

# STRANGER THAN FICTION: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SPLIT ENZ

This month sees the publication of the history of one of New Zealand's most important and well-known bands. Written by founder member Mike Chunn, the book follows the band from their formation and first gigs through to the peak of their success in the 80s, and beyond.

The excerpt below picks up as the band travels to the USA after successful tours of Australia and the UK and the release of their first album *Mental Notes*...

We had no expectations as to what might befall us in America. We went to Australia thinking we would conquer it in three weeks: the UK was the golden land where our final concerted efforts would be made. But the

USA found us couched in uncertainty. America was gripped in Fleetwood Mac and Al Stewart fever, long hair and flared denims were still the uniform. The Ramones and Blondie were kicking up dust in the alternative

in the morning, asked me what I was doing.

"Why you driving funny, son?"

"I get confused with these traffic lights, Mr pot-bellied, gun-toting officer, suh!"

how he liked the album and that he had friends, serious music lovers, who liked it too. He suggested to Tim that when he was next in London he look him up. Tim walked off to his room a few inches off the orange, purple and

boredom and how we were going to solve it. During the second set, Phil walked off early so we played on without him. We didn't care for our own various reasons.

The next night we resolved to ignore the serious, conscientious attitude demanded of us. We walked onstage and as we faced the audience of two people Tim called out: "Are you having a good time?"

At the deep silence that followed, he continued: "Well, we are... and majority rule!"

We sniggered and cackled and lurched off into 'Late Last Night'

to confront the situation and we were unable to help him. There was no one he could turn to and I believe he felt victimised. A scapegoat for the drudgery we were steeped in.

On March 11, 40 days after our bubbly arrival at Los Angeles airport, I flew to Auckland. Eddie and Tim flew to Baltimore to write songs at Tim's uncle's house; the rest sloped back to London. Nothing was said, there was nothing to celebrate. It was the quiet, timely end to the first phase in what was to be the long life of Split Enz.

MIKE CHUNN

# THE FALLOF THE HOUSE OF CARDS

press but, as opposed to the UK, this meant little on the grand scale of things. To further collectivise ourselves as an impenetrable unit, we took to wearing black track suits en masse, emblazoned on the chest with silver ferns. In many ways, this was clever stuff as it held up the genuine pride we had managed to sustain over the years for the homeland — although it further enhanced the prospect of Split Enz being regarded by flash Americans as a pack of wandering minstrels each short of a few brain cells.

The reception on arrival was also a sharp contrast. In Australia we had a bemused, uncertain Dave Russell waiting with a clapped-out Holden car. In the UK, there was nobody. Here in LA we had a Chrysalis reception party and a fleet of stretch limousines. We drove off down the freeway with FM stations blaring, televisions clicking off and on, cocktail cabinets opening and shutting, electric seats swishing to and fro, electric windows zooming up and down, electric sunroofs sliding back and forth, heads popping out scanning the wide vista of palm trees and rows upon rows of enormous, clunky American cars driving beside us as if in a silent pilgrimage to nowhere.

Our Chrysalis rep, Russ Shaw, signed us into the Hyatt Hotel on Sunset Boulevard and we threw our by-now battered suitcases onto the wide beds and threw open the ranch-sliders to gaze out across the dark haze that was settled on top of the huge metropolis of LA, each of us clutching our fresh, unmarked tour itineraries in our hands. Upon reading, we knew this was going to be one organised six-week trip.

A myriad of interviews weaved their way through our waking hours, coupled with record store appearances during which we summoned all our minimal conversational skills to endear ourselves to the staff. Tim and I visited a radio syndicated show called the Magic Mountain (a long way from Thomas Mann) and we were introduced to two black kids who were being interviewed after us. The little one had a handshake like warm plasticine. His name was Michael. His brother was Jermaine.

