

FEATURE REVIEW

Matthew Bannister (1999) *Positively George Street: A Personal History of Sneaky Feelings and the Dunedin Sound*, Auckland: Reed

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Having been a fan of Sneaky Feelings since first experiencing them live during the mid-1980s, it was with much interest that I approached Matthew Bannister's 'personal history' of the band. As an original member of Sneaky Feelings, one of the first groups recorded by Flying Nun, the record label responsible for popularising the 'Dunedin Sound', the author has a wealth of 'insider' knowledge to share. Bannister makes it clear, however, that Sneaky Feelings never adhered to the dominant Dunedin/Flying Nun aesthetic defined in relation to the reliance on 'jangly guitars' that "developed around the resolutely New Zealand-based groups and musicians who coincided with the formation of Flying Nun in 1981" (Mitchell, 1994: 38).

The "jangling guitars and pleasant melodic lines" (ibid: 39) characteristic of many Dunedin bands recording in the 1980s reflected exposure to the music of American guitar bands of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Velvet Underground, Television and the Byrds. Graham Downes, founder member of Dunedin group The Verlaines, argues that, in musicological terms, the 'Dunedin jangle', as exemplified by the music of The Clean, stems from "the exploitation of modal tensions and long range resolutions" (Downes, 1992: 23). Bannister acknowledges the influence of US bands and the specific musical traits of the 'Dunedin Sound' in a short section titled 'Being a short diversion on the origins of drone or jangle'(71-72). He argues that within Dunedin bands there was a "tendency to sustain or repeat a note or notes, while changing the chords underneath" (71). When employed on electric guitars, this 'drone' becomes a jangle (71). In conjunction with the use of reverberation, the 'jangle' filled out the sound of bands that only had one guitar and "made the music sound seamless" (71).

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Given their reliance on two guitarists (Bannister and David Pine), and that a "more country-rock oriented influence is predominant in their music" (Mitchell, 1994: 39), it is not surprising that Bannister denies Sneaky Feelings' obedience to the predominant Dunedin aesthetic. This 'outsider' status is established on the first page of the book, where Bannister recounts the omission of Sneaky Feelings from the Flying Nun ten-year retrospective album *Getting Older* (1991):

We weren't on it. Sneaky Feelings, who'd made more albums than any Nun band except the Verlaines, and was one of the supposed founders of the Dunedin Sound. The best fucking band on the label, in our humble opinion, had just been officially Rogered (7).

This introductory anecdote, where Bannister notes he "never felt at home" (8) in the Flying Nun office, sets the tone for the remainder of the book, which maintains a tone of sometimes embarrassing honesty (see, for example, the recounting of a 'sexual misadventure' while on tour in Europe and the consequences for a long-term relationship in New Zealand [172-173]) mixed with varying levels of sly and often self-deprecating humour.

Rather than providing a chronological history of Sneaky Feelings, with details on performances and recording sessions, Bannister provides a more reflective account of life in the only Dunedin band that "wanted mainstream success" (108). As such, *Positively George Street* is accurately subtitled as a 'personal history of Sneaky Feelings'. Recollections about recording sessions and tours are balanced with reflections on personal relationships, tensions within the group, and the position of Sneaky Feelings as part of Flying Nun/the Dunedin scene. For example, Bannister's account of a 1988 tour of Europe mentions problems with their record label ("[w]e'd left the [album] artwork with Flying Nun, who had 'promised' to send it over soon . . . it arrived eight weeks later" [178]); his relationship with his partner in New Zealand ("I poured out my misery in letters to Margaret" [179]); notable gigs (such as in Hungary, where the "venue was a cellar — TV monitors showed Pink Floyd's *The Wall* — the ultimate in Western decadence" [182]); and the state of the group ("[r]elations within the band were at an all-time low" [183]).

Positively George Street also lives up to its second billing as a personal history of the Dunedin Sound. As such, references to Dunedin bands appear as part of the narrative of events involving Sneaky Feelings. In a chapter that revolves around the recording of Sneaky Feelings' 1984 album *Send You*, Bannister reflects on the evolution, output, and abilities of such Dunedin bands as The Great Unwashed, The Bats, The Chills and The Verlaines (82-100). The subjectivity of such reflections is highlighted by Bannister's argument that the "Dunedin Sound, or more broadly, the Flying Nun aesthetic, was constructed mainly outside of the musicians who were practicing it" (101). Bannister argues that Dunedin record shop owner Roy Colbert was "the main propagator" of this aesthetic, wherein "Flying Nun was invested with the romantic aura of a select band, with the need to keep the faith, a grass-roots movement spread by word of mouth" (ibid). The 'grass-

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roots' nature of the Dunedin music scene was linked with the isolation of the city. Downes (1992: 21) notes that "the isolation of New Zealand (the even greater isolation of Dunedin)" helps explain the unique approach of Flying Nun artists. This spatial isolation is understood as underpinning cultural isolation, with distance shielding Dunedin musicians from the influence of 'mainstream' musical styles and trends. This understanding of culture, geography and the 'Dunedin sound' was identified and promoted in articles about Dunedin music and interviews with Flying Nun artists (see Gow, 1992; McLeay, 1994; and Scatena, 1993). Indeed, some Dunedin musicians proclaimed the artistic and cultural uniqueness of their local music scene with such voracity that they became part of the 'myth' of the Dunedin sound itself.

Perhaps the most vocal promoter of the 'myth' of the 'Dunedin sound' is Chris Knox, a musician Bannister argues was "probably the most important contributor to the [Flying] Nun cult of shambling amateurism" (102). The extent of Bannister's feelings about Knox are evident in a chapter titled 'Sour Grapes', which is largely devoted to the influence of Knox on Dunedin musicians and the output of Flying Nun:

Chris Knox, prophet, calls you to reject worldly blandishments, and follow him to salvation . . . In order to be saved, it is necessary to give up idols (103).

According to Bannister, while Knox, and the majority of other Dunedin bands, believed music to be something that is played and not talked about, Sneaky Feelings were a band that valued analysis over action:

Sneaky Feelings, on the other hand, liked to talk about it. We were a bunch of wooses, wimps, tossers, MOR bourgeois-buggering pop-picking schlock-sucking wet-as-wankers. We liked pop music, damn it. We were intellectuals. Nerds (105).

The final chapters of the book focus on the recording of *Hard Love Stories* (1988), Sneaky Feelings' last album: "[s]omehow we managed to make another album ... it was our last" (174). A subsequent tour of Europe revealed that "[n]o one was under any illusions that the second European tour was anything more than a holiday. Except me" (177). Bannister's account of the eventual demise of Sneaky Feelings encapsulates the overall tone of the book — references to a wider musical context, reflections on intra-band relations, commentary on Flying Nun, and a picture of life in a New Zealand band in the 1980s:

It wasn't a very Beatles ending. There was no messy divorce. No one sued anyone. David [Pine, singer-songwriter with Sneaky Feelings] and I didn't exchange put-downs on vinyl. Our record company didn't drop us, but then they had never really taken us on in the first place. It was more like the Transit van on the road between Dunedin and Timaru, coasting to a standstill in the silent landscape (190).

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Readers looking for a more objective history of Sneaky Feelings and the 'Dunedin Sound' would be best to look elsewhere (see Dix, 1988; Mitchell, 1994). For those interested in a 'personal history' of one of Dunedin's most enterprising groups, and of their musical peers in one of New Zealand's most important 'musical scenes', then I wholeheartedly recommend this engaging recollection.

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