



Interview with Helen Johnstone and Yuri Frusin by Nick Cain, published in Opprobrium #1, 1995.

Helen and Yuri, you were playing music a long time before The Garbage and The Flowers, right?

Yuri Yes, when I was about 16 or 16 I met Helen and we both idolised the idea of being in a band, we had a mystique about the Dunedin music scene. This was in Wellington in 1985. So we started pretending, [laughs] but it never really worked. We did recordings on tape decks, we were playing a rock style. Helen was very good at playing viola and I started playing guitar. I'd only just learnt how to tune it. We played very simple styles. This went on for about four or five years. Not much came out of it, we have lots of cassette tapes, most of which aren't very good. I played guitar and Helen played viola and sometimes drums.

Helen I bought a guitar but I didn't play it much.

Yuri I just got thrilled by doing anything on the guitar, because I didn't think I could play it very well, so I found out that I could pick notes or pick little arpeggios, it meant quite a lot to me.

Helen We spent a long time on arpeggios.

Yuri Or learning simple country and western chord progression. We flirted with a number of styles on a very basic, primitive level.

When did you get the idea to form Garbage and The Flowers?

Yuri It was a result of Helen being away in Auckland and me meeting Paul [Yates, now known as Paul Ling], I met him in 1989. He was working in a restaurant in Wellington where a friend of mine worked. We recorded a song with a friend of ours and Paul played on it.

Was this The Velvet Underground Fan Club?

Yuri [laughs] He liked them, but not as much as we did. He was more into Faust and Stooges. The song turned out alright, it got good when Paul started playing a fast rhythm.

He put a lot of energy into the songs, he did this noisy solo.

When did you come back down from Auckland, Helen?

Helen October 1990.

Yuri From there, we had a jam with Paul and a couple of other people. Helen was really keen and decided she wanted to form a band. I was very unhappy about it, I was even paranoid, but it turned out really well, just Paul, Helen and I playing guitars together.

Helen We just did it to relax in each other's company.

Yuri After recording Helen had a bath and came back and added some vocals. [laughter]

Helen The song worked out really well, so we thought we'd keep going.

Yuri We decided to pursue it as the culmination of that fantasy of being in a band.

Helen We started to play every week, I can't remember the circumstances.

Yuri I had a house in [Wellington suburb] Roseneath above the sea and hardly anyone visited there, so we had quite a lot of peace. We recorded every week, we recorded a lot of stuff with Paul. We weren't really a band, it was just the three of us. Helen would often do the drum track.

When did you first play live?

Yuri April 1991. We had to organise a set of songs in a couple of weeks and get a bass player and a drummer. We used some songs that the three of us had worked out before, in quite a different context. It was quite a ramshackle band.

Did it work okay live?

Yuri Yeah I guess so, I don't really know.

Helen We got through the songs. [laughs]

Yuri We have a video of it, and judging from that, about three songs worked okay. But we played heaps of songs, we played too long. We were supporting [now thankfully defunct Wellington sub-Skeptics losers] Lushburger.

You have a history of supporting really horrible bands.

Yuri We only ever supported.

Helen It was quite good in a way though, because no one expects anything of you. And we got a different mix each time.

Yuri When you're headlining it goes to your head, from what I've seen. The only problem was at the most we were only given about five minutes to soundcheck, we could never hear each other when we were playing.

Helen We were probably quite afraid on stage, you feel really alone. It's so different from just practising.

How did you fit in in Wellington?

Helen We didn't.

Yuri The Wellington scene of the time was getting obsessed with a heavy metal sound. There was also bands who were influenced by the Pixies and Sonic Youth. Some people didn't like us because we were quite amateurish-sounding. The emphasis then was on being 'tight' - if you read reviews of Wellington shows, the reviewer would usually compliment the band for being 'tight'. We didn't fit in with that, and we got accused of copying The Velvet Underground, and that didn't make us popular. They were seen as the band that every other band copied, and we were seen as the millionth band to copy The Velvet Underground. We sort of commented on that with 'Nothing Going Down At All', the song on the Shock compilation - that was the only song that really warrants telling us off for being influenced by The Velvet Underground. We consciously copied them there with the chords and with the frame of the song, the chord change is lifted completely from 'Rock 'n' Roll'. People didn't get the joke, surprisingly people weren't as familiar with The Velvet Underground as I thought they were. [laughs] We were plagued with that tag, it was the criticism that was made of us. I guess it was justified, but I didn't see why it was a criticism, for me it was a compliment. [laughs]

Helen I don't think we sounded that much like them, looking back. I don't think we sounded like a copy band.

