



Photograph: Tyrone Kallmeier

SPACEMEN 3

A mystique seems to surround BAILTER SPACE and their music. Engendered by photographs

of them clad in black, showroom dummy-like. And critics who went into adjectival overdrive over *Thermos* with words like "ominous", "unfathomable", "immense", "gorgeous", "angular" and "difficult". And that's just from one *Rolling Stone* review.

Back home, young bands who wanted to sound heavy and sensitive cited Baiter Space as the influence (and got BS drummer Brent McLaughlin to produce their records). All this without even raising the spectre of the Gordons — the god-like early 80s jagged-edge guitar band in which these three first wrecked aural devastation.

The Flying Nun press release accompanying their new EP *The Aim* is suitably oblique, reporting that Alister Parker and John Halvorsen "are singing as much about what Baiter Space themselves represent through music — the mysterious, metallic interface between human and technological form — as about any outside reference point in the everyday world."

Wow! How would I conduct my own interface with the three men in black?

We met at Writhe in Wellington, their recording studio and temporary home. Inside, sitting around on black sofas beside banks of equipment (including a Dalek-like 24 track from the 70s) the four of us gradually warmed to the task at hand. Alister was wariest, Brent was quietest, and John was the most forthcoming. The walls were painted the same light turquoise as the cover of *The Aim*. Several of John's ghostly portrait paintings (destined for an exhibition at Shed 11) hung above us.

Baiter Space have been working on their next album, "every day, seven days a week till three in the morning". Working on songs for which they put down rhythm tracks

eight or nine months ago in different studios, bringing it all together now, producing, as always, themselves. Aiming to complete work before they leave for their next European/American expedition in September. After the critical acclaim accorded *Thermos*, are they daunted by high expectations?

Alister: "That's why it was time to release a record, to work out where the mystique was coming from."

There's a notion that you're a heavy kind of band...

Alister: "I don't think it's a fair comment really."

John: "That's one way it can be looked at but I think it's been more than just heaviness. I think it can be more elating sometimes for people rather than a heavy, brooding feeling. It can be quite uplifting."

You're not attempting to give voice to a dark vision?

Unanimous "no"s and laughter all round. John mentions that *Thermos* is getting "quite old now and Alister adds: "It's not like we play the same standard thing. It might be that every gig can turn out to be a different sound, feel different or whatever."

John: "Every time you write a song you're developing your sound. Every new sound we make is related to all the ones that have gone before but it's like a new song or a new sound is emerging so we're just developing as we write songs. It's a new album and it's new material and we've just developed a new feel."

Can you describe that?
"Well, we couldn't, I don't

think, yet, it's not finished, there's a lot of work to do on the album and it can shape up in many different directions."

What about lyrical obsessions? What sort of things do you like to write songs about?

Alister, slumped in semi-shadow in a chair to my right, murmurs that's it's to do with a lot of things. Silence. I suggest that he can sound quite impersonal, almost identityless, as if he's holding something back.

Is that because he doesn't want to give too much away?

Alister: "It's not really like that."

John: "Sometimes I think we give too much away!"

Alister: "Far too much. Especially in interviews. That's what I'm thinking at the moment."

Yes, I can tell. You're not really telling me anything.

Alister: "I would tell you anything I really wanted to tell you, for sure, but otherwise it doesn't seem worth it. I don't think yours is going to be a bad article but you have to definitely watch out, I think."

Because people are trying to get you?

"No, but you have to think before you speak, for myself, that's what I think. I can be misconstrued because some things I say don't make a lot of sense if I just say them."

Not that Alister objects to being misinterpreted lyrically.

"With a vocal idea, I like the

idea of me hearing somebody's sound and I think they're saying something — like I read the lyrics and it might be totally different. Sometimes I don't want to read the lyric sheets for a song that I like. So some of the ideas around performing vocals, in my half anyway, are a little bit open ended."

You don't mind if people can't hear what you're saying?

"Well, a few years ago we used to mix the vocals a lot quieter so they were almost an instrument."

Are you making music primarily for yourselves? How much are you trying to transmit something to the audience?

