

# IZZY STRADLIN

## and the Ju Ju Hounds



**Auckland Town Hall**  
**TUES NOV 10**

Tickets Truetone and usual outlets

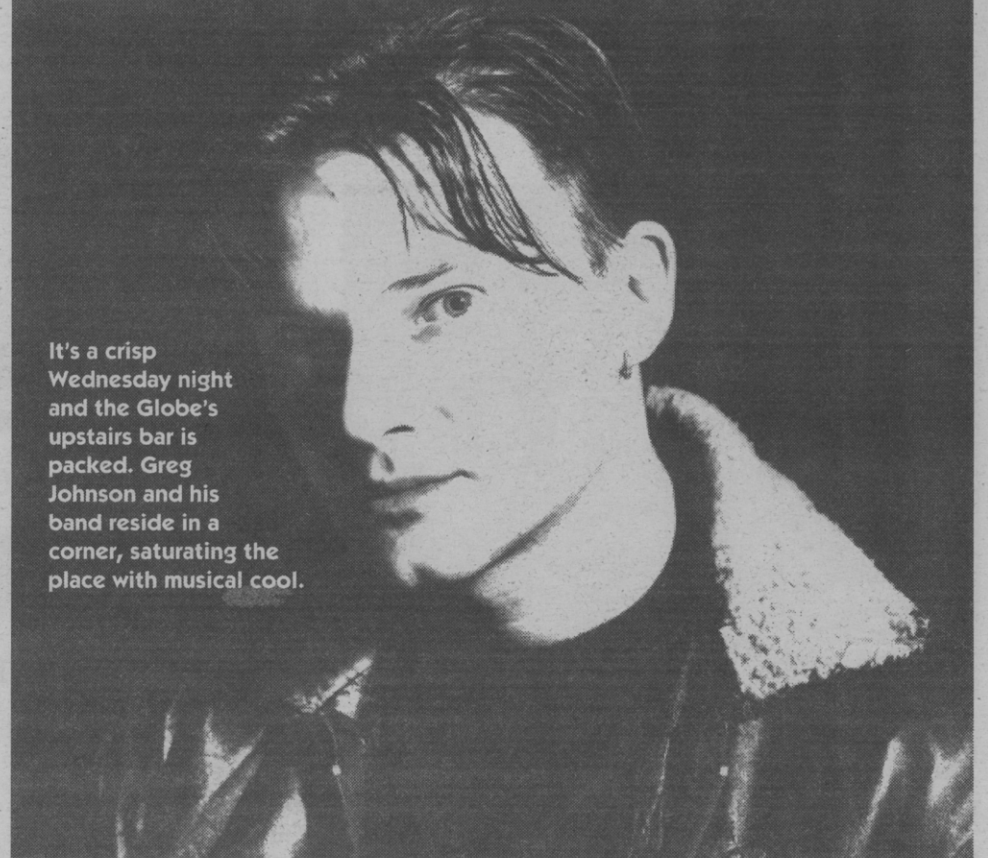
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Special Guests Dead Flowers & Nine Livez

Izzy Stradlin and the Ju Ju Hounds



# COOL THING



It's a crisp Wednesday night and the Globe's upstairs bar is packed. Greg Johnson and his band reside in a corner, saturating the place with musical cool.

You won't hear "Isabelle" or "Talk in This Town" though. Tonight he's fronting his 'other' band, Bluespeak, looking like the kiwi Chet Baker under the dimmed lights and ceiling fans (his rip-off movie "Lets Get Pissed" is unfortunately still just an idea), and sounding like his trumpet was grafted to his mouth at birth.

It's a scene that Greg creates most nights of the week at the various clubs and bars he plays. But when I met him the following Friday he was playing the role he prefers, Greg Johnson — 'pop' icon.

"Some people actually find it quite offensive when I say I just play this jazz thing for a living. Pop music's my passion. Some people get really pissed off because you're not really supposed to take that attitude — because jazz is meant to be 'divine'. I do love jazz, and I wouldn't do it if I didn't like it, but it's really my meal ticket — has been for the last three or four years.

"The best thing about it is the singing — and there's no better way to learn how to sing well than singing three hours every night. I wasn't born with a natural singing voice, so for me I've had to go out and work at it.

"It drives me mad sometimes though, just playing in front of people that aren't there to see you and don't give a shit — four nights a week. But I think that playing to different crowds and smaller crowds is good for you as a performer, you know, playing to five people at the bar — especially five drunk, obnoxious people."

