

THE  
GARBAGE  
AND THE  
FLOWERS



The story of **The Garbage & the Flowers**, by some measure Wellington's most brilliant pop band, is equal parts classic underground rock'n'roll history – couple forms group, potters around for years not doing very much, lives in its own peculiar world, members come and go, they split up in just enough time to grant them ex-post-facto legend status – and the kind of peculiarity and idiosyncratic behaviour that has me thinking, 'only in New Zealand'. For The Garbage & the Flowers, even though they've resided in Australia for over a decade, still feel to me very much like a New Zealand band, developing their own psychedelic pop sensibility in their own, self-cultivated bubble, existing within their own aesthetic and personal worlds, and emerging from this hotel womb only long enough to take a look at the carapace of mainstream life and think, 'maybe someday, probably never'.

Yuri Frusin (guitar, songwriting) and Helen Johnstone (viola, vocals, now bass) met sometime in the 1980s, that most un-august of decades – though if one country's underground made it out of the '80s with its collective cool intact, it was surely New Zealand, what with labels like Flying Nun

and Xpressway, and their noted propensity for finding great music in every bedroom cabinet. Frusin recalls, "our musical relationship dates to even before the formation of The Garbage & the Flowers, when we were a bedroom band and calling ourselves by various names like The Sweet Nuthins, The McDaniel Sisters and the earliest name of all, The Falling Spikes. Helen and I met when we were 16 or 17 and practically one of our first conversations went something like: 'I want to be in a band' and 'I want to be in a band too!' Of course, at the time being in a band seemed like an almost unattainable prize."

Back in the mid-late 1980s, Wellington's counterculture still milled around Aro Street, which "streams into the Te Aro Flats," continues Frusin, "the old river delta that the centre of Wellington is basically built on. When I was a little Russian émigré boy in the 1970s sitting in the back bucket seat of my parents' old grey Holden station wagon and surveying the scene outside as we drove through town, this section of Cuba St looked like the Bronx to me." "When I was in my last years at secondary school, I would see all these rough punks walking up Cuba Street," Johnstone remembers, "and my



mother told me never to go up past a certain point, past Dixon Street, where a homely deli was we used to visit. She said it was upper Bohemia, and it was. Post punk kids in op shop clothes and rags."

By the time they met, Johnstone was already immersed in music, a child prodigy by all accounts, classically trained on her chosen instrument and a member of the NZ National Youth Orchestra. Johnstone recalls of their meeting, "I thought he was very exotic and possibly from another universe. One where they hung carpets on walls and ate a porridge-like substance (khasha) for lunch. It was good to meet someone who was so creative with music. I had done lots of drawing and writing in my young life but the idea of buying an electric guitar had only briefly crossed my mind." Soon enough, Johnstone and Frusin would fall on the creative relationship that would last to this day, with Frusin writing songs and Johnstone analysing them, adopting the role of 'arranger' – "and later on in The Garbage & the Flowers, the 'editor' in terms of reeling us in when we would be getting too prog," she smiles.

Listening to The Garbage & the Flowers, first of all you'll think: The Velvet Under-

ground. It's fair enough: the group is one of the few to truly understand VU, to grok them right down to the minutest of details, to really get to grips with the DNA of their sound. Jeremy Armitage, leader of the group Frusin calls "Wellington's premiere grunge act," This Will Kill That, and later co-leader of The Drugs with Frusin, remembers hearing him on the radio in 1988, "doing an 'all Velvets' radio show on Radio Active late at night playing these super rare bootlegs of "Sweet Sister Ray" and stuff like that. Fantastic, especially for a teenager listening in the Hutt in the '80s. I only put two and two together that it was him years later. He was a Velvet Underground nut basically." But it's with the 'formation' of The Sweet Nuthins that the story really starts moving, as Frusin tells it: "Helen and I ended up calling ourselves The Sweet Nuthins, another Velvets reference of course, and some early recordings that ended up getting released one way or another under the The Garbage & the Flowers moniker date from this period of the late 80s up to 1990/91. "My Sweet Baby" is one such song."

He continues, "Remi, the brilliant but unpredictable guitarist from The Brothers Gorgonzola had got together with Jessica Walker, and Merlene Chambers passed on a

cassette of some of their songs to me and Helen. I remember the night I listened to that tape and was overcome with intense jealousy when I heard one of the lovely acoustic ballads that they'd penned. I'd been putting songs together with Helen for a few years already and in my mind my musical heroes were already transforming into bitter rivals in song. I was determined to come up with something as equally pretty and very quickly composed the simple "My Sweet Baby" which Helen completed with some lovely singing and a verse or two."