At nights we'd be herded off to restaurants to meet radio people. We would dress as absurdly as we could, taking on their leisure suits, tight body shirts and splayed collars with stove-pipe trousers, jerkins and thin black ties. This was the era of heightened seventies kitsch, with loud mouths and relentless hyperactivity. How could I relate in my blank dream-state. LA was a society languishing in sex and coke, not yet ready to heed the warnings of fried brain cells and the hollow victory of me me me. The west coast ethos was overdrive and the likes of Russ Shaw would spend all his spare time driving us in his convertible Mercedes high above Los Angeles to view the city lights or cruise along Hollywood Blvd.

There was a definite feeling that these Los Angeles people thought of us as simpletons. This was exemplified by a pot-bellied cop who, on stopping me for weaving all over the road at two

"Well, son, where you from with that funny accent?"

"New Zealand, suh."

"Where? Well, let me explain something, son. When the red light's on, you stop; same with the orange. The green means you can go. So get your cotton-picking weasel face outta here before you make my day!"

Sitting in the ground floor coffee bar of the Hyatt one smoggy afternoon I was gazing out the window, my brain gently to-ing and fro-ing in a state of pax while Tim coped with a journalist from Teen Date who wanted to know why we were so zany, spoony, daffy and flipped-out. Malcolm McLaren walked past in zippers and tears and winked. One short fragmented piece of body language that said many things. Presumably one of them was: "Get out of this place, kiwi ignorami. Regroup, refocus, shake off that wrinkled facade and return to conquer!"

I couldn't be certain.

The first show was in San Francisco, which appealed instantly. Stylish, colourful, varied, almost European, San Fran had a feel and we readied ourselves for the first show at the Boarding House. The tickets were subsidised by Chrysalis at only \$4; we wore the Black and Whites and we walked on to a full house.

What is it, when a moment predicted as mundane turns into euphoria? Confronted by 300 San Francisco residents who, over the years, must have seen and heard it all, I anticipated a struggle. It was not to be. From the first note they beamed with delight, whooping, laughing, intense and wide-eyed. At the final, crashing chord of 'Another Great Divide' they rose to their feet shouting and cheering. We had scopped them up and taken them to another place. The real spirit of the performance came from our desperation at the whole Los Angeles media focus on haircuts and zaniness, whackiness and silly clothes. Here, tonight, we were going to prove that we could overpower the whole theatrical monster we had created and drive home a bunch of songs that would prove our musical worth. And we did.

Backstage after the show, a long-haired chap walked into the changing room and exclaimed: "You guys are good. I want you out of town by sunset!"

"Mumble, mumble... ha ha... mumble mumble."

"You guys know who I am?"

Noel replies: "You're not anybody if you don't have our record."

Presumably the bass player for the Tubes grooved on the flippancy.

After another three nights of enthusiastic receptions, we drove back to Los Angeles for the big show at the Roxy on the Strip.

After soundcheck Tim returned to the Hyatt and walked into the lift, where a gent with a London accent put out his hand and introduced himself.

"Hi, I'm Ray Davies and I'm a fan!"

Time stood still for the country boy as a flood of swift memories flashed by; those hours of Kinks songs pouring out of the radio and the uplifting, moving melodies burning in his brain.

Davies spoke to Tim about

mauve carpet.

That night the cognoscenti, coppers and aloof gathered at the Roxy to decide for themselves whether or not Chrysalis were backing a dark horse. We charged out in the Zoots and ran around to a muted response. This one was hard work, particularly for Tim who had to try to wring some life out of the silhouetted masses. It never came to be and we ran back to the dressing room with its light-bulbed mirrors and chrome and looked vacantly at each other. Questions flew around the room unspoken and there were no answers to be had. We were in the gladiatorial ring and the gates were locked.

