

MUCH ADO ABOUT

What's this? An album at number two in the charts and the McGlashans have got a guard dog already? You haven't got that gold one on the wall, yet Don, I can't see any screaming hordes outside your Kingsland pad, buddy. But, no, the dog which has been growling and barking at me from the McGlashans' front porch slowly gets up, still barking, and slinks away — to next door.

"The dog isn't ours," sighs McGlashan on his doorstep. "We don't know why he does that."

One of life's little mysteries, perhaps like the one where an album that was partly recorded in a garage shared with a printer is at number two in the charts and the second single, 'Nature', a fairly grumpy version of the Formuylas' 60s hit, is on everyone's lips.

That album, the self-titled debut from the Mutton Birds, has had an interesting journey already. It was originally scheduled for release in April, but fell prey to a number of delays, including the closure of the New Zealand branch of Virgin Records, which was distributing the band's own Bag Records label. While he waited, McGlashan, singer, songwriter, musician and actor, never thought he'd end up number two to God (Eric Clapton, maaan) in the charts.

"I was so pessimistic about radio play and the idea of a single, because I didn't imagine that anybody would buy Mutton Birds singles, I thought people would be interested in buying an album and we wouldn't have that feeling of pressure that a single generates — that that's the album that everybody has to buy that week, I didn't anticipate that. I've never been involved in anything like this, it's fantastic."

But there were darker days, like when the album was being recorded in that practice room.

"We'd be struggling away with the rain beating on the roof and noxious fumes from the printer swirling around and on our hands and knees trying to work out where the humming was coming from. At times I was painfully aware that every recording project I've been involved with since Blam Blam Blam has been on a lower budget. At times when we were going to try and borrow a mike lead so that we could keep going I started to think what was wrong with me, why hadn't I been able to get a deal for this record, why hadn't I got anybody interested."

It's been largely the success of 'Nature' that has made normally disinterested radio types listen. The success of the cover version is ironic, considering that McGlashan has primarily been known as a songwriter since Blam Blam Blam, through From Scratch and theatre group The Front Lawn.

"I think it's a really good song," says McGlashan. "I don't want to do lots more covers, I didn't want to go out with a cover first, but I felt that people would like 'Nature'. It's one of the things on the record that really worked for me."

"I think there is a recognition factor — most people will have heard the original, even if they're too young to have sat up glued to *Studio One* or *Loxene Golden Disc* when it first got aired. There's something neat about the unalloyed joy of the song — the energy about it — there's a looney, pastoral sort of hopefulness. I'd love to write something that direct and the stuff I'm doing now feels a bit closer to that." And this is the main reason McGlashan formed the Mutton Birds two years ago — so he could write songs.

"The fact that I've got a band who are really supportive when



MUTTON

With their new single and critically-acclaimed album climbing the charts, THE MUTTON BIRDS are creating quite a stir . . .

I turn up with songs and they've got great ideas to throw in is pushing me into taking more risks with writing and being able to write from a more instinctive place. I've written a certain number of songs and I would love to have written double that number in the next couple of years. I'm 33 and I've got maybe 10 or 15 songs that I think are good."

McGlashan also cites the Fane Flaws-directed video for 'Nature' as a reason for the song's success.

"I think nowadays a video is what wakes everybody up, including radio programmers, all sorts of mainstream radio got interested after seeing 'Nature', it gave them a picture of what the band's trying to do, made them listen to the song in a different way." Ideas for the video started with Graham Campbell, the Front Lawn's manager, and cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh, who worked as DOP on *An Angel At My Table*.

"Stuart was really keen to do it, he'd phoned us up after hearing us on BFM and said 'Are you going to make a clip of that song? I'd love to be involved', so that was fantastic and I'd talked to Douglas Wright, I've composed for his dance pieces, and Doug was going away overseas so he quickly choreographed the dance sequence which we then used."

So just how far are the Mutton Birds willing to push their poppy, crafted wares? Rest assured, this is by no means just Don McGlashan's Latest Thing. David Long (guitar) has moved from Wellington to Auckland

and Ross Burge (drums) came back from New York to work with McGlashan. Along with Alan Gregg (bass and vocals), they're prepared to take on the world, which means touring overseas, something now more possible in the wake of bands like the Chills, the 3Ds, Strait-jacket Fits, the Bats and the Verlaines. McGlashan and his family have made a commitment to the Mutton Birds.