You would think that swapping between two such vastly different styles would be impossible without developing some sort of musically induced schizophrenia. Especially seeing as Bluespeak also have an album underway. But Greg says it's the audience that has the biggest problem getting to grips with it.

"The odd person will come up to us (Bluespeak) and say 'oh can you play 'Isabelle'?' Or come up to the other band and ask for some Miles Davis and you've got to explain that it's another band. But wearing the two hats isn't a problem for me at all."

His jazz side isn't the only aspect that distinguishes Greg Johnson from the average pin-up pop star. His songwriting talent made him the favourite for the APRA's Silver Scroll Award this year (which he narrowly lost to Shona Laing).

"It's my ambition to be a great songwriter, more than anything, it's what I like to do. My theory was that if I write enough songs, some of them are going to be good — and I've written a lot of

songs. I've got a backlog of over a hundred songs, 40 are actually registered. You can practice and practice, ultimately though it's spontaneous. And the best songs are the ones that just pop out when you're waiting twenty minutes for a friend to go out for a drink, or when you're waiting for a drink".

Or in the middle of one...

"Yeah or just after one too. It's quite disturbing basing your whole future existence on something so arbitrary. But I'm in a lucky situation, I get a lot of encouragement from the rest of the band, and they're quite tight in quality controlling my stuff. I get pissed off when they don't like my new songs but I always respect what they've got to say and its good to have that control."

The latest Greg Johnson Set album, *Everyday Distortions*, is certainly an eclectic mixture. There are tracks that will appeal to the older fans and there's stuff for the "Isabelle" ballad junkies. There are even some blues twinges here and there (the brilliantly titled "When love gets out of this asylum" was originally written for Bluespeak). What they all have in common though is that sense of progression.

"It's bigger sound this time because it's a band sound, whereas last time we hadn't really played as a band before, and I was still hung up on technology — which I've kicked now. Not that I have anything against the technology and stuff, it's just that the constrictions with playing with machines drove us crazy. It loses a lot of things — spontaneity is one of them. When we were playing with sequencers, every time we played that song it had to be the same, you couldn't do anything different because if you did you'd be out of sync with the machines. The sound is a lot more guitar based now."

The more delicate tracks have definitely evolved as well, with some of them comparable with the Blue Nile's brand of aesthetics.

"What we've tried to do, and in fact what I'm still trying to do, is put classic dynamics into pop music that can combine the very fragile and the huge — especially live. And it's great to capture it on record as well."

What's the sad little number at the end of the album?

"That's actually from a film soundtrack that I did that never saw the light of day. I'm not going to say what film it was because I'm really pissed off they dumped the music. And I don't want to give them any free advertising because they didn't even ring to say sorry or explain or

anything...It was only a small budget film but it still fucked me off."

At which point it became time for some hefty topic changing.

How was the Simply Red support?

"It was a real buzz actually, one of the biggest crowds we've played to. Which just goes to show that if you get your songs played on FM radio the crowds will know them."

They were singing along?

"Bordering on it — on 'Isabelle' and definitely 'Two Feet off the Ground', and the new one they'd heard. Once a crowd's heard one or two songs, they're more receptive to the other stuff as well."

"It's great at the moment with the commercial stations opening up. Like you'll turn on the radio and you'll hear Jan Helriegel, the Muttonbirds, us, Dance Exponents, Dead Flowers, Chills — I even heard Straitjacket fits the other day with 'Done'. It shouldn't be surprising, but it is."

The production and musical credits on the album are littered with familiar 'names' like Nathan Haines, Jan Helriegel, Fiona McDonald and Diane Swan...

"A lot of people came in and did stuff, which is pretty indicative of how things are in the Auckland music scene — there's definitely a lot of cross pollination going on. There were some great moments in the studio — on one song we had Diane, Jan, and Fiona doing back up, and getting those three in the studio was great."

The Greg Johnson Set may have had some big chart successes recently but like so many New Zealand musicians before him, Greg has to be realistic about being able to depend solely on 'pop' for a living.

"I don't think it's sustainable here at all. Even the Exponents, who were making a killing, finally came to realise that it only takes two weeks to get from one end of the country to the other and you just can't go back and do it again. It has to go overseas in order to be sustainable as a living."

So is this the album that will take you overseas?

"I hope it is. That's one of my personal hopes, to get the budget for another album, and hopefully with any money left over we'll go overseas. But its a document of the band over the last year to eighteen months as well — the word album does really mean 'album' in this case. It's a sort of musical photo-album of the last two years and the different line ups."

JOHN TAITE