Yuri That tag had become slightly less popular, because other bands sounded like other things, Metallica or whatever. But because The Velvet Underground were a canon, we got criticised. Just the fact that Helen played viola probably invited it. People regarded us as fodder for getting stoned to - someone said that as soon as we started playing, people start lighting joints.

Didn't you have a rather eventful gig at the closing down of the Carpark?

Yuri Yeah, we were invited to play because the guy who ran it seemed to like us. We played on the same bill as a whole lot of heavy rock bands. It was another situation where we couldn't hear each other on stage, it was probably worse than ever because it was badly organised, there were a lot of bands. Everyone decided to just play whatever they wanted, [laughter] and everyone went into their corners and did solos. We hear varying stories about it, but the guy who was engineer claimed he was getting threats.

Helen There was a lot of really piercing feedback.

Yuri Paul was really wild because he had had some codeine beforehand, and his guitar playing exploded. We only did three songs, we got the power pulled on us.

Helen I remember hearing people booing.

Yuri They were throwing things, too. [laughs] But we had quite a lot of supporters, too, people had hung around for hours listening to these seedy rock bands so they could see us.

Who was writing the songs in Garbage and The Flowers?

Yuri It varied.

Helen Me and Yuri wrote quite a lot of song frameworks together, but most of the ones we played in 1991 also came about by Paul coming in and altering the structure, or Paul writing the whole song - he wrote 'Catnip', he

wrote the chords and we perverted them.

[laughs] Sometimes we'd change the chords deliberately, other times they'd change because the whole band would be jamming, like 'Lucy In Her Pink Jacket'. I usually wrote the lyrics.

Were you a regularly practising band?

Yuri No, we had real problems with that, with getting together.

Helen We used to practice the day of the concert.

Yuri We never got into the rhythm of having a practice a week, like other bands.

How many times did you play live in 1991?

Helen About ten, eleven times. We played the same songs for about six of those.

Yuri Our sound changed a bit when Heath [Couzens], who was playing bass, left for Australia. We had been recording at Trojan House, and we asked Stuart Porter, who was one of the people who ran Trojan House, to play bass with us. He affected our sound, he had quite a strong bass sound, he used about a dozen pedals.

One Garbage and The Flowers gig I saw you played for an hour and a half.

Helen I think we were thrilled to be able to play. We couldn't hear ourselves, though - we just rambled on and on.

Yuri We had a set number of songs.

Helen And we were used to playing quite long versions anyway. I remember people taking solos for quite a long time, including me. Because you could hear yourself when you soloed.

What sort of music were you listening to at this point?

Helen We probably weren't listening to much, actually, just our tapes, getting a really narrow focus. I used to listen to folk music quite a lot, and rap - Schooly D, Public Enemy. I remember listening to Eastern European folk music.

Yuri At the time I listened quite a lot to a tape of Indian classical music.

When did things start to fall away?

Yuri About April, May 1992.

What prompted it?

Helen Me and Yuri didn't see each other as much.

Yuri We'd just finished off the 'Catnip' single. Even though we'd recorded it in September, we weren't happy with it, so we added viola and guitar over the top. We hung around a bit and practised songs at Trojan House.

How did the single get organised?

Yuri Alastair Galbraith apparently put a lot of effort into trying to find somebody to release it.

Helen When I went down to Dunedin with Tongue I met him and we got on quite well. I sent him a tape, and he sent it to Twisted Village.

Yuri The tape we had was stuff we'd recorded pretty badly in terms of sound quality, so Alastair had to find a label that had that kind of aesthetic. It came out in late '92.

Was there ever talk of an album?

Yuri Twisted Village offered to do an album at the time, and they advertised it, but Helen and me broke up and that sort of fell away. The idea's still there.

I always thought Garbage and The Flowers should have been from Dunedin. Living in Wellington, you were really geographically displaced.

Helen It was quite good in a way. At the time, we didn't like any bands that played.

Yuri We got quite reclusive, just to protect ourselves.

It was a pretty horrible time. It still is. When were the tracks on the Twisted Village single recorded?

Yuri We recorded 'Catnip' in September 1991 and we'd recorded 'Carousel' about a year before that, on four-track.

That occurred in 1992?

Yuri Helen started playing with [heavy indistro/sample noise Wellington band] Tongue, and we hadn't really 'broken up', but we didn't do anything for a while, from about October '91. The next year I went to Australia and when I came back we wrote some songs in a different style - the early songs were based upon playing mainly major chords, and we felt a bit of pressure to do something a bit more complicated, [laughs] so we wrote some songs that were more based around melody. We did a couple of concerts. Helen was always a really motivating factor for getting anything organised, so we did some more concerts.