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of years of working this out," he says. "But I've gotten to the stage where I'm now free, it's a decision that me and my family have made, we've decided that we could give the next few years to this if that's necessary." The birth of McGlashan's son, Louie, to he and partner Marianne Shultz has caused something many new parents find out — suddenly you are more aware of your priorities and it's a lot easier to focus on what you really want. The birth of the Mutton Birds and Louie has a definite connection.

"There is a tie-up, although I am the father, the rest of the band aren't the father!" laughs McGlashan. "Parenthood organises your life, it organises your priorities, because if you're trying to share this full-time job of looking after a kid then you've got less time to waste on things that aren't as essential. I

find it easier to say no to things, because there's something very specific, there's this little person I've got to look at."

"Previously, I've had trouble saying no to things, because the only reason was this large and fairly non-specific idea in the back of my mind that I should be getting on with my own work, writing songs. Now, in a sense, it's clarified what I want to do, there's things that are really important to me,

gutsful and I won't want to have anything to do with it again. I think I've changed a lot — the industry hasn't changed, it's capitalism in its purest sense and it's never going to change.

"There's only a tiny proportion of the record industry that's about music. If you really get hot under the collar about what the industry is putting all its energy into selling and consequently what the poor old public is putting its energy into buying and the sort of dreck that most of the time people really like, then I think you're wasting your time. It's like getting really mad because people want to spend all their money on buying mutant ninja turtles instead of sending it to the Horn of Africa."

And despite the self-financed independence of *The Mutton Birds*, if a big advance was offered to record another album, McGlashan's answer would be 'that'll do nicely thanks'.

"Yeah, my analogy with this record is that we've decided we want to fly somewhere, so we go out in the back yard and we build a plane. Next time, I'd just like to buy a ticket! I'd like to go to the travel agent and say 'this is where I want to go, give me the ticket' and I think in New Zealand, you can invent your own method of doing things and that's one of the neat things about being here to a certain extent."

In the future of the Mutton Birds, we'll probably also be seeing less of Don McGlashan's face too, as the working band develops.

"I'm the one the interview-

ers ask for, because they want to talk about the songs and my background," he says, "but the next set of interviews will be all of us or more of us. I did set up the band so that I would write more songs and the original idea was not to be as collective as other things I've been in, but the personality of the music is something that is the net effect of all four personalities."

Another favourite media topic has been the 'Don McGlashan documents kiwi culture' theory. Strange, in a way, as many other local bands also mention place names or other such kiwi stuff.

"If that's all that strikes people, then that's unfortunate," says McGlashan. "In the final analysis it's whether something sticks around and stays and continues to be arresting or moving or continues to have a life after the year it was released and I don't think that aspect of trying to write good songs has anything to do with the detail in the lyrics, the local flavour, I think that's a sort of cosmetic thing."

"The neat thing now is that I grew up in a country where occasionally you'd hear Peter Cape on the radio, you'd hear 'Down The Hill On Saturday Night', that was kiwi music, or you'd hear John Hore singing about the Waikato, that was when I was little and then there was this explosion through the late 70s and beyond where there were punk bands singing about Grafton Bridge and now I think it's not that weird to be singing about this place."

"The great thing about what's happening now, is there's a music here that doesn't owe much to anybody else, it's not the New Zealand answer to anything. It's music that grows out of our experience and that is something that goes a lot deeper than mentioning Dominion Road in a song."

That very direct, filmic writing style may change in future years, anyway. McGlashan has a professed desire to write more pop songs, although says he's never managed to write a "completely irony-free one". The band's sound is changing too, "becoming louder and more distorted as we grow into a band", he says. No desire, yet, though to get butt naked, paint their bodies and grunge out?

"I understand there's quite a few people who would like to see our bass player get naked and paint his body, or possibly get naked and paint their body. I think we'll save that for the fourth single!"

It's a full circle for McGlashan, back now to touring with a band — he's seen more of the country than most, having done seven national tours with Blam Blam Blam and six with the Front Lawn. This tour is something of an experiment in that the whole family will be on the road. It's a far cry from the highly portable days of The Front Lawn, when McGlashan and partner Harry Sinclair had to ask everyone individually in the public bar of Stewart Island's pub to come through to the lounge bar and see the Reason For Breakfast show.

"They were all such hard case people that we had to perform parts of the show to just about everybody in the pub to prove to them that they might have a marginally good time going next door," remembers McGlashan with a grin. He's full of great little stories like this — like his songs. No matter whether the dreams of success come true, no doubt the life and times of the Mutton Birds will be eventful and they will create stories and a history of their own.

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