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The Semi-Autonomous Rock Music of The Stones

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Abstract: The Flying Nun record the *Dunedin Double* (1982) is credited with having identified Dunedin as a place where independent, garage style rock and roll was thriving in the early 1980s. Of the four acts on the double album, The Stones would have the shortest life as a band. Apart from their place on the *Dunedin Double*, The Stones would only release one 12" EP, *Another Disc Another Dollar*. This essay looks at the place of this EP in both Dunedin's history of independent rock and its place in the wider history of rock too. The Stones were at first glance not a serious band, but by their own account, set out to do "everything the wrong way," beginning with their name, that is a shortened but synonymous version of the Rolling Stones. However, the parody that they were making also achieves the very thing they set out to do badly, which is to make garage rock. Their mimicry of rock also produced great rock music, their nonchalance achieving that quality of authentic expression that defines the rock attitude itself.

"We are the greatest rock + roll band on earth, and why not?"²

It is something of a truism that independently produced and released rock music will sound independent, that its sonic experience will convey its difference from music released on big corporate labels. It constitutes, in this sense, an alternative truth. The rise of independent labels in the late 1970s and 1980s to compete with mainstream rock music is a much trodden history. The New Zealand label Flying Nun has been exemplary of this history, celebrated for its releases by The Clean, The Chills, The Bats, Headless Chickens, Look Blue Go Purple, Straitjacket Fits and others. While Flying Nun released many different kinds of music, they became known for a Dunedin Sound, characterised by garage style, jangly pop music.³ The legacy of this idea has been so powerful that even the most recent writing on Flying Nun still grapples with its legacy.⁴ Of course, the idea of an alternative sound distinct from the commercial music that Flying Nun competed against is a difficult one to sustain. Music released on corporate labels shared with Flying Nun arrangements of rock instrumentation, song-writing formats and a striving for authenticity.⁵ Independent music reproduces the corporate rock formula as much as asserts its difference from it. In Flying Nun's case this difference lay in a punk sensibility around its releases, as they collaged or hand-drew album covers, made recordings in home studios and distributed music with personalised notes and drawings in mail order packages.⁶ Such strategies, however, remained indebted to models of rock dominated by commercial music, and to models of performance determined by stadium rock of the 1970s. It is with such a model in mind that the music of Flying Nun and other independently

released music presents something of a paradox in its aspirations to make good rock music, while also demonstrating one's independence from its commercialism. The paradox is nowhere more visible than in the music of Flying Nun band The Stones. This band were not the English band Rolling Stones, but Dunedin's The Stones, named not only to parody the more famous English group, but also, as this essay argues, to become them.

Flying Nun produced and released The Stones' only two records.⁷ A twelve inch called *Another Disc Another Dollar* (1983) was preceded by a place on the *Dunedin Double* (1982) alongside three other acts. The *Dunedin Double* was the record that established Flying Nun's identity as synonymous with a Dunedin Sound, and Dunedin as a centre for alternative rock music.⁸ Its collaged album cover was influenced by the anti-commercialism of early UK punk releases, showing off the Flying Nun label's do-it-yourself ethos. Each of the bands on the *Dunedin Double* were able to design a sleeve of the record, and The Stones collaged photographs of themselves in a parody of The Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main St* (1972) centrefold.⁹ The parody here lies in the way that these photographs foreground the tropes of the band photograph, as they replace the famous faces of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards with three skinny youths in suburban New Zealand.¹⁰

Central to the listening experience here is the way that we are conscious of not listening to the Rolling Stones while listening to The Stones. The joke is on us, as The Stones recreate the stadium rock formula while not being stadium rock. As with much Dunedin music of this time, The Stones rely on simple riffs and beats. The style has been described as a kind of "minimalism" by The Clean's Hamish Kilgour and Shayne Carter of The Straitjacket Fits, a minimalism made necessary by the lack of studios to record in.¹¹ The exaggeration and repetition of simple riffs in the songs of The Stones combine with humorous, cynical lyrics to create the effect of a tribute band without their songs actually being covers. It may be that instead of simulating The Rolling Stones, The Stones simulate the way in which The Rolling Stones have become a cultural phenomenon, a band so ubiquitous that they personify rock itself. As a tribute band, The Stones set out to "produce a perfect simulacrum of the tributed act."¹² Yet in producing original songs, they are not merely a tribute, but enact the sincerity by which rock musicians individuate themselves. Confusing parody with sincerity, theirs is an uncertain simulation. The originality and quality of their riffs belies the parody that they at first appear to be. The band themselves put a cool distance from anything so intentional as this, however, front-man Jeff Batts claiming that the band made a virtue of doing "everything the wrong way."¹³ This included naming themselves after The Rolling Stones, in bragging about how great they are at gigs, and being demonstrably uncommitted to the future of the band.¹⁴ Yet it was precisely through such acts of negation that they achieved the sensibility of rock itself, their authenticity lying in their distance from their own rock act.

