

VERLAINES Ready To Fly

In the middle of last year, without telling anyone, the Verlaines became the second New Zealand band to sign a seven album contract with American label Slash Records. In October, they finally got around to informing those beyond the extended family. By this stage the band's first major label release was ready to roll in North America, Now four months after its American release, album number four, *Ready To Fly*, is in New Zealand shops. Sales in Dunedin might be a bit slow, sorry lovers of all things fine, but it is a CD/cassette only distribution deal through Liberation.

With bassist Mike Stoodley and drummer Gregg Cairns out of town I talked to guitarist Graeme Downes on a winter-like January day. As I walked into his lounge, Downes hurriedly moved some notes to one side, the fine tuning of his doctorate. As he says, at least that'll give him something to do to wile away the wait for a soundcheck, and there'll be a lot of that sort of waiting this year.

1992 is developing into a crucial year for the Verlaines as they prepare to promote their new album in the United States, Europe and Australasia. Well, probably the latter, nothing's too definite at the moment. In fact, it'll only be in the week or so before the band leaves for the States that they will find out if tour number one will be as a support act for Lush or as headliners in their own right; the difference between playing in 1,000-people venues and early nights, and 300-people venues and little sleep (like they did in 1989, 25 times in 28 days).

Downes is looking forward to a year of constant touring. It'll be something new, they haven't toured till it's created the desire to jump off a tall building before. It's also an opportunity for the Verlaines to really gel as a band. Since Gregg Cairns joined in mid-1990, live outings have largely been limited to sporadic one-offs.

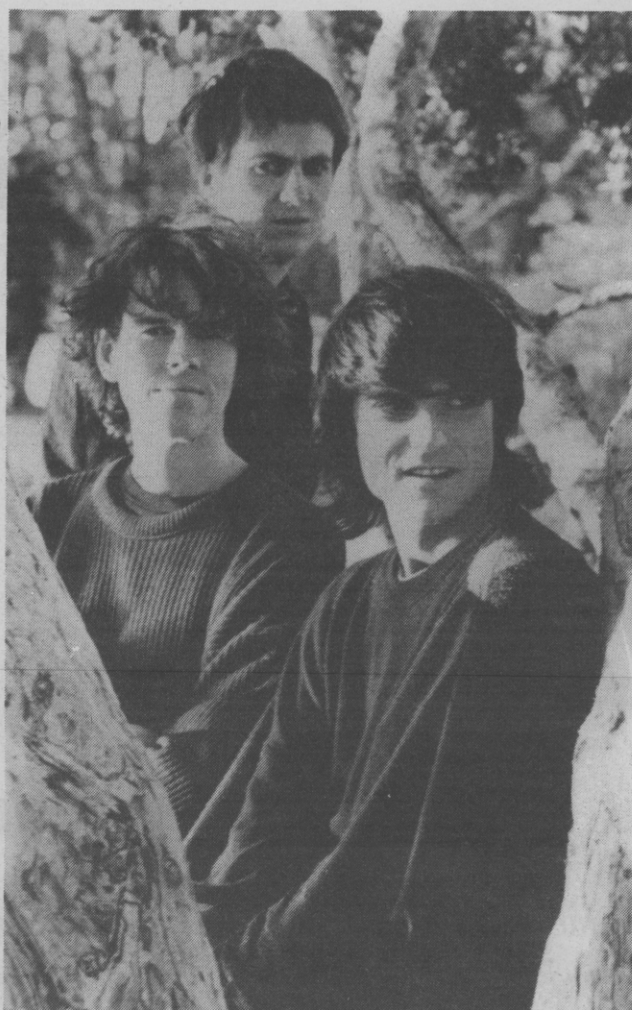
Cairns joined shortly before the band demoed *Ready To Fly* at Radio One's 16-track studio in Dunedin. This was the first time the Verlaines had demoed an album, the tape being used to attract major label

attention. Having met Slash in 1989 they were obvious first recipients. Negotiations began in April last year and by July the band were recording in Sydney with Kiwi engineer Victor Grbic. Slash showed unheard of faith in a new band, letting them self-produce it. Nine months of pulling the demo to pieces made both a producer nigh redundant and recording the album much easier, as Downes explains.

"The demo was pretty thorough and we fine tuned everything from that. We had enough time in the studio to follow the song if it went off in a different direction, which it did on a couple of occasions. 'Inside Out' became a lot snappier, lots of chopped strums, the second guitar parts were written on the spot. But when we ran into problems there was always the demo to fall back on."

Ready To Fly sees Downes again augmenting the three-piece Verlaines' sound with strings, horns and brass. Unlike previous occasions the demo eliminated the element of conjecture involved in arranging the songs prior to recording an album. A reaction to the sparseness of the previous album *Some Disenchanted Evening*, the orchestration is, however, in no way as overt as on 1987's *Bird Dog*.

"Yeah, *Bird Dog* seems to win or lose on that. It still gets lauded in the States due to the novelty of how overt the added sounds are. The intention has always been to use extra instruments where they were going to add something as opposed to bury something else. *Bird Dog*



Verlaines (L-R) Mike Stoodley, Gregg Cairns, Graeme Downes.

went too far in one direction. *Some Disenchanted Evening* kneejerked too far back the other way. I think we just about got it right this time. The band shines through and is always present on the record, it's never subjugated. I've got no real problem playing any of the songs live... the strings on 'Tremble' embellish, sit underneath, the brass on 'Ready To Fly' just add to the grandeur. Generally they are just adding colour. On 'Such As I' they are a bit more overt. We had done it in the *Some Disenchanted Evening* session, but the three piece recording wasn't full enough to carry it off in a vinyl situation. 'Moonlight On Snow' is different. We don't normally do it live, so there's no real need to reconcile it with the live performance."

