

The walls of Simon Grigg's tiny office — tucked away on the first floor of a non-descript building on Auckland's High Street — are peppered with some classic names in New Zealand music. Posters and pictures feature infamous band names such as Toy Love and the Suburban Reptiles, playing at long lost venues called Zwines and the Rhumba Bar. Not-quite pride of place goes to a framed wide angle shot of the Screaming Meemees playing to thousands at the 1982 *Sweetwaters* Festival. If you look closely, Grigg can be seen, standing side of stage, almost hidden amongst the clutter of people and banks of equipment.

For almost two decades, Grigg has had his finger firmly planted in many pies within the inner and outer realms of the New Zealand music scene. And on the surface, at least, it appears he has the midas touch.

Grigg is the owner and operator of Huh! Records, the small local indie that gave the world OMC's 'How Bizarre'. To date, the song has sold over 1.3 million copies across the globe. In the mid 80s, Grigg was at the forefront of introducing dance music to New Zealand. And by endeavouring to remain, "cutting edge", he has enjoyed a fruitful longevity in the Auckland nightclub scene since 1986. Up until 18 months ago, Grigg's club, the Box, "was the lone venue playing underground dance music in Auckland." In addition, Grigg owns a thriving inner city record store, BPM, named after the weekly dance music show that he has hosted on Radio bFM for the past decade. With such a full CV, it's not surprising that Grigg says his biggest problem in life is, "getting to the next appointment."

It all started for Grigg in June 1980, when he was 24. His first venture was the independent punk label, Propeller, that helped make local heroes out of bands such as Blam Blam Blam, Screaming Meemees, the Spelling Mistakes, the Features, and the Newmatics.

What was your motivation for starting Propeller?

"The first record I made was by the Suburban Reptiles, it was financed by the band and supposedly it came out on my label, Partisan, but it ended up on Vertigo. I thought at the time that it would be nice to have a record label and do my own thing. A couple of years later, Bryan Staff decided to put out a couple of singles on Ripper Records, and he rang me up and said, 'I'm putting out these singles', and I said, 'Oh yeah, how do ya do it.' He said, 'Ode Records are going to manufacture these things and all you have to do is give them the tapes. I was flating with this guy, James Pinker, well James' girlfriend actually, but James was there 98 percent of the time. James was in the Features and I thought they were amazing, but they couldn't get a deal, they'd been turned down by every record company, so I borrowed 400 bucks to release their record. About the same time, my brother-in-law was managing the Windsor Castle. He had a Battle of the Bands, and the band that he managed was the Spelling Mistakes, and they won. The prize was a days free recording, so I said, 'I'll release your record'. We released a couple of singles to see what would happen, and they took off. There was a massive groundswell of support for this whole underground, punk, indie scene happening in Auckland, which the major record companies had no idea about. That, combined with the fact there was no New Zealand recording industry, back in those days. We released more records in the first 12 months after Propeller started, the indies did, than had been released by New Zealand record labels in the whole of the 70s."

Did you have a clue how to operate a label, or was it trial and error?

"It was trial and stupidity as much as anything. We didn't have the faintest idea of



Simon Grigg and OMC's Pauly Fuemana.



Tony Drumm, Screaming Meemees.



Photo by Murray Carmichael

Blam Blam Blam, Propeller.

rip it up 1977-1997

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what we were doing. We released the Spelling Mistakes, and the single entered the chart at Number 32, and we thought, 'this is amazing, we've got a big hit single on our hands'. I was working at Taste Records in High Street, and this guy walked in and said, 'I wanna put your Spelling Mistakes single on *Solid Gold Hits*. Here's \$2000 as an advance, and here's a contract, just sign it'. That sounded good to me, \$2000 was a lot of money in 1980, so I signed this contract, and handed over a master tape a day or so later. He came back 24 hours after we'd given him the tape, I still hadn't banked the cheque, and he said, 'we listened to the song and it's terrible, we don't want to put it on our record anymore'. He took his cheque back, and it wasn't until he'd walked out of the shop that I realised I had a signed contract. I could've had them over a barrel, but it didn't even occur to me. Then we started selling all these records — the Features, the Spelling Mistakes, the next one was the Marching Girls' single. And as fast as I could press them, they kept on selling. Then it occurred to me, about a month later, 'hold on, these things are selling for \$2.99, times X number of thousand singles, there's some money here somewhere'. None of us had even thought about it."

Did working in a record store help you chart Propeller releases?

"Yeah it did. New Zealand's record charts are notoriously dodgy anyway, everyone knows they're crap, they always have been and they still are. I reckon the top 10 are probably close to accurate, and the rest of the chart is retailer whim — despite the fact that the industry will probably tell you otherwise. It's a bit of an old boys network, like, 'I'll give you 100 free singles if you mark my single up in the chart', and that's bollocks. I had the support of all the Auckland retailers, who were totally into what I was doing, and even when the singles were out of stock they were still marking it up there. Then there was some sort of chart investigation. Radio Hauraki complained to RIANZ [Recording Industry Association of NZ] in Wellington, saying, 'this is a fiddle'. A year later we had a Number One single with the Screaming Meemees, and Radio Hauraki couldn't understand how we entered the chart at Number One without their support, because Hauraki was all powerful in those days. But it was a legitimate Number One, we sold three and a half thousand singles in a day."

What would you suggest as reasons for the avid support for local bands in the early 80s?

"There was just a huge local band buzz, which doesn't exist so much anymore, the scene is so fragmented now. On a good night, when Propeller was at its peak, I could go and see three of my bands playing to capacity crowds in Auckland, at different venues, and they all had 300 to 400 people in them. I don't know how many kids you had in central Auckland on a Friday or Saturday night, wanting to do things, but it was a lot, and this gave them something to do."

After such a brilliant start for Propeller, what began to go wrong?

"It was a combination of a whole lot of things. It was business naivety, and it was having to make the jump from a 'singles' label to an 'albums' label. We charted something like 30 singles out of 36, and all those bands, after three hit singles, wanted to