The Stones simulate both autonomy and dependence on rock's mainstream as they use both riffs and lyrics to create an ambivalent relationship with the music they are making. The concept of semi-autonomy describes this kind of duplicitous relationship, flourishing as both an imitation *and* negation of rock music that is largely defined by mainstream releases.¹⁵ They were not the only act from this period of New Zealand's rock history to employ humour to achieve this duplicity, ambivalence and ultimately semi-autonomy. The interest in humour is shared by a

number of independent New Zealand acts of the 1980s, including The Clean, The Gordons, Tall Dwarfs and Chris Knox, all of whom were released on Flying Nun. Humour was not, of course, the only strategy to distance local acts from the mainstream industry. Singer-songwriter Alastair Galbraith simply stopped songs part way through their recordings on albums like *Talisman* (1995), while The Dead C, whose first release was on Flying Nun, still work with improvisation and what its guitarist Bruce Russell calls “mis-competence” in an attempt to negate their own status as rock musicians.¹⁶ While humour is The Stones’ strategy in the *Dunedin Double*, in *Another Disc Another Dollar* this humour gives way to cynicism and a degree of anger, with lyrics like, “no-one’s listening to you” and “yak yak yaking,” shifting from one mode of negation to another.

To establish the historical ground for the emergence of The Stones as part of a movement of innovative musicians and independent labels from the South Island of New Zealand, it is worth turning briefly to the situation there in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dunedin, where The Stones formed, was dominated at this time not by original music, but by cover bands. There were no opportunities for original musicians from the South Island to release music within the New Zealand record industry, nor to have a song played on the radio. Local bands played covers of 1970s rock bands. This does not mean, however, that there was not an interest in music in Dunedin. The local paper *The Star* featured a whole page of text on music and hi-fi equipment every week, alongside more moralistic columns on the value of family, work, Christianity, drug abuse, the impact of Space Invaders and the value of employment. The author of the music and hi-fi page was Roy Colbert, who wrote long expositions on amplifiers, receivers, stereo recording, oxide quality on cassette tape, electrostatic speakers, headphones and, just before these columns disappearance in mid-1981, the relationship of sound to the unified earth idea of Gaia. Colbert was a prolific contributor to the paper, also writing a separate music review column under various *nom de plumes* that were often the names of his friends and relatives. Colbert was not only a writer. He also played a key role in influencing the next generation of musicians through his own Dunedin record store, called Records Records Records. After reading overseas music magazines, he imported releases from the U.K. and U.S.A. Collectors, including school-age listeners, gathered at Records Records Records through the 1980s to hear and buy overseas imports, as well as to meet other music enthusiasts. Colbert named his shop after Records Records in Los Angeles, where U.S. rock critics bought their music, and created his own local version of it with a view to its place in an international network of collecting and consumption.¹⁷

The isolation of Dunedin, not only from the major overseas centres, but from New Zealand’s own cultural centres of Auckland and Wellington, may well have contributed to keeping Colbert in business. Musical conservatism, isolation, and Colbert’s initiatives to promote original music, combined to influence Dunedin’s young musicians. Through Records Records Records, teenagers were introduced to garage bands and psychedelic rock from the late 1960s, music that Colbert liked.¹⁸ Across New Zealand the 1960s also represented a heyday for local, original music, with Christchurch acts such as Max Merritt and the Meteors and Ray Columbus and the Invaders achieving national fame.¹⁹ Above all it was the Velvet Underground, and Lou Reed himself, who played a central influence. This, not only by modelling a minimal musical style, but by turning the aggressive, up-front posturing of rock into a cool, ambiguous affair.²⁰ The Velvet Underground all but inaugurated the art rock

