

mean, I have to tour that in the States and Canada and that's good for me. I'll be 40 in Canada, I'll have a male menopause on my own."

Was the new Pagan album done since your Flying Fish album?

"The Pagan album was done just before I got on the plane and went to America to do this other thing. In actual fact the Pagan album was finished on the Tuesday or Wednesday of the week and I was on the plane on the Friday, at the end of April."

With your choice of songs on this album, are they songs by artists you admire a lot or are they just stand out songs?

"Well, the Pagan one there's a Dylan cover who I've loved for many years, particularly his earlier stuff, up to *Blonde On Blonde* and the song I've chosen was from *Highway 61*. I love this period of Dylan very much and Bobby Womack I've always loved, and I've always loved 'It's All Over Now' and Bert Jansch's 'Running From Home'. It's been drastically changed, I've done a virtual re-arrangement but the essence, the message of youth looking for a new direction, that break away from the chains of home in teenage years, it's a good theme, it's a good song, I feel."

How did working with Annie Crummer come about?

"It was one of those magical moments where Nigel Stone the engineer on the session was working on a project with Annie and she had come to the studio. She phoned him beforehand and he said Paul Ubana's in the studio and I sort of shouted 'Hey, come and voice' in a joking fashion and she came along and listened to what was being done, loved the feel of it, and decided to hang around and put her magical vocals over the top."

Did you do the first album with Nigel Stone?

"No, that was with Nick Morgan at Airforce. Nick did a great job and Nigel Stone's carried on from there. Nigel put his character and personality in the sound and I'm really pleased with the sound we've come up with."

Are large studios necessary with your format?

"I needed quite a lot of space to get the sound that I want and Airforce was good at the time."

So the room's important.

"I think so, the ambience, to get that feel. When they finally dim those lights down, the magic's there and you can go away, cut into the

song and it feels good."

Do you feel NZ's changed over the last five years?

"I'd be quite blind if I said it isn't, and I do see right across the spectrum of NZ and in playing I touch the universities and high schools, YMCA, Maraes, kids. My music brings me right through these avenues and I see changes."

Positive or negative?

"Oh both. What we're going through now is this whole period of questions, turn around, festering and erupting in all different little pockets of society. That's what we're seeing and it's happening and we have to address it and deal with it."

"Yesterday I arrived from Nelson and I stopped in Ohakune after seven hours of driving around and I was refused entry into a motel because of my colour and how I looked, my hair, so it's there and one has to deal with it and one can't say it doesn't exist."

That happens a lot with rock musicians.

"She didn't even know I was a musician. I arrived at 9.20 at night, never been there before and somebody phoned up for me and said there's someone that wants to check in, cos the office was closed, and she said 'okay I'll be down'. When she actually saw me suddenly there was no vacancies and then when I questioned her she sort of erupted and said 'It's the way you look, your hair' and gesticulating about the colour of my face. So it's quite blatant and one has to deal with it."

Stereotyping should be on the decline not the increase.

"But I think historically, when there's gross unemployment and violence, people start to stereotype in order to feel safety. A huge switch over to the right side of things. Which means mediocrity and anything different gets a hammering, even more so."

Is part of the attraction for you bringing you family up in New Zealand, our distance from the problems of London?

"No, we never came here to escape, we just came here for another perspective, which we've certainly been getting. And it's still a good place to be for us and our family. There's no escape, the only escape is within yourself. We haven't run away from Europe because of nuclear holocaust or anything like that. We came here to have a change in life, a new direction."

MURRAY CAMMICK

WILDING BUNCH



These Wilding Ways (L-R) Jason Dempsey, Joel Haines, Michael O'Neill, Wayne Bell, Glen Robson.

The way Michael O'Neill tells it, you could be forgiven for thinking the Pope got the wrong man when he canonised the bloke from Opus Dei a few weeks ago. If John Paul had had his wits about him he would've given the metaphysical gong to Mark Tierney, producer-at-large. Laurie Mains probably missed his chance to get the greatest All Black captain of modern times . . .

Yes, O'Neill can't say enough about Tierney — and with good reason. Not only did the media assassin give up the traditional Christmas-New Year break to help These Wilding Ways push through their debut album *Paul* in a mere three weeks, but he managed to bring a focus to a band which had really only been able to count on the fact that O'Neill seemed to write good songs on a consistent basis.

The songwriting thing, which O'Neill doesn't seem to fully understand himself, came late in life, in rock 'n' roll terms. He had his first bash straight out of school with the Screaming Mee Mees, a band which never seemed to turn a huge amount of energy and a lot of potential talent into the results everyone expected. They were widely perceived as four arrogant brats:

"Oh, we were!" O'Neill grins. "I think it was partly because we never made a conscious decision to be in a band — I was only in when it started at school because my brother had built me a left-handed guitar and bought me an amp. What we were doing seemed to work and we saw no need to work on it and improve it."

