

A Test of Faith

January 1996: The Headless Chickens are charging and unstoppable on the main stage at the *Big Day Out* in Auckland. The desire is there to make this a good one, as singer Fiona McDonald and founding member and keyboardist Michael Lawry, are due to leave the band after this performance. All is not lost in the Chickens camp, however, and several months later, they are unstoppable once more. Huddled on stage at the inner city Auckland club, Squid, Chris Matthews, Bevan Sweeney, and Grant Fell, having teamed up with old pals Rex Visible and Angus McNaughton, play their new songs with an energy and drive that makes it clear this incarnation of the Headless Chickens means business. And then, seemingly on the ascent, the unstoppable all but stop. Fell, Visible, and McNaughton depart almost simultaneously, leaving Matthews and Sweeney to soldier on with a new member, Bevan Larsen, until a few months ago, when Sweeney's exit leaves Matthews the only original Chicken remaining.

November 1997: Chris Matthews, recently turned 34, sits in a corner office at his label's Auckland abode, his subdued mood in total contrast to the Monday morning hustle and bustle of Queen Street, four floors below. On December 1, Flying Nun release the Headless Chickens third album, *Greedy*, a tangible end to two years of exceptionally hard struggle for Matthews.

"If I was a Christian, I think I'd believe that this had been sent to test my faith in what I was doing, it has been really difficult and really frustrating. But I feel like I've been vindicated, that my belief in what I'm doing has been borne out, that it's supposed to be happening."

Outwardly, life was looking good for the Headless Chickens in December 1995. The band were riding high with their first New Zealand Number One single, 'George', and plans were made to record their third album (following *Stunt Clown* and *Body Blow*) early in the new year. However, Matthews reveals a split in the Chickens ranks was overdue and unavoidable.

"There had been some dissension between Michael and myself and also Fiona and myself, because Fiona and I had been in a relationship and we'd split up, and it was quite difficult. And Michael obviously didn't want to be in the band anymore and he was making life increasingly difficult for me, which I was really upset about because we had worked together very well for so long, it was sad, but probably the sadder thing was most of the press, and possibly the record company, were more concerned that Fiona left because she was more of a focal point. I was quite unhappy about that because Michael had been in the band from the beginning and he didn't get much of the credence he deserved. But yeah, I knew then they were going to leave, but it was great having a Number One."

Immediately following the *Big Day Out*, the Chickens regrouped, adding Visible and McNaughton, then hunkered down in a suburban rehearsal room and furiously wrote songs for the upcoming album sessions. It was all going smoothly, thought Matthews, until half the band upped and left.

"It was a bit strange when all three of them basically decided to leave at the same time. They were all running their own businesses, so none of them could afford to commit to the band, and spend six whole weeks in a recording studio. It was reality-check time, where the whole thing about money kicks in — it's too fucking small this country, ya can't make money out of being in a band. I suppose it's half of the reason why you keep on doing it because you think, 'maybe one day something might happen and I might have



Headless

that big hit,' and you might make lots of money out of it. I've been doing it for love ever since I started, I'm still not making any money out of it, but you expect that other people are going to have that tunnel-vision about it as well, but obviously they don't."

With the Headless Chickens now down to two members, did Matthews contemplate ending the band?

"No, I contemplated changing the name because I was really paranoid that it might end up with a Martin Phillipps and the Chills situation, where a lot of people perceived the Chills as being Martin and a bunch of hired musos. That was not what I wanted, I wanted people to be in the band because they really loved the music and they were committed to what we were doing. The bottom line is, I really don't have anything else to do, this is what I've been doing since I was 13. It probably sounds a bit sad, but I don't know what the fuck else I would do if I couldn't play in a band, I don't have a lot of other skills. This was always what I wanted to do, play music, and it's the first thing I did when I could possibly do it, and I still like that. I certainly don't think I would have been playing in bands for this long if it wasn't a driving factor, because there's too many things that can prevent you from doing it. If you're worried about money, if you're worried about trying to keep a long-term relationship going, if you're worried about where you're going to end up living, if you're worried about where you're going to get your next square meal from, if you're worried about anything like that, then you shouldn't be playing in a band in New Zealand, because it has to come first."