band, that imagines music better than its members can play. Instead, the art rock band makes albums and plays gigs that are as conceptually interesting as they are musically driven. The Velvets released melodic pop, droning noise and everything in between. Managed by the artist Andy Warhol, they were as much a concept as a band, and offered a window to young people interested in ideas as much as music. The Velvets also made it sound easy, anticipating punk and post-punk. Reed's song "Heroin" (1967) was simply made up of the chords D and G, sped up and slowed down to create an ecstatic tangle of guitar. Reed's influence was palpable among local, independently minded musicians in the South Island of New Zealand of the 1980s.²¹

The radicalism of the 1960s were also being relived in the 1980s as a wave of political protest swept New Zealand over an Apartheid era rugby tour by a white South African team. In 1981, New Zealand society became divided into those who were *for* the tour (who wanted to separate sport from politics), and those who were against it (who succeeded in stopping the match).²² Colbert recalls that such issues were not discussed among musicians in Dunedin at the time, but the national situation does illuminate something of the context within which local musicians found themselves forging new paths, embracing new ideas that were not part of the program of mainstream society.²³ Bruce Russell explains:

Young people bought a lot of records in 1981. And to otherwise entertain themselves they drank, they smoked pot, and they went to the pub to see rock bands. And then they went out in the streets to smash the state. So while before 1981 they were criminalised mainly over drugs, suddenly thousands of them were also criminals because of politics. There was a lot of "us and them" going on. Older people, rural people, and cops tended to be "them." They didn't get into underground music. So even though the music wasn't necessarily political in terms of lyrics, it tended to be "oppositional" because it was "for us"—and we were a sub-culture.²⁴

In this sense Colbert, with Records Records Records, may have harnessed a more general dissatisfaction with the ways things were. His semi-autonomy from the mainstream, the way in which his shop functioned to give rise to a network of musical enthusiasts, determined the fate of what came to become known as the Dunedin Sound. Colbert's own theory about Dunedin's musical success is that it emerged by chance, as four or five talented musicians came of age in the city at the same time.²⁵ Colbert, who witnessed the beginnings of the Dunedin bands who would become internationally famous, witnessed these individuals pushing each other to greater heights of song-writing. As they shared rehearsal studios and played together, Colbert compares the Dunedin Sound musicians to past music scenes in Liverpool in the U.K. (home of The Beatles and Gerry and the Pacemakers) and Athens in the U.S. (home of the B52s and R.E.M.).

From these musicians a series of bands would achieve success on the Flying Nun label, run by Roger Shepherd in Christchurch to the near north. For Shepherd the model was not late 1960s music, but the new independent labels being created in London in the late 1970s. In January 1977, The Buzzcocks released the *Spiral Scratch* seven inch single, kicking off a do-it-yourself singles movement in the U.K.²⁶ The band Scritti Politti followed in 1978, publishing a guide to pressing your own records. Flying Nun was indebted to the UK singles revolution, particularly to the examples of Factory Records and Rough Trade, independent record stores that turned into labels and distribution agents. In Auckland, Propeller Records and Ripper Records also

began releasing punk and post-punk in 1980, and Flying Nun's founder, Roger Shepherd sold their own releases alongside those from the U.K. in the Christchurch record shop he managed.

Of the four artists on the *Dunedin Double*, The Stones were by far the most garage in sound. They were reportedly only on the record to "fill out the last side," yet their contribution to the record stands as one the most distinctive contributions to Dunedin music of the time.²⁷ At first glance, with a name that is identical to the shortened version of perhaps the most famous rock band alive, The Stones could be mistaken for a joke band, but the joke would have resonance in Dunedin, a city that the Rolling Stones called "the arsehole of the world," after playing there in 1965.²⁸ The Stones' tracks on the *Dunedin Double* can be read, like the name of the band, as a blunt parody of the rock high life of The Rolling Stones, a parody from below. The double edge of any good parody is that it must be proficient at mimicking the target. As a forgery it must be as effective as its original. The Stones play rock just as well as anybody else, in fact better than most, while appearing to parody its myths and messages. It is possible to track this shift from playing great rock music to parody in listening to their tracks unfold on the *Dunedin Double*. For its first three tracks, "Down and Around," "See Red" and "Something New," it is possible to think of The Stones as typical rock musicians. "Down and Around" features the sound of an open piano being strummed like a guitar, and over some fantastic, transcendent garage guitar playing. Jeff Batts sings:

Over and over,
We travel together,
Why is it this way and why is it that way?