Four days later we were in Houston where the roads were twice as wide as the freeways of LA, we eat grits for breakfast, the sidewalk was awash with ten-gallon hats, the pavement ground by Cuban heels. We visited a record store, played one show to a confused response and the next day found ourselves in

## "CHRYSALIS CONCEIVED THE ULTIMATE IN GAUCHE, CHEAP PROMOTION: A LOOK-ALIKE COMPETITION..."

Dallas. By now some of the national press fostered in LA had reached the newsstands and there was a bustle of curiosity in the music industry. Boz Scaggs and a few cohorts checked us out. Cheap Trick drove down from upstate but missed the show. We relished the sudden burst of attention, although the reaction to the show was far short of that which was showered on us in San Francisco and Phil's stage presence was in retreat mode. He would stop playing at seemingly random moments and his guitar parts took on an increasingly abstract tack, trembling and reeling as if out of control on a river of brandy. He was by now failing to sing with Tim at all. Time was unable to confront Phil with this and drove himself on stage like a fanatic, clamping his eyes shut and pounding the stage as if he was crushing every demon in his head.

By day we stuck to hotel rooms, except for visits to record stores and radio and press interviews which allowed the odd free lunch. It was obvious that Chrysalis had only a slim chance of getting the album away and that there was no single for the record company to focus on (in this, the country that invented the Top 40). The progressive rock era that held the long-player aloft and poured scorn on the seven inch 45 was gone, particularly down here in the deep south where Lynard Skynrd ruled.

The next stop was Atlanta, Georgia. Chrysalis were desperate and they conceived the ultimate in gauche, cheap promotion: a look-alike competition sponsored by themselves, a record store, a radio station and a hair salon! We were playing four nights, two shows a night at the Great Southeast Music Hall. The first night's performance set the tone when we drew four people for the first show; the second ten. Once again we found ourselves waiting backstage between sets, the sweat drying on our white, orange, pink and blue striped faces. We talked about toasted sandwiches and

forgetting where we were. Forgetting the album and Chrysalis and fame and fortune, we found some semblance of sanity coming back. Between sets we pranked and laughed and kept to ourselves. Phil threw back his brandy and laughed along. We opened the second set with 'So Long For Now', said goodbye at the end of it and left the stage. Stuff 'em all!

By Saturday night we were anarchic, playing hokey to the miniscule crowds. The whole situation reached truly imbecilic proportions when it was discovered that there had been only one entry in the look-alike contest. Chrysalis honchos quickly rounded up some of the club staff and employees of the hair salon sponsor and threw them into our changing room where they slapped on make-up in a valiant attempt to look like one of us. They were then paraded out in front of the crowd of around 30 people and the only chap stupid enough to enter was

given his first prize of air tickets to California to watch a Jethro Tull concert. He looked like me. In fact, he looked more like me than I did. Second prize was 50 Chrysalis albums, third prize was free admission to the club for a year and fourth prize was a year's free haircuts but there was no one to claim them.

This insane seige was too much. Tim took refuge in a trip that elucidated the whole scenario into a vapid fantasy. We wormed our way through about three-quarters of the set before we noticed we were one member short — Phil was gone. We played on regardless and finished the set. Backstage, Phil, in defense mode, pleaded tuning problems. Eddie and I had had enough so we went back on stage and checked the guitar — it seemed fine. This was passed on to Tim. Instead of letting it go as he would have done in the past, his altered state swept aside his usual reluctance. He confronted Phil and accused him of lying about being out of tune. For the first time in his life, Tim stood up and threatened the safe haven that Phil existed in.

Phil was taken aback... in a corner... and he punched Tim in the face, at the same time exclaiming "I'm leaving."

As Eddie and I held Phil back, Tim stared long and hard at him — letting everything that had bonded them together slip away. But for how long?

The next day we were in Boston and Phil announced his departure. In hindsight, he had to go. There were many reasons, however, as to why Phil was walking away. He desperately needed someone outside the band that he could confide in and relate to. And that person could only be in the management role. A manager could have instilled confidence and a sense of worth in Phil but he was now so low, so backed into a corner, that he wanted to disappear. The image of Phil as an aloof, arrogant and moody person was wide of the mark and an easy job. With external forces now so in control of our movements, he was unable

