

TELLING TALES:

Shayne Carter talks to Paul McKessar

Shayne Carter of the Straitjacket Fits is talking about his first extended stay back in Dunedin since the band moved to Auckland nearly a year ago. "Dean Allen summoned me over last night in between sets and says [perfect DA impersonation] 'best fucking band in the world, the best ... and last weekend, you were shit tonight, my boy' (Dean always calls me 'my boy' when he's pissed) '.... tonight my boy, s'okay'".

He laughs, but there's a hint of resignation in his voice. The Straitjacket Fits have had a rough time as the prodigal sons come back to town for xmas. Their first gig at the Oriental (the one Dean had seen) had left Shayne crestfallen. The right mood hadn't been there at all, between the band on stage and between the band and crowded pub. They'd pulled things together for Saturday night at the Ori, confident enough to finish with their throwaway Prince tribute 'The Cross' and playing with a little bit of the ol' SJF bravura.

Memories, however go back exactly a year to the same venue and same weekend in '87. There weren't plenty of people there to see the band then, but there was a feeling of a band very definitely on the way up, a popularly acclaimed debut e.p. just out that week and a new song 'Hail' fitting into the established set, hinting at powerful and bright prospects for the band.

1988 hasn't been easy. The move to the big smoke came with its attendant swag of traumas for our boys, and when the time came to record an album, a follow-up to the highly successful Life In One Chord, things became uncomfortably drawn out for the SJFs as they and producer/engineer Terry Moore struggled to bring the project to fruition. And now that it's just out, there's plenty of things on Hail to annoy Shayne, but there's also plenty to like and plenty for the SJF's to look forward to in '89.

The SJFs' xmas party at the Savoy has its problems, including a fire alarm break and a version of 'The Cross' that goes so badly that Shayne vows it will be the last ever, but the band come storming back, and boy does this band storm when they feel they gotta, with a scorching 'Dialling a Prayer' and hi-energy chestnut 'Poisonality' for an encore.

This interview between Paul McKessar and Shayne Carter took place the following afternoon. It starts off with singing.

"I used to scream all the time, but now I've learnt to use a mic. properly; with bigger venues and PAs you have more control without screaming".

It seems to add to the dynamics anyway...

"Yeah it's not atonal, one dimensional."

What about the way you seem to create tension within your performance. Is there a need for Shayne to get worked up, to react off of external things, whether its Heavenly Bodies not letting Bored Games support them, the Clean accusing you of stealing a microphone, or trying to have the SJFs' match Snapper's performance the night before?

"Well it all boils down to lyrical content, what you wanna sing about. Words do have to mean something. Now I'm more 'mature' I've learnt to comment on things a little differently than when I was in Bored Games and was a punk rocker. I could get heavily abusive then cos that was the rules of the game at that stage.

"But always I believe that you've gotta mean it to get it across. Our band works on x factors, and we mean to get that edge across that you can't define. If a band doesn't mean it you can tell, so I do have to get worked up, but I like it to come from within the songs and out through performance."

Your songs often seem like they're cathartic for you, a release on a very personal level.

"Yeah, it relates back to its having to mean something - I can't write glib lyrics. It can be uncomfortably earnest but that's just the way it is. I'm expressing different experiences, but the base emotions are the same for everybody; there's a universality to it for people to pick up - it's what music's all about."

"I've worried about that cathartic aspect of performance though. Like the way a bad gig leaves me totally bummed out, sometimes for days, and conversely a great gig brings on unbeatable euphoria. Is that a healthy reliance? Any form of art - writing, painting, music - can be a form of total expression. It's been used for exorcism by tons of people. Being able to

express things is important; there's solace to be found in it. Like listening to Berlin - there's something in there that's not 'pseudo-depressing' - I find it inversely up lifting."

Sometimes there seems to be a lot hidden behind a 'wanking depression' cliché. (A criticism sometimes levelled at the Strait-jacket Fits).

"Well I do wanna get worked up, to achieve that intensity that drags people into it. I never wanna be treated as wallpaper".

The SJFs don't give you a choice in performance. It's like the audience is forced into either accepting or rejecting the band onstage totally. It avoids that muso mentality of technical proficiency where you're either admiring a performance or saying 'so what?' I like being dragged into it, even to come out really hating something, I mean at least then you've been properly provoked.

"Well people pick it up if you're not totally committed to it. You can't contrive those situations - people feel it and you know it so it drags the interaction down another notch. Right now I feel like the band is working hard; we're tight and we're listening to each other. It feels totally convincing, and it's gotta be played with authority to be convincing."

But not necessarily played exactly the same way every night.

"Fuck no! Spontaneity, danger, straddling the wire the best music is that which feels like it's gonna fall apart at any moment. That sense of danger - I think that we've still got it even though we've tightened up.

"All that technical proficiency, how fast you can get around the fretboard - early 70's, that's music I loathe above all else. I wanna see music that's fucked up, human. You don't have to worry about what Pink Floyd or Genesis are gonna do - you know they're not gonna frighten you by making a mistake. Their audience look up to them and that seems like alienation.