I can't see the purpose you've dulled all my senses,
You give me no reason for all this attention,
Oh its true that you're not for,
And I know and you know that it's not for.

Down down I'm going down down,
You turn me round around,
Anyway I've gotta live, live to death.

While it is possible to listen to these lyrics in conventional rock terms, the final track on the *Dunedin Double* insists that it not be taken seriously, and invites the listener to think again about its earlier tracks. This final song, "Surf's Up," overlays the echoing and twanging of surf rock guitar with hysterical vocals that make little sense. It may be that Batts is mimicking Mark E. Smith who toured New Zealand with The Fall in 1982, the year this recording was made. The very end of the track shifts to a series of bitter, sniping phrases that mimic the sayings of surf culture: "you surf, you bleach your hair," "surf's up," "radical man," and "tall tubes."

While the target of the parody is all too clear, the track is also a kind of tribute to The Clean, whose music drew upon the style of surf music. The Stones' "One in Nine" is indebted to The Clean's single *Getting Older* (1982), while "Gunner Ho" (on *Another Disc Another Dollar*) simulates The Clean's easy going vocals and riffs, its title referencing The Clean's "Tally Ho!" on the *Tally Ho!/Platypus* single (1981).²⁹ The appropriations are not serious, as "Gunner Ho" is a version of the nursery rhyme Three Blind Mice. The Stones testified to The Clean's influence on them when they

said, in a typical humorous aside, that they wanted The Clean to “support them,” while elsewhere they said they simply wanted to be them.³⁰ At the time, The Clean were at the height of their creativity and success, achieving a high place on the New Zealand music charts.

The uncertainties that The Stones perform, as they make both quality garage-style rock, and express a targeted cynicism about rock-and-roll, is one that embodies the problem of making rock in an era in which the form is no longer new. Ultimately, The Stones were not a parody of The Rolling Stones, but of themselves, and the attraction to, and repulsion from, rock and all it represents. From Dunedin this parody made sense, as The Stones played out their own outsider status, their own place in the arsehole of the world. While Flying Nun took this isolation seriously by setting out to export New Zealand rock to the USA and elsewhere, The Stones simply set out to parody their own peripheral situation. Later Dunedin bands echoed The Stones in setting out to perform this sense of being on the outside negatively. Russell speaks of the inability of the Dead C to play music, while he also plays music in this internationally acclaimed band. Here Russell echoes The Stones’ own lines about “defeating expectations of what bands do and don’t do,” but going ahead and doing it anyway.³¹ Here too, in a culture of celebrated, stadium rock bands, old rock truths about authenticity become confused, and resurface in unexpected ways.

Endnotes

All URLs accessed Jan-March 2018.

¹ I would like to acknowledge everyone I spoke to while I was in Christchurch and Dunedin in 2015, especially Roy Colbert, who died in 2017, but whose legacy remains everywhere in the history of independent music in New Zealand. Thanks too to Shelley Brunt and Jonathan W. Marshall for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Text from The Stones gig poster, year unknown, <https://www.audioculture.co.nz/people/the-stones>.

³ Roy Colbert, “What’s In A Name?” in Ian Chapman, ed., *The Dunedin Sound* (Auckland: Bateman, 2016), p. 53; David Eggleton, “The Bats: Hearing Secret Harmonies,” *Music in New Zealand*, 26 (1994): 45; Craig Robertson, “*It’s OK, it’s all right, oh yeah*,” honours thesis (Dunedin: University of Otago, 1991), p. 140; The Clean, *Boodle Booodle Booodle*, vinyl record (Christchurch: Flying Nun, 1981), FN003.

