

It's a funny old world...isn't it! Full of contradictions. Like the way some people say one thing and mean another. Or how we think it's uncool to be popular. It's all topsy-turvy really. We're even ashamed of love songs and prefer paeons to pain. I mean we've got it so back to front we don't even appreciate how well off we are. Fancy complaining and whinging when we're sitting in the lap of luxury. We don't even know how good we've got it. Look here's a case in point. Just get a load of this! Right here in this lucky old country of ours the better we do the more we're criticised. What the hell is that all about? Just take a look at silverchair. One minute they're perceived as tall poppies growing up in the harsh glare of the media searchlight and the next they're seen as dedicated artists looking for their own nirvana? But here's the twist. silverchair probably don't realise it but many people in Newcastle are fiercely protective of them. You see, they're on a par with three times world surfing champion Mark Richards, also from Merewether, and the raggedly glorious Knights. They're family. And families can bitch about each other all they want but God forbid if anyone else does. And it seems everybody in Newcastle has an opinion about silverchair, with their own story to tell, good or bad, about the biggest band to ever come out of this town.

There's the hoary old tale that's now part of silverchair's myth-making about the night at Jewelstown Tavern when the guys from Sony were witnessing them in full flight for the first time. The Innocent Criminals, a name the band wasn't sorry to ditch, were banging out the odd Pearl Jam cover along with the tunes that were to make it onto their first album. That gig has been immortalised in Craig Matheson's book *Hi Fi Days*. But others' recollections don't include any bikers, just the Friday night blokes drinking in the other bar and the boys' mums and dads hanging out the back with the agent who kept yelling to Daniel to play *Acid Rain*. Or there's the story of the Jesmond High school-dance in the Binni Shell where the stage was rushed from the very first number by the eager schoolkids starved of live music. The band hung out in the boys' toilets drinking coke and doing the usual high-school things while their bemused dads kept a watchful eye. Or there's the time they did an underage gig at the notorious Piper's Nitespot in Hunter St... and no-one showed!

My favourite story is the time silverchair were doing their first major support at the Workers' Club with a band of some considerable national standing. The road crew decided they had to have dinner and were going to leave this unimportant young band to their own devices even though management had assured silverchair they would be looked after. A 'set and forget' as far as the crew was concerned. So the band called in their own soundguy at the last minute but even then he wasn't allowed to touch the desk until the band had walked out on stage to perform. When he pulled the covers off the mixer as the band was playing its first notes he was abused for being over anxious. And where was the bottom-end bass sound that miraculously appeared after the main act came on? A typical horror 'support' story no doubt but I guess in the end though what goes around comes around.

After those early days in the band's career the personal stories got less so, except for the occasional sightings. I mean you could read plenty about silverchair in the press or see them on television but essentially, they were gone. Headed on the road to fame and eventual fortune. They'd already started to set the world alight with a video that won the SBS Nomad competition. They were then duly pushed by JJJ. *Tomorrow* saturated the J's airwaves and on its eventual commercial release caused a sensation. They headed into the studio with Kevin Shirley and layed down the tracks for *Frogstomp*, the album which was to carry them across the all important American market and allowed them to become the latest in a line of big Australian musical exports. They wound up riding limousines in cities with legendary rock names like New York, Houston and Chicago, played on the awning at the MTV Awards, watched backstage as Madonna and the Red Hot Chili Peppers did their respective things and they saw themselves as lucky to be playing at the same

festivals as their own idols. I mean how often do you get to meet Ozzy Osbourne? Most of all though, silverchair tried to keep their heads down as they rode the tiger of fame. But try as they might they couldn't be low-key.

In 1995 they won a string of accolades including Best Debut Single, Highest Selling Australian Single for their smash-hit *Tomorrow* and were lauded as Best Australian New Talent. In 1996 they were honoured again by ARIA with an outstanding achievement award. This year MTV gave them the Best Video award and ARIA named them Artist of the Year. They've got a song on *The Spawn* film soundtrack and the ABC has even devoted prime television time to them with a documentary on their incredible international success. Now they've released their second album *Freak Show* and after promoting it overseas are embarking on their first fully fledged Australian national tour.

Along with Daniel Johns and Ben Gillies, Chris Joannou, the quiet bass player from silverchair, was home for a bit of well earned rest and relaxation, when we caught up with him. Along with completing his HSC he's also been hanging out and checking the scene he left behind, taking the opportunity to catch a few local bands. "Actually," Chris ventures with the enthusiasm of a perpetual music fan, "a lot of my friends are into going to see that band Spoon, so I've been tagging along with them quite a bit. They're great. Great to go out and have a bit of a jump around to."

With his schooldays over though Chris will no doubt add a few stories of his own to the 'chairs road exploits, which are documented for all to see on their own massive website.

"Now that we're all eighteen it's the first time we've done a full on national tour of Australia. We all think it's pretty exciting," he states enthusiastically, keen to get on with it. "All we've been doing all year is basically overseas and probably one or two shows in Australia and that was it. We had the idea of leaving the national tour to the end for Australia so we could have a bit of fun finishing up on the *Freak Show* touring. They're still all ages gigs so that everyone can come to the gig really. You see, especially in America, all our shows are all ages as well because the legal age there is twenty-one and that gets a bit ridiculous. I mean a nineteen year old not being able to get in...so we still just make them all-ages."