John: "I think we're certainly trying to give the listener something as much as we're writing for ourselves. We're trying to give them everything in our music really, without giving too much away. No, I don't mean that. I dunno. When we write songs together a lot of it's just enjoyment, the sounds vibrating through your body at practice are quite fun sometimes. They make you feel a certain way and often influence the type of vocals you write."

Baiter Space have been called industrial-cyber-punk but they say they're a guitar band. They use samplers and some technology but Brent

happened and it sounded really nice. Often songs start the other way round with guitar but this particular instance it turned into a song at sound check. And that was during a period when we were half way through making *Thermos*. We'd already recorded five or six of the songs and then after we played that we went back to Wellington and recorded 50 more songs and that was one of the ones."

As for Baiter Space's influence on other people, John has this to say:

"Instead of trying to emulate someone else, why don't they just try emulating themselves first? Then one day they might have something that other people will want to copy off them. I don't think we've ever pinched other people's things, at least, not intentionally. Sometimes if you directly get ripped off it can really hurt because it's a personal thing that someone's nicking, your life's work. You get used to it cos it happens a lot. I wouldn't be able to copy us if I was playing with other people. Our sound is almost inevitable, it seems. We're just forging what we have as a natural resource between the three of us — there's a lot of electricity going on."

points out that most of the sampled stuff is guitar noises anyway. Which brings us to influences. I stupidly neglect to mention the German connection. What German connection? Well, Baiter Space went down very well with German audiences last year and the keen listener could be forgiven for detecting certain Krautrock influences in their sound. Such as 70s future-sound trance-noise merchants Neul and Faust. Not to mention the Krawtwerkian machine-automaton aspect of their musical personality.

Instead, I ask Alister about the fine line between "ominous" and melodramatic in his kind of vocal style. He replies quietly and darkly that he doesn't have a dictionary with him right now. An awkward moment. Which John saves by speaking.

"We don't specifically draw influences from other bands. I think it's the combination of just the three of us as people. I remember the day we met it was very similar to today, the

Baiter Space don't often get asked to play Gordon's songs, although it happened in Germany when they least expected it, in a small town which happened to be Eva Braun's birthplace. For the first time in many years they played one ('Machine Song') and John says it was fun to do.

Do they ever feel they've mislaid their early jagged edge?

"No, not really, it's just that we're not the Gordons, we're Baiter Space. We perform in a different way. The way we came about being Baiter Space wasn't 'hey, let's reform the Gordons'. Baiter Space started with Alister and Hamish Kilgour and a few other people. Alister and Hamish were the core. Meanwhile, Brent and I were in Wellington doing other things — Brent was getting into his engineering career and playing with the Skeptics with me and then suddenly, out of the blue, '88, I joined Baiter Space. It seemed like a really good idea because I used to like working with them in the Gordons. That was just

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way we work and the way we interact, which is something that's really hard to define in words but it's a process that only exists when I work with these two guys. We're influenced by each other, by ourselves and by the sounds that we make and slowly forge over the years."

What about TV? 'Hard Wired' reminds me of a broken down, demented *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* type theme tune.

John laughs. "I remember the *Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, I can't remember the theme tune though. I think the thing that sparked that song was we were soundchecking in Auckland and I had to dash down to the music shop to buy some guitar strings and I saw an old second hand bass there. It was a real dunger of a bass, really cheap, but I was drawn to it and I picked it up and played it and I just loved the sound of it. I brought it back to the sound check and a bass riff sort of

Hamish and Alister and I. At that stage the Gordons wasn't in our minds. When Hamish stayed in New York it seemed obvious to get Brent in as our drummer, so there we were full circle but not so much by plan, it was just, I dunno, destiny or something. That's why it doesn't sound like the Gordons. Our songwriting processes are different, it's a different thing, a whole different mood that we're expressing, a different idea. But at the same time we're the same three people so it's related."

Brent: "Exactly the same!"

John: "Except this is now."

How long are you going to keep going?

Alister: "We're here today."

John: "We certainly planned never to be around for this long. Maybe we'll be 70 one day and still doing it. I don't know. We haven't found a good reason to stop."

DONNA YUZWALK

