

In the last weeks of January, the demand for tickets to Radiohead's two New Zealand concerts was hotter than the weather. In Auckland, where the show at the NZ Expo Centre sold out three weeks prior to the event, dozens of fans phoned radio stations bFM and Channel Z, offering extravagant dollar amounts to secure a ticket. Further south, similar deals borne out of the same desperation were reported for the band's concert at the Queens Wharf Events Centre in Wellington. There was no doubting it — Radiohead in New Zealand was a big deal.

# COMPUTER GAMES

## RADIOHEAD in NZ

In less than a year, the whirlwind that has formed around the activities of England's Radiohead has rapidly seen them ascend to the status of World's Most Wanted Band. Spawned by the June 97 release of their third album *OK Computer*, Radiohead's popularity has spiralled to near-out-of-control proportions, and the plaudits have become more and more extreme; in a recent edition of UK music bible *Q*, readers voted *OK Computer* the best album ever made, above classic recordings by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, REM, Nirvana, and the Beach Boys.

With such a powerful and acclaimed album to perform, and armed with a reputation for stunning live shows, Radiohead were a band considered on top of their form when they arrived at Auckland Airport on January 26. As guitarist Jonny Greenwood cleared Customs, he approached the NZ Managing Director of the band's label, EMI, "Hello, where's the nearest record shop?"

Radiohead began their four day tour of New Zealand on Auckland Anniversary Day — a public holiday, and also the first of two days off for the band. Having just completed a 13 day tour of Japan, during which they played 10 shows, Greenwood explained 48 hours of rest and relaxation is a tonic; "It's lovely to have time to walk around and look at the record shops, instead of rushing everywhere all the time."

At Real Groovy Records in Queen Street, fans tore down Radiohead advertising displays for the browsing band members to autograph, and the following day, at an EMI barbeque to present the band with Platinum sales discs for *OK Computer*, guitarist Ed O'Brien smokes so much pot he's temporarily unable to speak.

"[Marijuana] is much stronger here," explains Greenwood later, "we mix it with tobacco at home."

Come the afternoon of the Auckland concert, Radiohead are back into the routine of life on the touring circuit. At the Centra Hotel in Albert Street, where the band are staying, O'Brien, Greenwood, his bassist brother Colin, and drummer Phil Selway, spend several hours being interviewed by local media, including bFM, MTV, Ice TV, and *RipItUp*. Singer Thom Yorke has been excused today, and indeed does no interviews while in New Zealand.

The day before, Radiohead drove out to Karekare Beach, on Auckland's west coast, to check out the recording facility where Crowded House made their final studio album, *Together Alone*. Greenwood says it's far too early to speculate on whether the band will record the follow up to *OK Computer* in New Zealand.

"All we're doing is looking around for places to record. Karekare could be a good place to record, but New Zealand might be a bit too far away." And, adds Greenwood, let's definitely not talk about the content of the next album; "There's no point, we change our minds so often and we're so bad at predicting ourselves. All our interviews during *The Bends* [Radiohead's 1995 second album] tour, we were saying, 'our next album is going to sound like Talking Heads from 1979, it's going to be reverb-less and minimal.' Whereas, in fact we did the opposite. Maybe, finally, we'll do our Talking Heads album."

While Radiohead are touring down under, the only studio concern they're entertaining is the much anticipated remixing of *OK Computer* by Massive Attack, says Greenwood.

"Supposedly they're doing it at the moment, or at least imminently, they've given themselves a month to do the whole thing. It's going to be done in the same sequence like a real dub album, that's the idea. Massive Attack are already two years late delivering their own album, but they're still keen to do ours, which is great."

### THE BEST ALBUM EVER?

On the mezzanine level of the Centra Hotel, Jonny Greenwood is sitting on a soft leather couch reflecting on the confusion and impact caused by *OK Computer*. Since its release, the album has been dissected, analysed, and turned inside out, to within an inch of its life. More often than not, *OK Computer* is found to be an epic, beautiful piece of work, that just happens to deal with hideous 90s excesses. However, Greenwood takes issue with these types of apocalyptic descriptions.

