

THE BATS Fear of Flying

This month sees the release of the Bats' third album, *Fear of God*. The first with an outside producer, the first in a 24 track studio. Following the path outlined by Straitjacket Fits, the band and Mushroom Records are hoping it will be picked up by a major American label.

It's a warm day and I'm sweating it out with the Bats inside a swish secondhand Japanese station wagon. We're parked outside Sammy's Cabaret, as the Bats wait to soundcheck before their first Dunedin performance of the year. The windows are wound up to keep out the noise from the city's northbound one-way system. Half an hour later a window has to be opened, but being the nice people they are the band stops talking when passing traffic attempts to break the sound barrier.

The Bats are nice people, you'd warm to them even if you weren't inside a stationary, mobile Japanese sauna. It's kind of weird to think that these people are being sought after by major American record labels. Compared to their fellow/former labelmates in a similar position they are far removed from any industry-speak, there's no hype, self-hypnotism or any other 'ism' about them. It is probably just as much a product of their ages as the fact they live in the South Island. An environment that also results in them still taking time to reflect, to ponder, to live a life in which music appears to serve little other purpose except making life more enjoyable.

The Bats are a band who rather than being set in their own ways, have their own way of doing things. All of which means that despite being produced, engineered and mixed by an American (it was a co-production, y'know), it's difficult to argue with Roger Shepherd when he says *Fear of God* still sounds like a Bats album. So why a producer? Well apart from the bands' desire to get someone in to bounce ideas off, there were other view points as Malcolm Grant explains:

"From the record company's point of view we've been slack in the past with our arrangements and production. We've just gone in there and churned through our songs. They hadn't clicked how we worked. But it's good to stretch yourself, even if you don't like the direction you're stretching in."

You've got it. The Bats, like any band, have found faults in their new album. Recording however was not an easy time. First up the band had to move from Auckland to Wellington in the middle of recording. An already tight recording schedule was reduced by three days after the tape recorder at Mandrill left clicking noises on the

tape if any dubbing was attempted. In the capital city, Marmalade Studio could not be used in the morning and the Bats' van with gear inside was stolen. The gear was later recovered, as the van temporarily was, until the police lost it again.

Then there was the fact that the producer's country went to war during recording. A total eclipse had frayed those American nerves, the Gulf War tore them completely. Nick Sansano (that being his name's wife worked at a kindergarten which because of its large Arab roll received several bomb threats and was continuously under patrol by subtly armed secret service people.)

The final difficulty arose over the mixing of the album as Kaye Woodward explains: "He wanted to mix it in his own studio where he knew the gear really well, and he was also homesick."

No one was particularly happy that the band couldn't assist in the mixing, a process which was done sporadically over a three month period:

"He wanted us to be there as well. He didn't like the idea of doing it all himself. There's some things in the mixing... but it's hard to mix by fax."

One song which is affected by a bad mix is 'Looming Past', a great song, but that lead break at the end, why? The band agree that it's just mixed that wee bit too loud. Paul Kean explains his intention was "... a distorted guitar, that was back in the mix, subdued, sounding like it was being played next door, underlying but intense."

And to think the fax couldn't convey that!

The album undoubtedly sounds more produced than previous Bats efforts. The most notable difference is the greater variety of guitar sounds. This, along with generally toughening up the band's sound and improving the vocal mix were Sansano's main aims in producing the Bats; goals the band agreed with. The violin makes yet more appearances on this album. Starrett's more traditional approach to the violin found favour with the producer. In fact Sansano, a mean accordionist himself, ended up pushing the more folksy side of the Bats, which has its problems as Robert Scott explains:

"It's easy to be lambasted for being folksy these days, which is a shame, because that's a side of us which we can do well. But I'm really



conscious in these days of dance music, if you're trying to be a bit folky you're cutting your own throat."

Paul Kean takes off on a closely related tangent:

"Quite often in the past we've accidentally fallen on some interesting sounds in the studio, like Alastair's violin. And we've decided that sounds great, we like that and we've used it. This time it was more precise, if something didn't sound right it wasn't used, which was a shame in a way. I reckon you can learn a lot from mistakes, you can get a lot of good sounds."

