

ON A CAFFEINE BUZZ

Melvins

A week on the road with one of your favourite bands - sounds like a good deal, right? Sure does, until you realise on the way to collect them from the airport that you only know these people through their music, and they may not be quite as cool as you imagine. What if they're sullen egotistical rock cliches who won't lower themselves to talk to any stupid road crew - that'd sure be fun. However, it turns out the Melvins judge people on a different criteria.

"You went up in our estimation," Buzz 'King Buzzo' Osborne tells me as we're driving into the city, "when we saw that you weren't wearing shorts. In our experience, short trousers indicate a casual approach to work and life in general, so we should get on fine." He then laughs to himself for the next few minutes, which sort of sets the tone for the whole tour.

Vocalist/guitarist Osborne, drummer Dale Crover, and bassist Mark Deutrom, have flown into Wellington to begin a tour of four New Zealand universities. They stepped off the plane barely 48 hours after finishing up the first leg of an American tour with Helmet, and Aussies, Regurgitator. As we check into the hotel, the band are disorientated but not tired, and completely unconcerned with tour details or the upcoming shows — they just want to go to the Maritime Museum. Rock 'n' roll touring — it's not at all what you'd expect.

That night's show is sparsely attended, and the jet-lag has now kicked in. "Well, it's gonna be like an acid trip tonight," says Buzz. Though, in the dressing room I discover a very important thing about the Melvins — the band does not drink or take any drugs (Mark D's Cuban cigars aside). Instead, they're fuelled by a combination of food and shocking amounts of caffeine — which may partly explain the wired, aggressive nature of their live performance. Onstage, the Melvins are a bizarre trio; Osborne's mad shock of hair ("the most famous hair in Hollywood," seen in videos by Beck, Barry White among others), and roundish countenance; Crover, clad only in underpants and shoes, and Mark D, in braces and cowboy hat, looking like an extra from *Little House on the Prairie*. Their set leans heavily on the better known material from the *Houdini*, *Stoner Witch*, and *Stag* albums, though there's smatterings of their 15 year career throughout, both in content and execution. The songs fit strangely together — one note can be held for minutes at a time, and just as it seems everything will collapse in howls of feedback, the band will fire back to the exact moment they left off. The Melvins live are a powerhouse mix of precision and accident, a multi-dimensional wall of sound where even the silence is deafening. As to whether the audience got it — who knows? One guy approached Buzz as we were loading out the equipment, saying in an intoxicated and superior way, "That was only a half-decent gig." As he staggers off, Buzz replies, "And maybe I should half kick your ass." And then, inevitably, he laughs.

In Mark D's half-sarcastic opinion, the Melvins are only "semi-famous, but legendary." They have a historical importance that is easily overlooked, and which they happily shrug off. Way-back-when, they made enough of an impression on a young Kurt Cobain to inspire him to form his own band (Buzz says he might have let him join the Melvins if he'd owned a better amp), and lent Dale as a fill-in drummer on *Bleach* (contrary to internet rumours, Crover did not 'buy a house' with his Nirvana royalties). They also impressed many other budding young musicians with their slow, dirge-like, post-everything aural shambles — and many of their early peers went on to become, er, rock superstars (their first bass player subsequently started up Mudhoney, while Buzz recommended Dave Grohl join Nirvana, plus a compilation built around the Melvins selling power also featured the then unknown Soundgarden, the list goes on and on...). Present at the inception of the initial grunge blueprint, the Melvins characteristically avoided the hype, having fled the Seattle



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region for San Francisco before it all exploded — and they've been cackling with glee about that ever since. In fact, the Melvins think a lot of things are hilarious — especially people who've got famous. Billy Corgan once told Dale that his ambition was to one day join the Melvins — this provokes a laugh riot and some nasally impersonations; and a lonely picture is painted of poor old Foo Fighter Dave, with his whole band hating his control-freak guts. The Melvins can be merciless — they threw Shirley Temple's daughter, Lori Black, out of their band due to her narcotic habit, but claimed she'd moved into the porno industry. And

when they were personally invited by admirer Gene Simmons to open a number of dates on the Kiss reunion tour, they sneaked into Kiss' dressing rooms to try on the wigs and boots — naked (this may not be entirely true). Courtney Love is a particular object of ridicule, dismissed as a "no-talent junkie that rides on everyone's momentum, and gets other people to write her albums." It seems that Billy Corgan had more than 'pre-production duties' on the forthcoming Hole album. My inquiry about the authorship of *Live Through This*, is answered with raised eyebrows and a 'duhhh' look. Oh, of course.