"We want communication, a totality, and you've got to get it across. It's not really hard, but there's tons of aspects to it. It's not as cold as the term suggests, but you've gotta manipulate them. But we connect."

"Another good thing is that there are

young people coming to see us now. Like there's intelligence in our music for older fans, but especially important is the energy that's there for kids : it's good cos I still remember being a fifteen year-old and people being totally patronising to you about understanding their music. It still happens - those bands with empty, shallow music like the Mockers and the Fan Club who go out to high schools and play because they think that their music's moronic enough for kids to understand."

No-one wants to be talked down to and patronised like that when they're fifteen. That's the worst kind of manipulation.

"Sure, but kids do get off on it. They do like simple pop music, but you needn't take up a patronising attitude to do it.

"'Fifteen', a Bored Games song : *"I may not be a kid and I may not be a man / but I'm not the little fool that you think I am / I'm fifteen I'm not a punching bag to give your ego a boost / I know when someone's lying and when they're telling the truth / I'm fifteen I'm only fifteen and I'm just as good as you and I'm proud / I'm only fifteen ... I don't care and I sing it out loud."* A good song, our second song - y'know, I can remember what it's like!

"I really like the way kids look at the world, a feeling of wonderment and excitement out of the 'mundane'. When you're older you have to do things to your body to get there. I respect that about kids and also how they know when you're bullshitting. You can con adults but not kids; adults are all just superficial manipulators of appearances."

That 'little kids worldview' is like your brother (who is four) saying to me the other day 'what have I got in my pocket? It's round and gets stuck in your throat'. It was a marble, but from his description it sounded like something he'd been torturing his mates with. I mean there's even brilliant 'luurve' connotations there - something that's round and gets stuck in your throat.

"Yeah, like in 'Dialling A Prayer', which is just a whole lotta old song titles strung together, 'big red rubber ball' is such a brilliant image, like crude sexual and always bouncing back, coming back to you y'know. I like that - simple but powerful and ambiguous images. That's a type of writing that I really respect, not just in songs; it's not 'clever', just stark images, but multi-layered."

You seem to go for word-plays a lot. 'Taste Delight' is full of little puns and

and ambiguities.

"Yeah, there's a lot of things I do that I don't realise. I was just reading the Hail lyric sheet before and there's lots of those things, consonance and assonance. It's just the way it comes out; economy and sounds of words are important to me."

Economy's vital. All the way back to Chuck Berry and that. They're concise rather than verbose.

"Yeah, the early rock'n'rollers; Elvis - *'I'm evil / misery is my middle name.'* There's simplicity that cuts to the bone. Now thirty years down the road it's turned into cliché, but still ..."

There's something of that simplicity in my favourite Dunedin songwriters like Peter Gutteridge (Snapper) and Bob Scott of the Bats. The way they accumulate simple images without bothering to tell a 'whole story'.

"Dunedin's got a real cross-section, right across the spectrum. At one end there's Bob writing ... well, Bob-songs, and then there's Graeme Downes, overtly 'poetic' at the other end with Alastair Galbraith.

"I used to feel really self-conscious about my lyrics, thinking that they were no good. But now I can live with them cos I know they are honest."

Making the album was a stab at a different sort of communication, a whole different approach, I guess. What noise did you want to make on Hail?

"We got lost basically and that meant it was never going to work in a 'way we wanted' as it were. The band was not getting on well, we'd just moved to Auckland, and we were spending a lot of time listening to other people's expectations of us.

"People cite production as a fault, and it isn't right, but we abdicated responsibility. In the end we just weren't communicating, especially to Terry Moore, what we wanted. We were to a certain extent, but Terry was shouldered with the responsibility of production - he wanted that though, to produce it, but his vision wasn't the same as ours. We got it wrong as well.

"In the middle of recording there was a live performance at the Gluepot, and we were abysmal. It was a big gig, big crowd, and we

were just not playing together at all. We didn't play like a band that was going to make a great album.

"Having said all that, I like side two. 'Grate' is good, and 'Taste Delight' says 'this is a band to take seriously' I reckon."

Side two seems far more cohesive.

"Do you want a chronological comment? Okay, 'Telling Tales' should've worked; it's not a great song, but it's compact and does have peaks that don't come across in the recording. The lyrics may be a bit overearnest, but were heartfelt when written.

"'Dead Heat' is the biggest disappointment. It was always a song that was gonna record really well, but we changed it in the studio and we changed it for the worse. We are a band with pop sensibilities in that they're songs with melodies and structures, but the noise factor, the edge, is important; it gives it the psychotic edge."

That song doesn't reach out at all.

"Yeah, that's a mess. So's 'Hail' - flat as well, and a mess. All three guitar lines need to be heard to make that song, but you just hear mine all over it, drowning out everything.

"'Only You Knew' was a nice song in that we were trying to do something different, like 'Melt', our new song. It just fell really flat. I hate that as well - all gooey. Live, 'Take From The Years' races along, is unstoppable ..."

It's an important song in your live set for the crowd, like an upbeat respite, really likeable.