"Which is a neat piece of planning as it allows all those fans who have fuelled silverchair's meteoric rise to get along to the shows. The canny management partnership of John Watson and John O'Donnell, a former Rolling Stone journalist, appreciates that it's this all-ages fan base that buys silverchair's albums.

"It's been going quite well actually," ventures Chris,



poor freaks

By Johnnie Clott

when the new album is mentioned. "Better than what we thought. We thought it might have a bit of a dive on what *Frogstomp* was. We thought that people might think that it had to be along the lines of *Frogstomp* but it's a little bit different. The sound is more us on it. *Frogstomp* was a lot more live sounding in the fact that it was done in thirteen days and we basically played all the songs together all at once and just did overdubs. With *Freak Show* we took a lot more time and experimented a bit. We had a bit more time to 'shed on it.'

With a best selling album behind them not only have they been able to devote more time to their music but they've also been able to afford the services of the best ears in the land for their latest effort. The legendary Bob Ludwig mastered it and the equally legendary Andy Wallace was hired to mix it. Wallace lists among his credits Metallica, Jeff Buckley, Sepultura, Faith No More, The Rollins Band and, one of silverchair's favourite bands, Helmet.

"It was a bit of a buzz," admits Chris "because we'd always had it in mind especially to work with Andy Wallace in the end, and to actually do it and hear his sounds he was getting was great. Nick Launay, who produced it, was actually totally not on purpose. We were actually going to use Kevin Shirley again. He was unavailable and someone said 'what about Nick Launay'. You know we had a few talks with him and stuff like that and saw what was the go. He had some

where they mixed western string instruments with classical Indian ones.

"That's the first time that anyone's told me that I've never even heard the song I don't think," Chris says, oblivious to the history represented in the track. Nonetheless the diversity represented on *Freak Show* leaves silverchair in the enviable position of having their future musical direction unencumbered. They could wind back the hard rock thing, head into a distinctively unique feel with their next album or conversely head off even further into Korn and Helmet territory. But thoughts of the third album are far from Chris's mind.

"We were hoping after this Australian tour to just have a bit of time off, relax for a few months and then get stuck into it fresh again, instead of going straight into it after touring. So it's kind of hard to say. We could get in there and kind of start playing and find that we want to change it around a bit. You can hear a definite difference between *Frogstomp* and *Freak Show* and just in the material aspect of the music, I think as time goes on, getting older you, yeah, you do change with time. With anything really."

And the changes keep happening. The band has not only started to explore different areas and change musically but lyrically they're slowly starting to grasp the fundamentals of honest self expression. A scary thing for any artist, let alone for young blokes whose main desire is to fit in,

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great ideas and we got on really well. We did a bit of preproduction with him and things were going great and we got in there and it was even better."

With time to try new things silverchair have taken a few radical departures from the raging live sound of their first album. They have come up with songs like *Cemetery*. Ironically songwriter Daniel Johns was initially reluctant to submit it for the band's consideration. The version of *Cemetery* that wound up on the album employs a string section that is reminiscent of arrangers like Gus Dudgeon. It also carries strong echoes of Midnight Oils' tune *Outside World* off the Oils 10,9,8... album. Not surprising considering that Launay produced that groundbreaking Oils' album. Jim Moginie from the Oils was also on hand to play Mellotron on *Cemetery*.

"Well, we'd had the ideas of putting strings on and Nick was quite positive towards it and he started talking about all these ideas. We were like 'this is great' but if he said something we didn't like we were straight into saying 'no, we don't like that' and he was like 'cool, that's no worries'. He was very easy to work with and it was a very good thing to do."

For *Roses*, Ben Gillies' love of John Bonham and his tour-de-force, *When the Levee Breaks*, gets a respectful nod. *Petrol* and *Chlorine* however sees the band leaving their heavy rock roots and provides a fascinating excursion into world-music that has them teaming up with a similar line-up used by The Beatles on *Within You Without You*,

not stick their heads up and have them punched in by a country hell bent on lopping every tail poppy it sees.

And therein lies the main story of silverchair and their latest album for it reveals familiar tales of the age old problem of growing up, a tradition at the heart of all rock music. The clue to appreciating this *Freak Show*, and the characters in the songs, is to realise that when someone tells you that they love being hated or c'mon abuse me more I like it or stop sucking the blood right out of me it's as plain as the nose on your face that they're crying out for love and approval. All of the characters on the album, whether they realise it or not, are embroiled in a journey to adulthood that is awash with radically unfamiliar and aggressive feelings, swinging like pendulums all day long, one minute being calm and at peace and the next feeling like full grown and dangerous killing machines. Unfortunately in this society no-one lets characters like that know how to cope with those feelings. One of the legitimate ways is to write about it and act it out in music like silverchair does and we love them for it. You see their main gig as songwriters is to express those unexpressible feelings we all have. From rage through to bewilderment. And in the end.....I mean,....well, it's a funny-old world.....isn't it!

silverchair are on their Freakshow tour now. Freakshow is out now thru Sony.