The ferry crossing the next day is very rough, and any distraction is welcomed to avoid the impending reality of seasickness. Buzz talks about the great model of the sinking Titanic at the museum yesterday, which was so detailed, "that all the drowning people waving their arms about," were visible. Tour manager Simon 'Sicoff' Coffey manages to annoy Mark D with left-wing politics (and an ever-present camcorder), and for the duration of the tour will be snidely referred to as a 'knee-jerk liberal' or 'Uncle Joe Stalin.' For the time being, Mark ignores him by reading a book about his consuming passion, Antarctic exploration. A Texan currently residing in London, Deutrom has only been with the band four years, although he produced their first two albums, *Ozma* and *Gluey Porch Treatments*. While he looks serious, Mark is very well-read and an

apparent authority on a variety of subjects, plus, he possesses a deadpan sense of humour that cuts right to the bone. Buzz is delighted to join in the Sicoff-bothering game, telling him that they plan to "drive you crazy-ze while we're here, then tell the dirtiest, worst punk rock bands we know to request you on their tours." Dale, the friendliest and most down to earth member of the band, tries to distract attention by talking about a recent Canadian gig where just prior to the Melvins' set a girl had told Page Hamilton of Helmet that she was shocked the bands were playing together, as she had heard that Buzz was responsible for Kurt Cobain's death. So on stage, Buzz scans the front rows, spots a girl in a Nirvana t-shirt, and announces, "Before we start, I just wanna clear something up — I murdered Kurt Cobain!"

Two days off in the South Island before the next shows is mostly spent in museums, record shops, bookstores, and in cafes and restaurants. The half-hour we spend in roadworks-heavy Timaru makes an impression on Mark, who develops a theory that the town is built on a thin crust covering a lake of Tera Miso ("You can feeeeee the waves"). Everyone is very disappointed that the penguins only appear for 15 minutes at the Oamaru colony; "What, is it union regulations or something?" In Dunedin, we go to a screening of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; and sit, film-fanatic style, in the very front row of a mostly deserted cinema.

"Hello I'm Sheryl Crow and every day is a winding road." That's Mark's opening greeting to a liquored-up bunch of Dunedin students, who are more keen than Wellingtonians to stage (barrier) dive and generally have a drunken ol' time. The Melvins play a similarly heavy set through a PA that is far smaller than they need; and close with a version of Flipper's 'Sacrifice', with Dale on guitar and an audience member on drums. It's a chaotic shambles, and the guest drummer is apparently the worst anyone's ever seen. So of course the band love it — Mark shakes his head in disbelief, "That guy couldn't carry a beat in a bucket."

The next day, Sicoff's white-knuckle lunatic driving has become a bone of contention; "Quit this damn Blues Brothers stunt driving," someone yells as the van u-turns over a median island into the path of oncoming vehicles, after a day of high speed near-misses. After a change of driver, we make it to Canterbury University more or less in one piece. The gig, however, is plagued by monitor and drumfill feedback problems, which makes it impossible for the band to hear what they're doing. It goes reasonably well, though only a few hundred people have turned up. Soundman Chris Tate has carelessly mentioned he'd like to play drums on 'Sacrifice', and is dragged on stage leaving me on front of house. He plays pretty well, and I sneakily slide the drum faders up until the hall's windows are rattling. Excellent.

After the flight from Christchurch to Auckland, a soundcheck, and causing a scene on *Max TV*, the band discuss their future of releasing albums. "We're proud to have been thrown off Atlantic — that puts us in the same class as the Fugs," says Mark. They did three albums on the label before the relationship was terminated earlier this year, but at the same time managed to release an album and twelve singles on AmRep, a 10inch on Man's Ruin, and a lavishly boxed live seven inch set. Buzz says it's no big deal. "Anyone signed to a major can do that. You just don't tell them until afterwards, then explain what a great promotional opportunity it is." Dale says there's already negotiations underway with another major. "Our records sound better with cash. It's a shame we didn't have a budget for *Honky*, 'cause we could've made it way more... accessible."

And accessible describes the Powerstation show, the last of the tour. Finally there's a PA big enough and clear enough to do the Melvins justice, and at this show, people aren't so perplexed. The band play the finest set of the week, and as we wrap up the tour, everyone's in good spirits. All, that is, except for Buzz, who sees that the local crew are not yet at the end of their tether. "Maybe we didn't have enough time, but next time, we'll really drive you crazy."

TROY FERGUSON