"Sure, but we recorded it as an afterthought and it's not that at all. None of us are happy with it and that's side one.

"On side two, 'Grate' I like - it's the only song that was enhanced by a studio, a good version. 'Life's good; it's thrashy, basically all in one chord except for the end. Those songs belong to a different era in a way. We're moving on musically and lyrically.

"Our next recording will be a single, probably 'Melt' and 'Headwind'. The album was a painful and hard experience - I don't think we were playing very well at the time anyway - but we did learn a lot. Things like we thought that to bring out the guitars, you'd have to record three or four guitar tracks, but with our new material, I'd like to think that the guitar lines there anyway so we won't need that sound or volume. It

needs to be a lot more simplistic approach, not getting so uptight. We need to go back to the songs and spontaneity - playing the songs together, live in the studio.

"It takes time to develop empathy and understanding. It improves with trial and error. Maybe you can only improve things when they go wrong in the first place. We've been playing together for two and a half years; the Savoy was our hundredth gig."

It's hard to get places in New Zealand.

"Fucking hard and frustrating. You've gotta watch out for the middle ground, the gap between hardcore fans and mass appeal, cos it doesn't really exist. I don't want any sense of neutrality about the band at all, trying to have a foot in both camps.

"Our lifeline is going to be taking it overseas. Just with the numbers of people, bands can make a living off an indie cult following, which you just can't do here. And it's gonna be totally rejuvenating for us; people aren't gonna come along with preconceived in-depth analysis of the personalities involved in the band. The records will give people some idea, but they'll be hit by us because I think we are a fucking exciting live band. I think we will do well".

What about the Shayne monster personal? Does it overwhelm the band's identity, or even the band as an entity?

"Not within the band, it doesn't. We're all strong personalities, strong-willed, and like Andrew and I disagree and have vastly different views about songwriting but it is a strength because we give each others' songs a different dimension."

"That personality thing though, it's just like Graeme Downes gets - that wasted junkie cliché which is absolutely miles from the truth. But it's even down to the way I sing; that sneer isn't deliberate. People probably think 'arrogant bastard', but I'm not. People think what they think and I don't care though if I come across as incredibly arrogant, because that's rock'n'roll! Sounds dumb, but it's true."

The first record, I reviewed it with words like 'arrogant' and 'swagger', but its important, an attitude that the best of rock 'n'roll has to have.

"Rock'n'roll is such a teenage music, say-

ing 'yeah I know, look at me', not tryna fit in. When you're young, you do say 'the world's fucked, why doesn't it change?'"

Onstage, it always seems like a magnification of you. I guess old people might put rock'n'roll down because live, it has no subtlety, it wants to be obvious.

"You may appear bigger, but it's still you - another side of you that doesn't get an outlet elsewhere. It's an outlet for aggression and energy, but I mean, I consider myself to be a reasonably placid, laidback person ...

"How we look onstage isn't contrived either. There's no posing or feeling that we've gotta project, but it comes naturally. It's part of the totality and conviction : immersing yourself in the song and the performance. When a song works best live, comes across right, I have a mental picture of what it was originally written about before me."

That's kinda strange, cos where does 'So Long, Marianne' fit into that? It's delivered with pretty frightening intensity.

"When I was young, a person I was close to me had a nervous breakdown, and Leonard Cohen was the soundtrack to it, so songs like 'Marianne' and 'Suzanne' had a personal resonance for me. Then years later I heard it, & thought yeah, it would be a good song to cover. The day after that, a relationship I'd been in ended. It was totally relevant, totally right. But I listened to Leonard's version today and it was awful!"

Yours comes with a lot of conviction.

"It is ours, and we play it that way. I chose three of the six verses in the original for our version that were completely relevant. In hindsight, listening to and reading Leonard Cohen, I find pretty tiresome. All that religious guilt trip dripping sixtiesness is pretty pretentious. Still, some of his stuff..

"I was pissed off though, cos Leonard's hip again. 'Marianne' was grabbed out of total obscurity. Only Nick Cave had done 'Avalanche'. I'd like to send Len our single."

Of course, a lot of covers seem pretty trite.

"Yeah, 'The Cross' is like that. Though we'll never do that one again after last night. It was great at the Ori on Saturday, but that's a Prince imitation; it's definitely me singing 'So Long, Marianne'.

"All of this recycling of tried and tested pop hits is so cynical. It's not even fresh

and exciting pop music, and it was condoned by the NZ Music Awards, which were a farce."

We shut up and go into town. Dunedin now has a McDonalds, a dubious distinction which I presume means that we are now part of the civilised world. The food, of course, is awful. But we're only stopping for coffee. The young girl behind the counter suddenly smiles a real smile at Shayne, not a 'would you like a sundae with that coffee' smile, and tells him that it was great at the Savoy last night. Afterwards, she went straight home and put on the new Straitjacket Fits album. Shayne grins. It's a real effect; he believes in getting through to young people, and is gratified to see someone young excited by the SJFs' music. Fifteen again, eh Shayne. A memory and some real hope to take back to Auckland and on to the rest of the world. S' more than just okay; things are looking fine in this here padded cell.