

# TASMANIA



Was it the curse of the ABLE TASMANS that led to the Chills' demise? "How do you feel about stealing another band's drummer, Martin?" goes the ad on Auckland's BFM. In comes Graeme Humphreys doing the wickedest Martin Phillipps impression you're likely to hear this side of the College radio circuit. "Well, I wouldn't exactly call it stealing," he mumbles.

All silly fun, of course. "One day I'll ring up Slash records and get them to send me an amp or something," jokes Humphreys (piano, organ, guitar and vocals). There's no curse, of course, but Craig Mason, the Tasmans' drummer drafted into the Chills is coming home from a truncated American tour.

"I got a phone call from him last night," says Humphreys. "He was great, it was 2.30 in the morning, they'd just finished a gig, there was lots of drinking and Craig, quite weepy-eyed he was: 'Love you guys!'. He's coming back soon. It's a shame he didn't get to get to Europe, but I honestly think he's approached it in a pretty workmanlike way, the contract, the money, the professionalism. I'm really glad for him that he had the opportunity, it's a shame

he hasn't got the chance to earn a few more dollars off Warner Music for his wife and kid."

It's perhaps typical of the Able Tasmans' whanau-like approach that Mason's decision to take up the Chills' offer caused no problem, other than finding another drummer with the new album, *Somebody Ate My Planet*, fresh in the shops and in need of promotion. But Robbie Yates, former Verlaines' drummer, had offered to fill the gap almost as soon as he heard Mason was leaving. Must be good karma. The band now is slimming down to a five-piece, with the departure of Ron Young (synthesizer) a move both Humphreys and Peter Kean (vocals, guitar, cornet) think will work well.

"It's much easier to tighten up," says Kean. "It's been a criti-

cism levelled at us for a long time that we have too much going on in the mid range and it could tend to be woolly and lose definition and I think by cutting down to five it will go some way to solving that, just by the mere fact that that's the set up."

"It also increases the amount of communication that goes on on stage, which helps with tightness, because there's one less person you have to get in touch with," adds Humphreys. The rest of the band are Leslie Jonkers (piano, organ, guitar and vocals) and Jane Dodd (bass and backing vocals).

Way back when the Able Tasmans started as a two-piece, communication would have been no problem. The roots of the band lie in Whangarei in 1983, where Humphreys and Craig Baxter

formed a band called Sister Ray, doing 50 per cent covers and "quasi-punk rock, new wave sort of stuff."

"Wearing white sneakers," laughs Kean.

"That was for playing tennis," says Humphreys. "But the thing is if you played tennis in white sneakers and then went down to the mall in Whangarei on a Friday night it was pretty bad news. We got chased out of town for being punk rockers. I was very glad to leave and I tried to convince Craig to come down and play and he did and then we tried to convince Dave." That is Dave Bannister, who formed the Able Tasmans with the other two in 1984.

Humphreys and Kean met at university, where Kean was in a little-known band called Raucous Laughter, a band which hardly ever got out of the practice room.

Raucous Laughter stuff, it was remarkably good" and a Raucous Laughter song appears on the back of the first Able Tasmans single. "During the single we had the opportunity to do something like that and after seven years in the practice room they had to show something for it!"

The Able Tasmans have now come through a few recordings, from 'Carolines' on 1986's *Outnumbered By Sheep* (a forerunner to the *Freak The Sheep* series), the EP *The Tired Sun* and albums *A Cuppa Tea and a Lie Down, Hey Spinner!* and now *Somebody Ate My Planet*.

"Recording is in some ways a completion of something, a photograph of where we were at the time," says Humphreys, musing on the band's future path. "You can't destroy it, it will always be there, it's like a history and if we can carry on recording and carry

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"Raucous Laughter were in a practice room for seven years and did three live gigs," grins Humphreys.

"We were the most underground band in Auckland," Kean agrees.

"Peter and I were both doing zoology and I went down to Pete's practice room and just enjoyed listening to the band and doing recreational activities down there, it was great fun. It was a practice gig for years."

"It was a cool basement, eh, it had a sort of cage set up, it was well insulated," says Kean. Maybe that's why the band never got out, the practice room was so cool. "Yeah, didn't want to play live, shifting gear was such a hassle."

According to Humphreys, "there's a few tapes of the early

on being able to afford to record in the best possible manner, just keep doing that. Record, play live for fun, energy and band-type cohesion and the philosophy of being a rock band and record to record it."

Both Humphreys and Kean are happy with *Somebody Ate My Planet*, given the circumstances under which it was recorded.

"I think it's a good photograph, given the camera we had to use and how much film we could afford," says Kean, continuing the photograph analogy.

"I still think four in the morning is a ridiculous time to try and get the best possible performance to put in that photograph to record its history," continues Humphreys. "That's just the constraint of time and money. If you're going to do something

that's going to last forever, you don't work all day then stay up all night and do it at four in the morning. But you kinda have to."

An oft-asked question is, who the hell is Mark Byrami? (as made famous in the album's song 'A Conversation With Mark Byrami').

"He's been a friend of ours for years, he was here at university when we first came," says Kean.

"He played bass with Peter's band once, he played bass with Bird Nest Roys," adds Humphreys.

"Called him Frank back then," remembers Kean.

"He's a unique conversationalist," says Humphreys. "Oscar Wilde and Mark Byrami together would be televisable. He's got so many great and unusual philosophies that seem to be just as solid when he argues them out and you think 'Yeah, Jesus Christ, the world is stupid isn't it?'"

"Or: 'there is a god,'" laughs Kean.

"So it was prime material to write a song about," reflects Humphreys. "Not that it's really going to make that much difference to anyone else. Because of the personal nature of our songs it became material for writing a song."

The Able Tasmans are one of those bands who have fun. They're serious, but not that serious, perhaps why they've never done the OE thing, going for the big signing, the major tours. They'd love to get over to America, says Humphreys and, all things being equal, they may make it next year.

"We'll go for fun, it's not ambition, that's the thing," he says. "The idea of the Able Tasmans going to the States is really exciting because we'll all be in the States and we'll be having a really cool time and playing music is a great excuse, rather than we've got a tour to very seriously accomplish and play."

"It wouldn't be anything like pushing product," says Kean. "More like doing the geriatric bus tour 50 years early."

Humphreys' eyes light up. "Maybe we'll go as a band and just not worry about doing any gigs. Just take our amps and find a practice room!"

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