"It surprises me how people see tombstones in the music, I think it's a lot more colourful than that. It's not dark and gloomy and 'end of the millennium', and all the other tags it's getting, it's a very bright record."

When *Q* readers voted the album best ever, could you understand where they were coming from?

"It's hard to understand 'cause there were records that were obviously better, below it. A journalist explained it to me by saying that *Revolver* by the Beatles is musically a better record, but it means nothing to him because it didn't come out when he was around, it's just traditional music, 'Taxman'

doesn't mean anything as a song. Whereas, he could say, 'I heard this Nirvana song when I was doing this with my girlfriend,' so it becomes a different thing. I don't know how it works... you just get the feeling that there were terrible Genesis records voted Album of the Year in 1973, we could be as relevant as that, who knows?"

Why do you believe people became so emotionally involved with *OK Computer*?

"It was never the plan. Thom is really keen to not sing any song emotionally — he knows that he's got a voice that can sing anything and it will sound dramatic — so on purpose we recorded everything flatly. But I think Thom's got you by the hand from the beginning of the song till the end."

Not long ago, Thom reportedly said that when the album was finished, he was scared no one would like it. Did you feel that way?

"It felt like people who had *The Bends* would like it, and that's what we had in our heads. It would have been inverted snobbery to go and record a wilfully obtuse record... not that we went to record anything. If we'd done an album that everybody who liked *The Bends* thought it was terrible, we would have felt that we'd gone wrong. We thought we wouldn't be understood by anyone else."



L-R: Ed O'Brien, Thom Yorke, Jonny Greenwood, Phil Selway, Colin Greenwood

It sounds as though you were writing *OK Computer* with a specific audience in mind.

"Definitely, I think that's a big part of what we do. I hate it when bands ignore their audience by claiming to do everything for themselves. You've always got an audience in mind because what you're doing is trying to share something, it's just a question of whether your audience in your head is middle America, or whether it's people you've met and people you know where you live, and friends you have. It's about reproducing experiences that you've had I think, so obviously it's meant to be shared."

*OK Computer presented a seamless marriage of digital technology and traditional guitar, bass and drums. Do you feel the most interesting music happening at present is music that combines those elements?*

"No, because there's a sort of worshipping of samplers when they're just as clumsy and annoying as guitars or anything else. There's lots of great DJs around, and lots of great music being cut together, but some of it's terrible. You just suspect that these people have gone straight from having an adolescence obsessed with computers and programming, and have gone and fallen into music."

### BOYS ON FILM

An integral element of Radiohead's appeal from day one, has been the band's ability to produce intriguing videos, that as talking points, have undoubtedly contributed to their success. *OK Computer* continues with the mysterious themes, namely the animated clip for 'Paranoid Android', and the Orwellian video for 'Karma Police'. Radiohead aren't big fans of making the clips, explains Greenwood, but rather than take a Pearl Jam stance and refuse outright, they opted to turn the situation to their advantage.

"Videos are only adverts, there's no high art behind them, but we get off on finding people who are just starting out in their field, and letting them do what they want. We like finding people and looking at show reels, it's kind of the biggest kick we get in a way, that what we do spills over into other areas. There's a famous story about one EMI band turning up to video meetings, and they'd all come with stopwatches. They'd time how long they're in each video, to make sure that the guitar player isn't in longer than the keyboard player, that kind of thing. We try and not be in our videos, and let young directors do what they want in the same way that we're doing what we want."

Radiohead have turned filmmakers themselves, and will release a documentary of the *OK Computer* world tour later this year. Since the band began promoting the album last June, video maker Grant Gee ('No Surprises') has been shooting footage on an off stage for the doco. The as yet untitled film is still in its infancy, says Greenwood.

"We've done a rough draft for it. There's no talking in it, there's no questions or answers or statements, it'll just be a bit weird hopefully. We've done a half hour version, but since then we've done tonnes more filming so it could change drastically. But like Ed says, we don't want Spinal Tap."