"I wish I could get back to the naivety of those days which made it so much simpler to write songs. I was still discovering particular musical textures and chord progressions which I would find so arresting and which would inevitably lead me to pick up the guitar and try to reproduce the effect I liked. Of course, I've never been that good a musician so what came out was never quite the same and always a lot simpler. "Love Comes Slowly Now" dates back to this period in the late '80s when I was charmed off my feet by the endlessly repeating chord progression in Michelle Shocked's "Anchorage" which I put together with some striking lines out of a KD Lang album of country music standards. Helen would then take

away this raw material that I produced and put it through a process of refinement, spending hours getting the rhythm and melody right... In any case, she came up with the beautiful rendition of "Love Comes Slowly Now" that's on Eyes Rind As If Beggars without my playing on it and that's probably why that recording is so magical. She can hold on to the essence of my songs way better than I can."

The Sweet Nuthins would go on to release a tape, Ivory Girl, "with a grand run of one," Frusin notes dryly. The Garbage & the Flowers' story would unfurl from these formative moments, with Frusin recalling that things for the group really started to come together in 1990, after meeting with Paul Yates, when "Bryn Tilly brought Paul up to The Spirit Dog Hotel," the 'tumbledown bungalow' that served as both the physical and psychic base for The Garbage & the Flowers "and, with Bryn on drums and vocals and Paul and me on electric guitars, we quickly churned out a song called "Sweet Nikki", a boyish paean to a German girl Bryn and I had recently met," Frusin says. "The bit of the song that really mattered to me was the closing rock out section where Paul and I had the chance to let loose." (The Spirit Dog Hotel also served as the home of Anri Tist





Ke, the group Bryn Tilly, Daniel McLaren and Andrew Foster were working on at the time.)

Johnstone was living at Auckland at the time, but would soon return to Wellington. Yates first met Johnstone at The Spirit Dog Hotel, and soon after, "the three of us would get together over the next couple of months and record some of Yuri and Helen's songs to four-track". Even before then, Frusin and Johnstone were assiduously recording songs, and the b-side of their first single, "Carousel", came about from a loose, impromptu session at the Spirit Dog, with the duo joined by McLaren, after Frusin accepted a self-imposed challenge to write a song using only one chord, inspiration he had gleaned from messing around with McLaren's tampura. (Indian carnatic music, and other drone-based explorations, would be a continued underpinning presence in The Garbage & the Flowers' songs and performances – even if that drone might have been the glorious wail of unchecked feedback bleeding from an overcranked amplifier.) Indeed, all of The Deep Niche cassette, which was the first release by the group, was recorded during these days in the Spirit Dog Hotel – this cassette would go on to have lasting repercussions for the group,

more of which later.

Torben Tilly, who would end up as The Garbage & the Flowers' first drummer, was also working his way into the Spirit Dog orbit, having initially moved into the Frusin family home, across the other side of Wellington, in 1990 at age 18. Tilly first met Yates when he was flatting with Torben's brother Bryn in the late '80s, but that "we really got to know each other when we worked together in the kitchen at Wellington's Mexican Cantina – a legendary cheap restaurant with booths like sheep-pens, great Mexican food and a very raucous atmosphere." It was here that they also met Rachel Davies, who remembers that "the place was wild and chokka block with Wellington artsy bohemian-ness. Every night was crazy and wonderful, once I remember a big restaurant-wide beer can fight, I think the night of some rugby test match."

Davies would be drawn into the group's bubble for a short while, being asked by Yates to jam with the group. "I didn't really know what I was doing, I just thought of Nico and made sounds into the mic however I felt," she says. "I don't know if it worked or not, or if it was what TGATF were after, but they



asked me back a few times and I went, but eventually I stopped going, I can't remember why." She remembers the collective vibe as "comfortable and good and playful, and I am not really sure what they were trying to do, except that it was cool, and unique and independent." Davies would bow out of the group soon enough though, and focus on her work as an experimental film maker.

The Garbage & the Flowers were now forming their key constellation, with Johnstone, Frusin, Tilly and Yates all 'in place', and 1991 would be the year they stepped out of the collective bubble of the Spirit Dog, to play live and start spreading the word. Tilly had been asked to be the group's drummer for their first gig, "Torben had never played drums before so he was perfect for us as our musical aesthetic had already developed by then into a celebration of punk spontaneity," Frusin says. "Lack of skill and experience was more than made up for by Torben's inventiveness. He played the drums with a keen, artistic sense of its role within the overall composition of a song. Much more than just something that kept the beat going, it took its place alongside the other instruments with an almost melodic force. It would take me years before I would realize how important his

drumming actually was to the structure of our music – seemingly directing the twists and turns of our improvisations."

