crystalator', and a handful of live shows, little has been heard from the Dimmer camp. The only constant has been a ridiculously regular turnover in band personnel. What's the story? Carter simply says, "Things move slowly in Dunedin, man."

When Carter shifted back to Auckland last September, it seemed as though Dimmer had landed a concrete line-up in Carter on guitar, Solid Gold Hell's Gary Sullivan on drums, and Chris Heazlewood of King Loser (whom Carter had been playing with for several months) on bass. But in late October, Heazlewood "fell overboard in controversial circumstances", says Carter, without elaborating. What happened? It was there in black and white for those who were curious. Heazlewood went online with a message condemning the Dimmer project, describing it as a 'sad, half-assed debacle', and referring to Carter as a 'dumb dumbass motherfucker'.

"I really don't want to get into that," says Carter, "what he did was the act of a real schmuck and that guy knows it. The public forum really isn't the way to do it, and he also knows that, and I don't want to get into that in a public forum."

At present, Dimmer as it stands is a duo, and Carter says, "The focus on what Dimmer should be is a lot stronger." The Dimmer album, due for completion by the end of May, is scheduled for release on Flying Nun around September. Talking to Carter, it's abundantly clear he has a positive outlook, and is happy where he's at musically.

His experiences surrounding the demise of the Fits have not made him bitter and twisted ("It just the way it goes, it's a lottery out there."), if anything they've strengthened his resolve to search for those things in music that give him the biggest thrills.

"[Dimmer is] a bunch of people playing in a practice room, trying to get music that moves you to some degree, that's the ambition, to make shit that is powerful in some kind of way. As I get older, and the longer I do this, I've got to find fresh ways to get that feeling — playing 'She Speeds', that doesn't move me inside anymore. What I do with Dimmer may be viewed as more uncommercial or more unlikely to be picked up by Arista Records in America, but that's not the point. It's about making stuff that does it for me, and it's not disappearing up my own ass, it's just trying to arouse that feeling."

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