

A RENAISSANCE BLOKE

CHRIS KNOX

When the first issue of *RipItUp* hit the streets in June 1977, Chris Knox was living in Dunedin; an aimless 24 year old, working factory jobs and existing on a diet of "booze and light drugs." A few months later, when punk rock reached New Zealand, Knox found his forte, and was soon the consummate madman in Dunedin's first punk band, the Enemy, who later evolved into Toy Love.

Two decades on, Knox is a family man, living in Grey Lynn, Auckland with his partner Barbara Ward, and their two kids, Liesha and John. Knox still does odd jobs; in the intervening years, he's drawn cartoons, released solo albums, published comics, made videos, released Tall Dwarfs albums (with Alec Bathgate of the Enemy), toured domestically and internationally, written opinion columns, reviewed music and films, and at one stage, when Social Welfare attempted to wean him off the sickness benefit, Knox spent a day weaving baskets. This month, Knox presents his sixth solo album for Flying Nun, entitled *Yes!!*.

For all his achievements and dalliances, Nun describe Chris Knox as their 'spiritual godfather', and 'a true renaissance bloke from down under.' Nothing would have happened without punk, says Knox.

"In 1977, when I first heard punk, I was heading on a real decline towards major alcohol abuse and lots of drugs, and feeling really bored. I'd been doing meaningless labouring jobs for the six years, and it was becoming like, 'what am I supposed to do when I grow up?' Punk came along which made me feel much better, it gave me something to listen to that I could relate to, and the aesthetic was such that it made me think that I could play it too. I met Alec and Mike [Dooley], and by pretending to be a bass player I managed to stun them with the fact that I could write songs — they didn't like anything I'd written, but that fact that I could do it was impressive enough to get me in [the Enemy]. Literally, punk did save my bacon."

Were you living the punk/self destructive lifestyle?

"Well, I'd been living that for years, man! I used to walk around the streets of Dunedin in my little cheese-cloth singlet that was ripped to pieces and had blood stains all over it, in 1971. I had the image already and I was doing a lot of self destructive shit, so punk was just the obvious way to channel it all. I wanted to be weirder than anybody else in Dunedin, and was on the way to partially succeeding. But when you're fronting a band it's much easier to be weirder, because you're amplified and your upfront about it, so you become 'officially weird', and you don't have to try nearly as hard. The self destructive thing was seen to be a part of my make-up by those who saw me slice myself in the Enemy days, but it was certainly not that, it was more of a self-celebratory thing. It was a particularly adrenalin-induced performance art... it felt absolutely right."

Did you ever feel you were risking not living to the age you're at now?

"I realised there was a danger, living the lifestyle I was — just basic abuse of the body in all forms possible. But I never wanted to die young, I couldn't see any point to that. When the Enemy started I



was 25, so I was possibly the oldest punk in New Zealand at the time, but it wasn't an issue, and I didn't fear growing old."

Had you plans to be a family man?

"I never planned anything, it just happened. I was aimless, always have been aimless, still are aimless. I've got no particular things I want to get done now, and I had no particular things I wanted to get done then, except express myself in some fashion, which I'm still doing. I had no aspirations to settle down, and by the time I did, it was not entirely of my own volition — Barbara and I got pregnant. At the time I reacted against that a bit, but now I'm bloody glad."

In December 1979, Toy Love were at their peak in New Zealand. After releasing two singles, the band signed an album deal with new Australian indie label DeLuxe, whose distribution was handled by the major, WEA. In March of the following year, Toy Love travelled to Australia to tour, and record their debut album in Sydney with Dragon's Todd Hunter producing. After playing to indifferent audiences six nights a week for five months, for little money, the band returned home dejected, with a patchy album to show for their efforts.

ripitup 1977-1997

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Looking back, did Toy Love have the classic punk band/major label experience?

"I guess so, but I can't say in retrospect that we were fucked over, because the major label was just doing what major labels do. We were worked too hard, but that was as much our management as the label. We were used to being able to have a bit of time to write songs, and do other shit, but we didn't get that time. We were also forced to work in a studio that we didn't feel comfortable in, with people we didn't feel comfortable working with. In that way we were fucked over, but it was our fault as much as anybody else's, for letting it happen. We got out as soon as we could, once we realised how futile the whole process was. It was a great thing to happen in many ways, if it hadn't happened I might never have learnt that that experience is not a good one to base a life around."

Did your Oz experience make you despise the music business?

"We despised the industry anyway! There was no industry [in NZ], all it was, was a distribution centre for overseas rock records... there's a minor industry now. When the Enemy sent away a really terrible cassette of four songs to the major labels in 1978, we despised them, we despised them more when they all sent back rejections. We thought WEA were a total crock of shit, all they were interested in was the Eagles, but we really liked Terry Hogan, who was their A&R person, and he really liked us, so we went with it. Our experience just proved something that we already knew, that it wasn't for us."

Do you continue to have a contemptuous view of the local industry?

"Yes... to a degree. They are still mostly processing houses for overseas product, and they don't have much to do with what's happening in this country. Having said that, they do occasionally sign some really good people, and within all those organisations there are people with brains, taste, and skills, so, I wouldn't sweepingly condemn them as I used to. But still, the multinationals are terrified because of all the other technologies coming along, and there being no mainstream. It's getting harder and harder to be an artist on a large major, because if you put one foot wrong, you're off. It's better for me to be with someone like Flying Nun, who are extremely forgiving — they don't mind if you don't sell anything, especially me, because I record for so little that they actually make a tiny smidgen of money out of me — a lot of the people on that label don't recoup costs. I've got total freedom and I have no big demands on me, I don't have to do anything that I don't want to. It's great and it's the way I want it to be."

You've done your own thing for a long time now...

"I made a decision about the time of the Enemy that I would never work a nine-to-five job again, and if that meant going on the dole and the sickness benefit as I did