Grant: "Next time I think we should be a bit less controlled..."

Woodward: "... and more prepared..."

Grant: "... and allow ourselves to go outside the parameters of what is right and what is wrong."

Scott: "It definitely won't be as smooth next time."

Don't get the band wrong. They check themselves throughout the interview and remind me (and themselves) that it is good to have an outside person in to bounce ideas off: regardless of whether you like what they say or not. Control was definitely not lost, well that's what Malcolm Grant thought at one particular moment in the interview:

"It doesn't feel like we had a producer come in and this isn't our record anymore. It still feels like us to me."

Musically *Fear of God* has more similarities to the Bats' debut recording, *By Night*, than any record in between. Sort of similar art work as well. Could be the fact some of the songs are over eight years old as

reference does Scott consciously find the need to give his songs a definite setting?

"No, it's not conscious, it just comes through when I'm thinking what to sing; the words just tend to come out. If you've spent time playing outside as a kid, in treehuts or fishing and that sort of crap, it comes out in a song."

Do you, then, share Martin Phillips' sense of a magical quality in the New Zealand landscape?

Scott: "Not really. It's more just enjoying being in it. As a European I don't feel part of the landscape, in the same way a Maori may. After all, we Europeans have only just arrived here. To me it's just a good place to grow up in, to do different things in."

Friend Martin Phillips' lyric, "It's good to be an adult but still believe the child in me" is just as appropriate for the Robert Scott that the Bats' lyrics reveal. Musically it's also there in the beginning of 'Old Ones' which unconsciously alludes to childhood memories of accompanying Mum to church on Sundays to listen to her play the organ.

There is a certain naivety in a lot of Scott's lyrics, though in talking to him it appears some of it is definitely misinterpreted cynicism. 'Boogey Man' is however more definite in its child-like perspective:

Scott: "It's about kids being freaked out by something their parents tell them. Y'know the story about going to bed if you don't want the boogie man to get you, and how that thought comes back to kids when they are playing somewhere and when they're walking home. On another level it relates to being older and going back to those same places and remembering that fear."

As a lyricist who doesn't think in terms of themes, Scott again has not given this any thought until now. He sees it merely as a product of his more honest approach to song-writing. That is writing about what is happening around him, rather than being a musician who sings about what they think they should be singing about. After all, Scott lives in Pine Hill not the Bronx. The environment Scott lives in, and the lyrical dispositions he has lends itself to music that is easily digestible. Does he ever get the urge to offend people, to make his music nastier? Scott: "Yeah, I'd like to get nastier

with the songs next time. The environment you write them in plays a part though. Most of the songs are written on acoustic, and they tend to be less aggressive, more laid back. If I'd been writing them in a practice room with the others they'll tend to be more aggressive."

Grant: "North By North' was more the product of a jam."

Scott: "Next time I'm going to steer away from writing them beforehand by myself on acoustic and try and work with the others more, and write them on an electric."

Reviews of the last album pointed at 'Ten To One' and 'Smoking Her Wings' as the direction the band should emphasise in the future, but there's nothing like those two 'epics' on the new album.

Scott: "They're just two songs. It's pretty hard to go in a direction outlined by any one song."

Grant: "We're never going to be a band that sits around the practice room discussing what direction we're going to go in now. We just play to the song."

Scott: "As it is there's always a danger of songs sounding the same, so you're really conscious of heading in a direction. I think some bands' songs all sound the same, and ours possibly do as well. So I always try and have as much variety in the songs as possible."

Grant: "We're one of those bands where if you like them you see a lot of variety, but if you don't like them their songs all sound the same."

Kean: "But you can say that about most bands."