⁴ Colbert, “What’s In A Name?” pp. 52-55; Graeme Downes, “Foreword,” in Chapman, ed., pp. 9–11; Amanda Mills, “The Sound of Honesty,” in Chapman, ed., pp. 70–75; Oli Wilson and Michael Holland, “The ‘Dunedin Sound’ Now,” in Shelley Brunt and Geoff Stahl, eds, *Made in Australia and Aotearoa / New Zealand* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 69–80; Roger Shepherd, *In Love with These Times* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 2016).

⁵ On authenticity in rock music, see Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 62–72.

⁶ See Shepherd, *passim*.

⁷ Schmidt.

⁸ Various artists, *Dunedin Double*, vinyl record (Christchurch: Flying Nun, 1982), DUN 1; Tony Mitchell, “Flat City Sounds: A Cartography of the Christchurch Music Scene,” *Popular Music and Society*, 21.3 (1997): 96; Russell Brown, “Origins: The *Dunedin Double* EP,” in various, *Audio Culture* (Wellington: Audio Culture), <https://www.audioculture.co.nz/scenes/dunedin-double>.

⁹ The Rolling Stones, *Exile on Main St*, vinyl record (Rolling Stones Records, 1972), COC69100.

¹⁰ For this definition of parody in the art of the 1980s see Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

¹¹ The term “minimalism” is used by both The Clean’s Hamish Kilgour and Shayne Carter of Straitjacket Fits. See Hamish Kilgour, “Extended Play: The Clean—Hamish Kilgour,” interview (17 May 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NEbKYbDMqA>; Shayne Carter, “Dunedin Musician Returns to Old Stomping Ground,” interview (25 May 2016), *Channel 39*, reproduced on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEb0_9uCK1s.

¹² Andy Bennett, “Even Better Than the Real Thing?” in Shane Homan, ed., *Access All Areas* (New York: Open University, 2006), p. 19.

¹³ Schmidt.

¹⁴ Schmidt.

¹⁵ Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in Althusser, *For Marx* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1969), pp. 89–128. For a Marxist analysis of Dunedin music, see also Darren Jorgensen, "Improvised Rock and Independent Labels: The Dead C, Dunedin and the 1990s," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 28.3 (September 2016): 315–333.

¹⁶ Bruce Russell, "What True Project Has Been Lost?" oral presentation (Melbourne: Liquid Architecture Festival, 21 May 2017); Alastair Galbraith, *Talisman*, CD (Dunedin: Next Best Way, 1995), NB Way #001.

¹⁷ Roy Colbert in discussion with the author, January 2015.

¹⁸ Colbert.

¹⁹ On Christchurch pop see Mitchell, p. 88.

²⁰ Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 25–56.

²¹ Bannister, pp. 44–45.

²² See Trevor Lawson Richards, *Dancing on our Bones* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1999), pp. 186–227.

²³ Roy Colbert in discussion with the author, January 2015.

²⁴ Bruce Russell, "'1981': Godzone's Freaked-Out Year Zero," *Landfall*, 219 (2009): 98–106.

²⁵ Roy Colbert in discussion with the author, January 2015.

²⁶ The Buzzcocks, *Spiral Scratch*, vinyl record (Manchester: New Hormones, 1977), ORG-1; Scritti Politti, *Skank Bloc Bologna*, vinyl record (UK: St Pancras Records, 1978), SCRIT 1.

²⁷ Chris Heazlewood, "Thru the Past Darkly," *Alley Oop*, 5 (c1988): n.p., collection of the Hocken Library, Dunedin.

²⁸ Mick Jagger and Keith Richards are both reported to have said this about Invercargill, a city to the south of Dunedin, but The Rolling Stones never played there, so the slur was most likely meant to be against Dunedin itself, where they did play in 1965. See anon., "Rolling Stones: From Depressing Black Holes ... to Arsehole of the World," *New Zealand Herald* (21 Nov 2014), https://www.nzherald.co.nz/music/news/article.cfm?c_id=264andobjectid=11362431.

²⁹ Schmidt; The Clean, *Tally-Ho/Platypus*, vinyl record (Christchurch: Flying Nun, 1981), FN002, and *Getting Older*, vinyl record (Christchurch: Flying Nun, 1982), LAST 1.

³⁰ Schmidt.

³¹ Alan Holt, "The Pied Pipers of Noise," *Real Groove*, 153 (2006): 50.