

for many years in the 80s, then so be it. And I haven't. I've got several employers at the moment, but I don't have to go to an office and I don't work nine-to-five. The next big decision was, never to get involved with a rock band again, and so far I've managed to avoid that also. It's very difficult to have four individuals who are strong — as you would like the individuals in a band to be — to co-exist together. And Alec and I just worked so easily together, we thought we could just be a recording unit, that we didn't have to do all the other band shit. It was such a liberation, and that transferred through to my solo career."

*Toy Love broke up in September 1980, and Knox took a break: "I was so revolted by it all that I would've been quite happy not to have ever done music again. But it didn't take long for the urge to be musically creative again came over me." With money left to him when his Grandmother died, Knox bought a four-track recorder and, "a legend was born." The 'Dunedin Sound' was captured when Knox and soundman Doug Hood recorded many early Flying Nun bands using the TEAC machine, including the Clean, the Chills, the Verlaines, and the Sneaky Feelings.*

*Throughout the 80s and 90s, in addition to his musical output and related projects, Knox has regularly contributed cartoons, reviews, and editorial rants to many print publications including the New Zealand Herald, the Listener, and Real Groove, and he appears on TV3's weekly arts show, Sunday, reviewing films. Pushing an anti-mainstream stance, Knox's forthright commentaries and ascerbic wit have ensured his opinions are in demand, but although he's always busy, Knox has struggled to making a living out of being 'Chris Knox.'*

"The freelance life is a tough way to make money, you've got to be on your toes all the time and you never know if you're going to have a good month or a bad month. For years, the only regular income I had was 100 bucks a week from the Max Media strip in the Herald, and it was pretty dicey to sustain that sort of lifestyle, and not have to succumb to the going out to work thing."

**Are you conscious of ensuring you're seen as being leftfield in everything you do?**

"I lean left in every way, I'm an anarcho-socialist, if there is such a thing. I do like to be seen to be anti-establishment and iconoclastic, I don't like to be seen to be embracing industry standards. And this is something that I often have to work against. Today, for example, I bought a guitar stand for 25 bucks, and that took an effort of will because guitarists use guitar stands, just a little thing like that, I wanted to stay outside the norm."

**That's neurotic, why do you care about something so trivial?**

"I know, it's being stupid, that's why I eventually bought one, just like a guitar tuner, I eventually got one of those. But when it comes to more important things, like creativity, politics, there's enough of those things in the mainstream, you need as much as is humanly possible out there on the edges so that there's a choice out there for people, so that there's an extreme to come back from."

**Can you be anti-establishment when you're involved with the Herald and the Listener and TV3?**

"I don't see why not. They don't give me a brief, any of those people, as to what direction I should be coming from, so within those very institutionalised structures, I'm still doing what I like to do. As soon as I see any editorial hand come down on me I leave."

*Several months ago, when the Herald's*

*music section, The Voice, was incorporated into a TV lift-out, the resulting Max Media strip, where Max commiserated ("I've got no voice"), was rejected by the newspaper's editors.*

"That pissed me off, and every time they reject a cartoon it pisses me off, but I need some steady income. And apart from being pissed off once every three months, I can do what I like."

**What percentage of Max Media is your own personality and views?**

"A fair chunk, but Max is, to a degree, stuck back where I was a few years ago, I'm generally more positive than Max is. He has a way of expressing things a little more forcefully than I would express them myself. Max has been round for a decade now, he's had 10 years of personal growth, I do think of him as a person, and often do not entirely agree with him — it enables me to be schizoid safely."

**"Along with most of my performing peers, I have an ego the size of the South Island, so I want people to notice me. I like people liking me."**

**Are you a cynic?**

"I used to be a cynic and I still have a cynical streak, but I'm much less so now. I'm much more open to positive feelings than I was, certainly 15 years ago, and probably a year ago. The new album is called *Yes!!* — with two exclamation marks — and that's basically how I'm feeling. Cynicism can be really dangerous, scepticism is great, but I think a lot of people mistake the two. Scepticism is a good way to run your life, cynicism has almost a destructive edge to it that I would like to avoid these days. Being negative only results in generally, more negativity. Being bitterly negative has very little use, it leads to self hate, and you're just going to make your own life and everybody else's a misery. Having said that, I react most violently against your average game show type positivity, it's not felt, it's manufactured — people are trained how to be Simon Barnett."

**When you're performing, do you take pleasure in attempting to wind people up?**

"Winding people up was my old method, and I used to get quite angry with people while on stage, to the point where it could get quite unpleasant. Now, I gently terrify, I use humour a lot — you can get away with so much if there's a laugh in there."

**"I'm constantly trying to avoid falling into patterns, because therein lies that thing where you become a style rather than a songwriter."**

**Do you consider yourself an exhibitionist?**

"Only either when I'm really drunk or when I'm on stage. I like showing off, and I like being in the position where you've got to do something to entertain, even if you've got no idea what you're going to do. I put myself in that position at the Aotea Centre opening, I had to do a 45 minute spoken word thing and I had no idea what I was going to do. I'd prepared absolutely nothing, but I made it work. The first 15 minutes was pretty ropy, but the adrenalin kicked it and then I just bumbled, free associated wildly, and it was great. Being able to create something out of nothing, and keep people entertained, that, for me, is what showing off is all about."