Helen We entered the Battle Of The Bands at the Carpark in March '92. We won our heat...

Yuri [laughs] Along with the three other bands. We made it to the semi-final.

Your singing, Helen - were you nervous at first and then got more confident?

Helen I couldn't move onstage, I felt pinned down, everyone was looking at me type of thing. I just never moved, because I was so scared. I was often quite drunk, and when I'm drunk, I stop moving. When I opened my mouth to sing, I wouldn't be sure that I'd remember anything, so it was quite intense.

Why did you get drunk when you played - was that a defence mechanism?

Helen/Yuri [together] Yeah. [laughter]

Helen You get scared, then you get happy, and keep drinking.

Did you want to have it as an excuse?

Yuri We never thought of that...

Helen After a while, I liked feeling under siege when I was singing, I got used to it and I liked to feel like I didn't know what would happen, I wanted to feel as out of it as I could. [laughs] It's a shame, some of the recordings, I didn't have any control.

What sort of lyrical issues were you dealing with, Helen?

Helen They were like stories, with a character and what happened to the character and the frame they'd have in their brain, their emotion.

I wrote quite a lot that year, just screeds of crap. [laughs] Later on I just used any words, words that sounded together. I wasn't trying to describe a situation as much.

How much of a part did drugs play in Garbage and The Flowers?

Yuri We were too paranoid to smoke marijuana. At the time I could never play music while I was stoned, things would disintegrate and I wouldn't know what I was doing or why.

What about acid?

Yuri From time to time, when we met Paul. That was kind of the inspiration behind 'Carousel', feeling depressed about the world after taking acid. But it was also kind of based on how Helen took some acid one night and words started pouring out.

Helen Nervous energy.

Yuri Some of the early songs were made up of those words.

Helen I remember hearing music slightly different after taking acid, things that might have sounded really unstructured or untogether a year ago sounded really together and made some sense.

Yuri I remember someone saying that they liked us, but that we shouldn't try to play complicated things, we should get down to basics.

Did Paul bring a different element into Garbage and The Flowers? Was he more into improvisation?

Yuri No it was the opposite to begin with. It was all varied. At the beginning I think he was quite interested in doing songs, whereas we had a bit of fear of playing other people's songs. After that period where we were recording with Paul and we became a band, I liked the idea of a set number of songs, and I think Paul was getting bored with them, whereas it was my dream come true. After a while, he refused to play certain songs, [laughs] some of the ones I really liked. After about a year, that caused, or didn't help the

band carrying on. Helen and I pretty much wanted to have control over a lot of the songs, and I think we came out as Nazis in the ends. [laughs] I think Paul enjoyed playing louder and faster, whereas we're really happy to play ballad-y things. Helen and I liked the idea of perfecting songs. He wasn't into improvising music until he moved to Auckland. It was sad that the period where the three of us were doing things ended because of forming a band and doing concerts.

Did you consider what you were doing as folk music?

Yuri Yeah, we thought it was 'deep folk'. [laughs]

So you wound up in 1992; what happened then?

Yuri I didn't see any of Helen at all, I spent a few months practising the parts to our songs. My mother got sick with cancer, so I went to Australia to try and help her for about half a year. I came back when Dress was forming - Helen and Kristen [Wineera] and Brian Hudson.

Helen I got involved in the theatre, making music for play. I played quite a lot with a friend of mine called Sophie Oakley.

Yuri Dress formed around January 1994.

Helen Me and Kristen wrote the music for a couple of plays, and after that we thought we'd try and do something else.

How would you characterise Dress as different from Garbage and The Flowers? What was the intention?

Yuri It was meant to be no rock. [laughs] I replaced Brian in Dress, and Helen was really fascist about preventing me from playing anything resembling rock. And in between songs, if I had the guitar and started fiddling around, she'd tell me to stop.

Helen Or hit you or jeer at you.

Yuri But rock is having its revenge now, we've gone rock again.

Helen I went rock. We went off music, and we went down south and didn't listen to anything

for about a month, because everything sounded so horrible. When I started listening to things again, it was stuff like Nirvana. Dress is vaguely similar to Garbage and The Flowers, but we haven't done anything really rocky. It's quite still, not manic energy or anything.

Yuri We've recorded stuff recently as Entlang.

When did you do the 10-inch?

Yuri One of the pieces is from the theatre music we did, last year in March, and the other things was recorded around the same time, with stuff added last January. It's a hodgepodge, it wasn't really structured in any unified way, it was brought together from different sources, there's even a short piece with Brian playing on it.

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