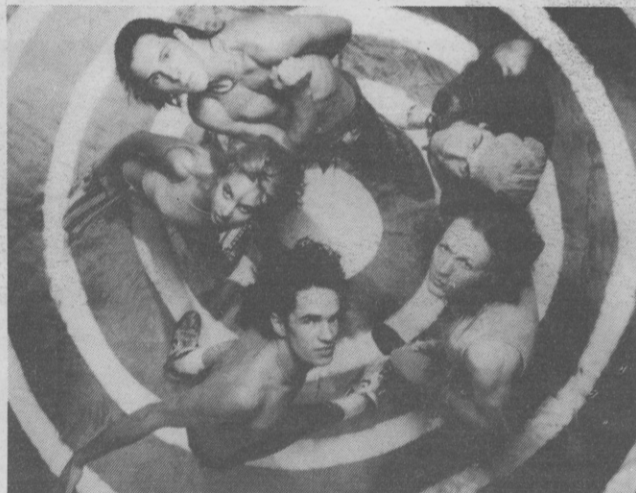
Grant: "Yeah, but people try to cover that up with fancy production effects, and getting flugel horns in, just to say 'look we're different now, we've got flugel horns'."

Don't discount it yet, the sound of a keyed bugle could be the ticket to the States. I don't know, perhaps the drunk later that night at Sammy's is right, maybe the Bats' strength does stem from the fact they tread that dangerous line between pop songs and nursery rhymes. Whatever line they tread, and I'm not sure it's that one, no one else has been there before and no one's following them either, which makes it worthwhile to keep both ears tuned to their journey.

CRAIG ROBERTSON

well. Lyrically, well... Scott's lyrics don't stand up to a lot of analysis. Their content isn't their strength. In an interview last year Graeme Downes told me that he thinks Scott is one of the country's better lyricists because his lyrics 'sing' really well, no syllable is (sung) out of place. That aside, as a representation of Scott's writing over such a long period of time the lyrics on *Fear of God* do reveal some strong themes, notably the very fixed nature of the lyrics in particular, and secondly, a fascination with childhood.

Fear of God possesses a very definite sense of place. Scott's lyrics are riddled with references to streams, fields, paddocks, wind, fire, etc. In fact there are two drownings on the album, well three if you count Laura Palmer's death as a drowning — 'Jetsam' was inspired by the *Twin Peaks* pilot movie. Aside from that



Killing Time

There's no denying the fact that most Australian bands get a justifiably raw deal over here, something that could have a lot to do with the fact that they tend to be covers bands, pub rock bands or alternative pub rock bands. It is a slightly unfair deal as there is no shortage of very fine acts over there, and Killing Time most definitely slot into that category.

Their recently released EP is more than enough to convince me of that, it's a nice chunk of sub-Stooges noise with a modern edge and a there's a killer Hendrix cover for good measure, so what do Nina, Jed and Chris think of the concept that Oz-Rock pretty much sucks?

"Yeah, there's a lot of really pathetic tribute bands over here,

and they all seem to make more money than we do! A lot of the hotels won't get an original band to play, it's got to be a tribute band or a covers band, and the original bands lose out."

Despite this there definitely seems to be a healthy scene over there.

"There's been a real resurgence in the last year or so, and I think the success of certain international acts has helped open up the public more."

Outside of the fact that they're from Melbourne, Killing Time's past is a bit of a mystery to me. Nina, who seems to be closest to the phone fills in the details.

"We started about 3 years ago, the core is Adam (vocals), myself (bass) and Chris (lead gat), we've had about five different drummers

and our guitarist has been with us for about a year and a half, which was when things really started to click. We've been working really hard for the last 12 months."

I understand there was a bit of a queue to sign you.

"There was a bit of a shit fight for a while, which felt weird. We got sick of answering the phone from nine till nine but it was a good experience as we had to learn a lot about business very quickly. We were pretty definite about what we wanted in our contract, which was basically a lot of artistic control and freedom in what we do, which is why we eventually signed to Red Eye."

And is there an album in the works?

"We're working on that at the moment, we've got another E.P. out in September, then fulltime into the album. We're just working out where to record it as we've got a bit of interest from America, so hopefully we'll record over there."

And tour over here? "Definitely! We toured there a while back and it was cool, and the airfares aren't much so who knows!"

Last of all, I have my killer question. A dubious source, (*Hot Metal* magazine actually) tells me some of you guys work in a biscuit factory.

(Much laughter — the parties in question seem to be present and highly embarrassed). "They did! We all had to do stupid things to be able to play, and pummelling dough all day was one of them!"

With dedication like that you know Killing Time have to be serious.

KIRK GEE

I spent a night in the Slammer.



PEPE LOPEZ
Tequila

WMP 5977 A