While Greenwood is touring in the South Pacific, there's a handful of albums that alternate on his discman; the Tindersticks, DJ Shadow, Dr. Octagon, Laika, and Sparklehorse, "who are probably the best American band around at the moment," he says. Listening to music is how Greenwood likes to mentally relax out on the road, although he insists touring poses no threat to his sanity.

"Three weeks after I left college we started touring, so it's a normal life really. No stranger than going to university. Our managers are telling us that after this tour we have to have nothing to do with Radiohead for two months, and it sounds awful, already I'm bored at the thought of it. I'd rather carry on, I prefer to keep playing."

### HELLO AUCKLAND!

Thom Yorke arrived at the NZ Expo Centre alone, 30 minutes before Radiohead were due to take the stage. Outside, anxious fans approached anyone entering the gates and pleaded in vain to buy tickets.

It was like a sauna inside the 4000 capacity venue as Radiohead sauntered on, accompanied by the Stephen Hawking-inspired vocal track 'Fitter Happier', and hundreds of cheers and whistles. *OK Computer*'s first song, 'Airbag', opened the show proper, and Radiohead instantly had the audience spellbound. During a two hour, high drama performance (that was boosted by a sharp sound mix and gorgeous, complimentary lighting), Radiohead swept through 'Karma Police', 'Exit Music', 'Subterranean Homesick Alien', and 'Paranoid Android' from *OK Computer*, and obvious crowd faves that included 'The Bends' and their biggest hit to date, 'Creep'. Yorke, his eyes shut tight and his head bobbing continuously from side to side, was all brittle aggression and painful despair. He especially excelled on the ballads 'No Surprises' and 'Let Down', and the encore tune, 'Street Spirit (Fade Out)' — drawing the show to a close while looking utterly wounded and spent.

Radiohead left Auckland the following afternoon, bound for Wellington. At the Plaza International Hotel, further newspaper and radio interviews were arranged for Selway, O'Brien, and the Greenwood brothers, prior to this evening's concert at the Queens Wharf venue. Last last year, the operators of the Events Centre successfully applied to increase the capacity of the building to 5000, and tonight Radiohead performed to a record breaking crowd.

The next day, *The Evening Post* devoted half its front page to concert coverage, and reviewer Mike Houlihan wrote; "What Wellington saw last night was a band at the peak of its creative and performing powers, playing its finest songs."

An odd aspect to both Radiohead concerts was the absence of local bands on the bill. In Auckland, Eye TV were scheduled to perform, and in Wellington, Dead Flowers. Greenwood explains.

"It's a bit bizarre. We were told that we had to have an Australian band supporting us or we couldn't play in the venues, union rules apparently, but I don't know how true that is. We were talking about bringing Stereolab or DJ Shadow, but suddenly we got told we had to have an Australian band, which is alright, but we got sent 20 CDs, none of which were great."

Do Radiohead insist on choosing the bands who will play the support slot?

"Yeah. We get sent a pile of CDs and it's usually not very good stuff. We get the stuff sent to us by major record labels, so it's never going to be the best of the local music. So, rather than cynically just choose your Celine Dion, it seems better to wait and find music we really like."

You just stated that the best music or bands of any country you play is not likely to be through a major label. That's quite a generalisation.

"I just think for a CD to reach us, it usually comes from a very big label, and [the band] have an agent already, and they've done lots of touring already, and... well, usually none of it is very good. We do sit and listen to it."

The morning after their Wellington concert, Radiohead flew to Australia to begin a two week tour, before returning to England. In early April, the band travel to America to pick up the touring thread once more. Towards the end of 1997, Gary Gersh, the president of Capitol Records [Radiohead's USA record label] announced, "We won't let up until they're the biggest band in the world." A scary thought perhaps, but rather than believe Radiohead are due to be worked into the ground sometime soon, Greenwood is quietly amused at the pomposity of Gersh's statement.

"They're very sweet but I think that everybody's been very wrong-footed by it all. [Capitol] were saying that kind of thing before they heard the record, and then they heard the record, and the prediction of what they thought they'd sell in America, they cut it in half. And then they've been wrong-footed again, because it's doing better than they expected. As a band, we've been able to surprise a few people lately."

JOHN RUSSELL