Determined to make a new record, Matthews and Sweeney set up a demo studio in the premises of the now defunct Ground Zero complex in Newton, to compose songs to finish the album. Soon after, Larsen was recruited, and in September 1996, the trio recorded *Greedy* at Airforce Studios with former Skeptic, Nick Roughan. Understandably, Matthews is rapt over *Greedy's* impending release.

"It was four years from *Stunt Clown* to *Body Blow*, and for it to be this long from the last album is just ridiculous. You look round and think, where the hell did all those years go! What the hell happened!"

Greedy, says Matthew is, "still very much a Headless Chickens record." Musically, he suggest, the Chicken's sound is retained, but taken into new areas; "A new album is always an extension of the last thing you did. This record's got some kind of basis in the hip hop/dance thing, but it's moving into different areas, there's a lot more guitars on this record. It doesn't sound anything like the first EP, and it doesn't really sound anything like *Stunt Clown*, it's kind of an amalgamation of the earlier stuff, and perhaps elements of what we were doing later, like 'George'. [*Greedy*] is a lot more like what I've been wanting to do for awhile."

Matthews also exercised his prerogative in March this year, parting ways with Sweeney, the original Chickens drummer.

"It was kind of like getting rid of an old girlfriend. I suppose it was because of the same reasons you drift apart from people you're in relationships with. I got to the point where I felt myself wanting to go in a different direction, and I didn't think Bevan was going to

be the right person to go along for the ride. It felt like it was getting a bit stale, the bottom line was, I really wanted to play with somebody else."

The new look Headless Chickens is Matthews, Larsen, keyboardist Flex, and drummer Gerard Presland. In the near future, the band undertake a brief New Zealand jaunt, and in January, travel to Australia to join the *Homebake* roadshow, and headline their own tour. Beyond that, plans are uncertain, although Matthews is taking aim at America.

"I'd really like to try and get [*Greedy*] released in the States, that is the main thing I'd like to do. It would've been nice to be this age and to be more successful internationally. Rather than having earned a lot of money, I would rather that the band's name was out there more and people would know what we've done. Basically outside of Australasia, we're pretty much unheard of, which kind of rankles a bit. I would've hoped that by this stage in our career we would've have achieved more in that sense."

Matthews' 12 year commitment to the Chickens recalls a line in the band's classic track, 'Do the Headless Chicken'. It wasn't a statement of intent, but a reminder to Matthews of what he didn't want to do with his life — "Get a job, buy a car, eat shit."

"When I wrote that I was working in a job at the time, and it was making me increasingly frustrated and angry because I spent the whole day thinking, 'I'm working in this stupid fucking job,' and I spent all my spare time thinking about what I wanted to do musically. The overriding thought was, 'I could spend all this time working for an asshole, or I could do something I wanted to do.' That feeling grew until I decided I wasn't going to work for anybody else ever again, it's just a waste of time."

"I think it's really important to decide in your life what is important to you, and actually do it. I decided when I was 14 that I wasn't ever going to do anything that I didn't want to do. I've slipped up a few times, but I've really tried to be true to that because there's no way I'm going to look back on my life and regret what I did. I'm quite happy with what I've done with my life, I feel that I've done something worthwhile."

JOHN RUSSELL

THE BUZZ

98

Head Like A Hole
Skin Machine
Shylock - VC

New Years Eve
PAIHIA

Tickets at Real Groovy - Auckland
Musicor - Tracks 'n' Tapes - Whangarei
Lighthouse Tavern - Paihia

Presented by Buzz Promotions
& the Lighthouse Tavern
Contact : dave@igrin.co.nz
or 025 734 918

CHICKENS