

# Chicken Control

It was a day like any other at Kerouac's. The sensuous hiss of coffee technology wheezing out like a surrogate wolf-whistle as leggy brunette models picked their way to the counter with as much care as they would on any catwalk. The well-heeled and beautiful people talking about money in loud voices, the longing, grubby faces of the poor smearing the windows for a few minutes before the Style Police moved them off the gold paving of Vulcan Lane...

I was at table number one with three of the Headless Chickens. Around us, the cafe generation's finest discreetly bent an ear as the Chickens preened and dropped conversational pearls about life in the fast lane as it related to their mega-budget new album *Body Blow*. Well, two of them did. Grant Fell was too busy chattering into a state-of-the-art cellphone — buy, sell, invest, divest — and arranging dinner with his stunning and very leggy wife: "Fiasco, darling?"

Well, no actually... sod coffee, we've gone somewhere you can get a beer. It has become rather fashionable to paint the band as proto-yuppies of late — which is rich, coming as it usually does, from people with regular incomes.

Only one of the band, keyboard boffin Michael Lawry, has a real job — he's a postman.

Guitar/keyboardist Anthony Nevison has just started paying himself \$50 a week out of the small but perfectly formed Incubator studios. Bassist Grant Fell is busier than the Prime Minister but never has any money and the rest of the band just bum along like we all do.

The band saved themselves about \$15,000 this year by recording *Body*

*Blow* at Incubator, turning down the chance to spend a great deal of money in a posh studio in Sydney. Incubator is *not* the Headless Chickens' studio, but it's closely related, which was a big factor in the decision to stay home for the album.

"Apart from the fact that it left us less in debt to Mushroom, we decided it would be more relaxed doing it there. We knew everybody and we'd have as much time as we wanted to get it sounding how we wanted," explains singer Chris Matthews. "Although we still ran out of time after spending two months on it.

"The other factor was that we used Rex Visible, who's been doing our live sound since we started, as producer, so it was important to work somewhere he felt comfortable and in control. As it turned out, he had a big input in terms of ideas and the general direction of the album."

*Body Blow*, the Chickens' second album, is striking, ambitious and some way short of perfect, but it will more than stand up internationally. There's a continuity and confidence about it that wasn't there on the debut, *Stunt Clown*, which, for all its highlights, tended to sprawl about all



Headless Chickens (L-R) Anthony Nevison, Bevan Sweeney, Michael Lawry, Fiona MacDonald, Chris Matthews, Grant Fell.

over the place.

"That's why this one took so long," Grant admits, "We had a lot of learning to do. There were a lot of situations on *Stunt Clown* where we didn't know what was going on."

Alongside older, nastier songs like 'Railway Surfing' and 'Crash Ho!' is the darkly cuddly 'Cruise Control', which was put together on the spot and has become a startlingly successful first single. It made the national Top Ten and, more significantly, became only the second Flying Nun record to gain widespread mainstream airplay.

"I don't think it's any more suited to radio than, say, 'Soulcatcher' was, but getting played makes a huge difference in terms of who you reach," offers Grant, "For example, some friends of mine came up to me last night saying how much they loved our 'new single'. It's not exactly brand new now, but they'd just heard it because 91 FM had just started playing it.

"Radio play wasn't the intention when we recorded it, but it was obvious it was going to be a much more laid-back number than anything else," Chris continues, "It was probably more pure luck than anything else that it turned out the way it did. The fact that Angus (McNaughton, a partner in Incubator) happened to be working on another song in the same BPM and had all these samples for it. He rushed off and got them and we used about half of them on 'Cruise Control'."

Fiona McDonald's airy lead vocal on the single may sound spirit-lifting, but Chris Matthews probably couldn't write a sunny little tune if he tried. Through it and the rest of the album there's a dark undercurrent, the fruit of lots of reading and even more brooding. The standout 'Million Dollar Dream', for instance, casts a jaundiced eye on our game-show culture:

"It's probably a bit of jealousy, so it's

as much about me as anybody else. It was originally about stupid game shows on TV and the way everyone rushes in to win the big prize. Everybody would like to think they can win Lotto one day, have instant money. It's probably more of a being poor, working class approach to wanting money than anything.

"Railway Surfing" was the result of a moment of panic about not leading as wild and exciting a life as I'd perhaps like to. I'd read an article about kids in South America jumping on the back of trains and regularly getting knocked off by tunnels and low power lines. I came out of *Wild At Heart* feeling like that — like I just wanted to get in a car with some wild woman and take lots of drugs and go and have adventures... but I'd probably just wind up dead."

As the old cliché runs, the Headless Chickens listen to all kinds of music. That includes rap and Chris (and Anthony Nevison on his wiggy showpiece 'Donde Esta La Pollo?')

has finally mastered a style of rhythmic delivery that doesn't sound like wannabe black America:

"I can't rap — neither can Gary Clail. He just shouts in a Bristol accent. No matter how much you admire something, if you try and imitate it exactly, you wind up sounding stupid, which is my biggest gripe about Maori and Polynesian rap bands — they can't rap. It's just a style of speaking more than anything else. On the other hand, MC OJ & Rhythm Slave have their own style and they do it so well."

The well-muscled eclecticism of *Body Blow* makes it harder than ever to put a tag on the Chickens' own style. Chris will kill anyone who calls them an "industrial dance" band and they all shy away from that awful, empty phrase "alternative band". Alternative to what?

The Chickens will be indefinable nationwide soon with an extensive tour, followed by another jaunt to Australia and a pencilled-in US tour which depends on how long interested American distributor Network takes to sign on the dotted line. DJ Roger Perry, just back from the UK, is working on a remix of 'Donde Esta La Pollo?' for single release. Further ahead, according to Grant...

"We'd like to develop the soundtrack side of things. We've done a little bit of that (for Alison McLean's short film *Kitchen Sink*) and we really enjoyed it. It's as satisfying as playing rock music — and when we get to 38 we don't want to be old rock farts. At heart we've always been interested in other things — art, film, Chris is a mega-bookworm... so hopefully we'll grow old gracefully."

"Nah!" spits Chris. "I wanna be dragged out kicking and screaming! No, really, I just don't want to end up like Chris Knox. And you can put that in — I'm sure he'll take it the right way."

RUSSELL BROWN

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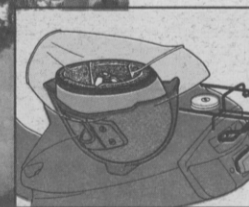
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