"With These Wilding Ways there's no aspect of trying to please people or do the right thing, which is a contrast to the Mee Mees. We were very influenced and I was probably

the most to blame. I'd hear something I loved and then couldn't wait to get my hands on a guitar so I could write something like it. Then I'd get pissed off when someone picked the influence!"

The brother who made that first left-handed guitar, Paul O'Neill, died in 1983. Michael took it hard at the time and Paul's name became the title of the album partly because Michael saw it as the album Paul had always wanted his younger sibling to make.

"He was very disappointed with the Mee Mees' album at the time, but now we've got an album where we got what we wanted, so it was just basically saying 'cheers' to him."

"The Mee Mees album was full of great songs, but it just didn't work. I don't own a copy now, I didn't like recording it and the first time I heard it played back I was really disappointed. We'd just been part of something that just didn't represent us."

After Propeller Records and its roster of acts made a quite impressive job of falling over in unison, O'Neill retired to twiddling and writing tunes on his guitar, which he'd always done, but also singing and writing lyrics for his own benefit. He also got out there in the world, travelled and worked (although, if the truth be known, he wasn't exactly the embodiment of the Protestant Work Ethic). It gave him

something to write about.

"I'm glad that I finished then and had nothing to do with music for seven years. That whole period gave me the input to write. The difference is that I'm writing about things I feel strongly about, rather than things I feel energetically about."

He kept it to himself until a couple of buddies, Jason Dempsey and Glen Robson, after listening to an O'Neill sermon on the state of music in 1989, suggested he do something about it.

"They said, 'why not form a band?' Jason wanted to learn the bass and Glen could play 'Stairway To Heaven', so I thought well, that'll do."

A few months later they were opening for U2 and Western Springs, in front of 80,000 people. O'Neill had sent a demo tape "as a joke — we didn't expect anything" to U2's tour promoters in Australia. They got the gig. That hasn't been the only unexpected break. The band's debut single, 'Can't Control Her', did the unbelievable and made mainstream radio playlists and another demo tape dropped in the mail won O'Neill a publishing deal with Mushroom Music. Drummer Wayne Bell and teenage jazz guitar prodigy Joel Haines joined up and These Wilding Ways went on to be . . . somewhat unfashionable. The low profile suited O'Neill and it was probably a good thing for the band which has only recently found its feet.

The hints of dance production introduced by Tierney have opened up songs like 'Take My Hand' and the re-recorded 'Can't Control Her'. "Manchester" isn't just something you buy at Smith & Caughey's. It's a

rhythm section thing and, logically enough, largely the result of close collaboration between Tierney and Bell.

"Mark's first job was to mix 'Take My Hand'," says O'Neill. "Wayne had already done the funky drummer thing and Mark came in with all his gear and put a drum pattern behind Wayne's and said what do you think of this? He sold me from that point on, because I'd always been a bit scared of technology."

"Mark would sometimes look straight past me to discuss something with Wayne, which was a smart thing to do. He sussed out very quickly that if it was up to me I'd just load everything onto the track — extra harmonies and guitar parts — I'm terrible like that. He chose the songs from the ones we presented him with too. I would have just picked all the fast, grunty ones, but he went for a variety of different keys and tempos, which is what's really made the album work. It's varied but cohesive."

One thing it's not hard to pick up from *Paul* is the fact that O'Neill's still less than comfortable with singing. It's not necessarily a bad thing.

"I don't think I'll ever be comfortable singing. I can sing the songs I write, but I can't sing covers — and we've tried! I just seem to have to believe in what I'm singing about to be able to do it. People have said I should take lessons and I've always meant to, but I can write a song and sing it. I don't know if I want to be comfortable with singing — the day I was and didn't believe in what I was singing, I'd lose the passion. If I didn't have that, I couldn't be a frontman anyway."

The songs on *Paul* don't sound like the sort of work of a rock frontman — more like a bunch of tunes someone's gone away and written in a bedroom then presented to the band and the producer — which is pretty much the case. O'Neill, as chirpy and full of chat as his songs are intense and personal, decided after he got the publishing deal that yes, okay, he was a musician and he'd have a crack.

"It's taken us a long time to get any sort of profile and I don't know if that's a good or bad thing, but I can't wait to go down the line soon on tour, because I know that some of the people we play to are going to go out and buy that album. I just want to play those songs to as many people as went to listen to them."

RUSSELL BROWN