Mmm. 'Moonlight On Snow', putting it as politely as I can, surprised me. Otherwise *Ready To Fly* does not offer too many surprises to anyone who's seen the Verlaines in the last year. The album sounds very crafted, well produced, a smoothness that doesn't take the bite from the songs. The bass, though, seems to be mixed fairly low;

sometimes I wonder if it's there. I thought it might just be my stereo, but Downes has noticed that as well, pointing it out to Victor Grbic and bassist Mike Stoodley, only to be greeted with bemused faces. There's nothing overly long on the album, a lot of pop songs in fact. The first beat and you know where the song is coming from. For those who haven't seen the Verlaines recently that point of departure may surprise: the country feel of 'Hurricane' and the blues of 'See You Tomorrow'.

"Hurricane" was inspired by a band in Sydney, ukulele, washboard and jug playing 30s songs, bluesish country sort of thing. A lot of that stuff is in early Dylan/folk music. I've always liked that kind of thing, so it was bound to come up somewhere along the line.

"I've also always been interested in some aspects of blues stuff. At the same time 'See You Tomorrow' is still very Verlaines; the chord progression is not very typical of blues. The joke of it is, it's just the chords of 'Ash Grey' messed around a little.

"Eclecticism is something people always comment on in regards to our music. It's not without justification, but I think that the Verlaines always try to make it their own despite any heritage the genre may seem to have. The three piece thing is always at the heart of whatever we do, even though three pieces don't normally play some of the things we do."

Is intentional? Do you sit down and think, 'yeah, I'd like to write a blues song today?'

"It's not at all cultivated. I can vaguely remember 'See You Tomorrow' being written... I wrote a lot in a big splurge after coming back from the States in 1989. The multi-coloured experience of that tour brought a lot of different kinds of songs on, inspired by different sources."

Lyrical, the album is much more straightforward than previous Verlaines records. Things are a lot less obscure. Complex metaphors have gone, but the clever reworking of cliched phrases remain. This change in approach is not the result of any conscious decision; Downes is unsure what it is the product of.

"We've been talking about it recently, comparing it with *Bird Dog*, where you listen to 'Makes No Difference' and think what the hell is he talking about. I'm really not quite sure why it's changed. If I dug around long enough I could find reasons. I suspect that now I let the lyrics of songs write themselves, whereas previously I let my own images and things run riot so things meant something to me, but to others they were just a long conglomerate of non-comprehensible images. Maybe it's a little bit more objective now. But I don't think it's going to stay that way, I suspect it may not."

Lyrics are something that Downes has always tried to perfect. As time has progressed his musical expression has improved, rarely now is Downes unsuccessful as he tries to grasp and follow the direction of a song. With his doctorate largely complete, Downes has enjoyed catching up on years of reading, processing creative language through his mind as opposed to analytical language; something which may help him get to the stage where he considers his language is on a par with his music.

The album continues Downes' study of the "anatomy of depression", focusing on relationships: characters are obsessed, being dumped, being adored — escaping an obsession is about as positive as it gets. Smiling, Downes admits that a balanced relationship where two people share the same intensity of feeling is possible, but he laughingly

complains they are not as fun to write songs about. You need that sense of excitement generated by conflict and tension.

In the title track Downes sings: *Dunedin is cold / And by winter it's going to get colder / and your tolerance leaves / When the bones in your fingers freeze over.*

"The observation in the song is pretty true about a lot of things. It's a time... when you're sorta staring at a chair in a room and say: 'I don't like it, I don't want it in the room', although it's been there for two or three years and you've put up with it. You know, the cold and the damp that affects you down to your bones comes up and you lash out at something to get rid of it. The winter affects tolerance to deal with a lot of things, not only other people... I suppose people do get a lot done in Dunedin in the winter, I certainly do."

Ready To Fly also differs from previous albums in its propensity not to take itself too seriously.

"It definitely laughs at itself a little bit more, especially on songs like 'Such As I' which has a distinctly comic edge. No one could possibly take 'Hurricane' seriously. Though that is probably part and parcel of the genre it is in. Country music is a bit like that. The horror and enormity of most country lyrics is never really reflected in the music. That obscene understatement is probably what I find funny in country music. In its best form, however, even if you're laughing at it, the song is not any the less powerful for it."

Can we expect the Verlaines to re-interpret any more genres in the future?

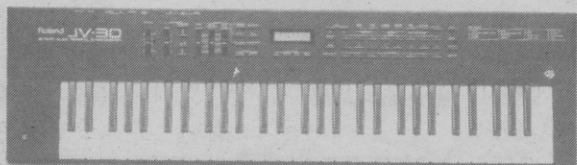
"I've just made a whole tape of songs, no lyrics at the moment. I don't know how to describe them... which Verlaines seem they belong to. The seams rotate around. I don't know, on the next few albums there'll probably be something which sounds a bit more modern, a bit more outlandish."

An embryonic desire to get a bit more grungy perhaps?

"We're probably heading that way more and more. I used some distortion on this album. A bigger guitar sound means you can record with less instruments. Lots of time extra instruments are used to get the size which an undistorted guitar can't give. But you have to find the balance, otherwise you lose clarity, make it big without blurring what you're doing is the ideal. But there's a likelihood that it'll be getting a bit more dirty around the edges. It's quite fun, I've discovered."

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