**Are there times when you feel obliged to live up to your audience's expectations?**

"I often feel that, so I go out of my way not to. I know there's people out there who expect me to do the unexpected, so

you do get yourself in a bit of a bind, but you've just got to do the unexpected in an unexpected sort of fashion."

**Have you the Lou Reed attitude to your audience, in that you mistreat them?**

"Yeah, he was quite a formative influence as far as that was concerned. The difference between someone like Reed and me is, I don't think I've ever stopped a performance. It's become more apparent to me that you've got to have respect for your audience no matter how little they deserve it, because if you don't give them respect, they don't give you respect."

**What makes an audience not worthy of respect?**

"If you're in a support situation and they're not giving you the time of day, even though you're working your lungs out to give them a good time. Just ignorance really, if they're ignoring you when you're really working hard and you know you're

doing a really good gig, that is very difficult. Generally, in that sort of situation I'd do something totally outlandish to get their attention, if not their respect. While I'm up there on stage, I'm going to try my hardest to get them to notice me otherwise there's no point in being there. Along with most of my performing peers, I have an ego the size of the South Island, so I want people to notice me. I like people liking me."

**Ever suffer periods of loss of self confidence?**

"Constantly, I think every creative person, if they've got anything going for them at all, is riddled with self doubt. Every time you do an album, it's like walking down Queen Street naked. You're putting yourself out there and you're so close to the damn thing you've got no idea if it's any good. It can be a deeply terrifying thing at times, but after having done it for 20 years, you know that it goes in cycles, so you learn to relax and take it as it comes."

**Do you ever feel that you're considered a sacred cow by some Flying Nun fans, as though your status deems you beyond criticism?**

"Maybe they do, but I have an abiding faith in my audience, those that think or feel about me enough to actually get to

that point, would be intelligent enough to see through that. And that's the experience I have mostly, I don't think I've ever played to an audience where there hasn't been some form of criticism, generally it's good natured. I'm certainly not beyond criticism, and I think if you believe yourself that you're beyond criticism, that's hideous."

**Have you any misgivings about being regarded as an elder statesman of Flying Nun?**

"No, I have a certain amount of pride in that, in that I think it has a little bit of realism in it, because if the Enemy hadn't been what the Enemy was, at the time it was and the place it was, then the whole Flying Nun thing would have been a little more difficult. And it's very pleasing that at my advanced age, I can still get some respect from young people who are doing what I was doing 20 years ago. So, I'm happy to assume all those sort of mantles. They're meaningless in one regard, but

they're the closest I come to accepting an award, in another way of looking at it."

**Have you always ignored the Music Awards?**

"I went to one when Toy Love were up for an award in 1980. We were totally cynical about the whole thing and seemed to be surrounded by people who were totally cynical about it as well. We got very drunk, Paul Kean got up on a table and yelled obscenities at the aftermatch function. It was all of no interest to us really, and I've never lost that attitude. The whole idea of awards has always struck me as a bit odd, just the whole competitive element."

**Do you ever feel taken for granted — 'yet another Chris Knox album'?**

"That's always a danger, and as you go on there is more reason for you to be taken for granted because you tend to fall back into familiar patterns when you're writing songs. Trying to do a headline gig for me in Auckland is really hard 'cause I am taken for granted here. But the thing that gives me hope is that there's a lot of young people at most of my gigs, and they're not taking me for granted. They're new to it, and maybe they've heard that this guy is really odd, and does things that most people don't do, and can provide a lot of laughs as well as a bit of music. The people who were there 15/20 years ago, I'm taken for granted by them, and record sales continue on this downward slump in New Zealand. Early Tall Dwarfs albums were selling 3000 copies, now Tall Dwarfs and me are lucky to sell a thousand here."

*Titled as a positive affirmation of Knox's lust for life, the new album, Yes!!, was recorded in the front room of his and Ward's Grey Lynn villa. At a cost of \$2000, Knox considers it, "pretty damn expensive by my standards", but adds, "it was fun to make, it was direct, and there's no songs on there that I yet feel ashamed of." The most striking song on Yes!! is 'Ndidi', a 17 minute instrumental soundscape that closes the album. It's creation and inclusion suggests Knox is striving to evolve his own musical style.*

"I'm constantly trying to avoid falling into patterns, because therein lies that thing where you become a style rather than a songwriter. It's really hard — especially when you've got the incredibly limited instrumental skills that I have — to come up with something that's new and fresh and exciting to yourself. All the songs on *Yes!!* are ones that have passed that test, but to an outside observer, I'm sure a lot of those songs could easily be exchanged for songs on earlier albums, and nobody would notice the difference... but I like it."

*For the remainder of his 20th anniversary year, Knox will embark on a brief September New Zealand tour, and spend October playing in the USA. Then, "I'll come home and write songs and potter." It's what he does best.*

"I'm basically a lazy asshole, and if I don't have to do things I generally don't. Good things keep cropping up, it's like that John Lennon line, 'life is something that happens while you're busy making other plans.' Remaining out of control of your destiny is a good way for me to do it, because it gets me into areas I wouldn't normally go. I try to leave things as open as humanly possible, and something always comes up. I'm very seldom at a loss as to what to do, and keeping active is a fucking good idea. I can't see myself retiring, the things I can do, I don't see why I shouldn't be able to do them until I die. I'll stick with my scattergun approach and wait for things to turn up, and hope that my use-by date is some way in the future."

JOHN RUSSELL