With almost the whole line-up in place, Johnstone had given a copy of The Deep Niche to Armitage, who was working at the Aro St Video Store at the time – he subsequently offered the group a gig at The New Carpark, supporting local band Lushburger, in April 1991. She would also subsequently ask bass player, Heath Cozens, to join the group, with the usual combination of laissez-faire and enterprise, at a party at the Frusin family home: "They had a music room downstairs and I was going berzerk playing heavy metal lead guitar with a mate on the drums," Cozens remembers. "Later when I came upstairs, Helen invited me to play bass in their band. That meant I had to learn bass, and all the songs, in the lead up to their first big gig, two weeks later. I perfected a style which I dubbed 'wandering bass'. Basically just me bass-soloing through every song."

Kristen Wineera, who was at the time playing with Bill Direen in Bolobolo, was also part of the group's circle, and she would eventually end up playing music with the members of The Garbage & the Flowers later





THE DgARBAGE  
FIOWERS



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live At  
THISTLE HALL  
saturday 7th

AN AFTERNOON PERFORMANCE  
BEGINNING AROUND ONE....

that decade. She told me about the group live: "They always seemed like a really big deal. I knew how much the band meant to Yuri. I didn't really know Helen and Paul personally, but knew that they were pretty much living music at the time also. They were all utterly serious about their music making—in a completely innocent and earnest way, not in a pretentious way. That's to say, I guess, that they were artists."

"At the live shows I was always aware of the slight weirdness of the big PA sound. And the slight weirdness of the band having to project themselves, just by virtue of the gig context. It always came across a bit harsher, more raspy and more chaotic than the home recordings. It was like these quite gentle, folk songs that had been perfectly realized in the comfort of the lounge were going through an abstracting filter. That filter being the band members just dealing with the performance situation in their own, slightly shambolic way. It was good; because, as Yuri used to say, a lot of bands at the time seemed obsessed with being 'tight'. Being tight was the holy grail, somehow synonymous with a band's being 'good'. TGATF rejected that fundamentally – not as a gesture; they just really were on a different planet."

"Over the course of the next few months, our style developed in reaction to the dominant look and sound of the Wellington alternative rock scene," Frusin recalls. "Though Helen and I had gone through our own period in the late eighties when we dressed only in black and leather, following the look in the photographs in Victor Bockris and Gerald Malanga's *Uptight: The Velvet Underground Story* which became sort of our style bible, we became alienated from the rigidly cool conformity of the scene in the early '90s and I remember making a point of wearing daggy, colourful knitted jumpers for our gigs. And instead of concentrating on getting a tight musical outfit together, we began inviting oddballs – like us – to join us on stage, like a guy Torben or Heath met at a bus stop and invited to come and live with us and later join the band called Steve Woolff: a jazz muso who would duet on his saxophone with Helen during her wild flights of viola or else moonlight a bit on the keyboards. Then there was another school friend of Torben's, Amanda Raisin, who'd wail on stage and shake the tambourine or Sam Penny, whose on-stage dancing reminded people of some kind of crazy character from a David Lynch movie."



# THE CARBAGE



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LOWE CARBAGE  
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Soon enough, though, Cozens would leave the group, and he would be replaced by Stuart Porter, who was something of a legend in Wellington, having been a member of The Primitive Art Group, and co-founder of the Braille Records label. "By this stage, Stuart had left the traditional jazz sound behind and was concentrating on a band he'd formed with Brendon [Ryniker] and Brian Hudson called God, still containing elements of jazz instrumentation but now in a heavy industrial mix of rock music," Frusin explains. "It wasn't long before what was perhaps Stuart's main interest in The Garbage & the Flowers manifested itself and he invited our prime asset - Helen - to join God on viola and vocals... Sometime late in 1991, God took Helen to Dunedin to play at Alastair Galbraith's famed Super 8 Club... This was when Helen first got to know Alastair and gave him a copy of The Deep Niche."

Galbraith, one of the most important figures in the New Zealand underground, was immediately smitten by The Deep Niche. "That voice!" he exclaims. "And the things it sings! Antique Russian ice is tinkling in the starlight from some book life. An angular mind glitters with broken gifts, haunting translations of OTHER times and worlds. I

wrote the song "Andalusia" about it. And I wrote to Kate and Wayne at Twisted Village (among others) - sending out copies of the tape and asking if they'd release vinyl by them. They said yes." Rogers chuckles, "there was nearly more tape hiss than music on it. But the music was phenomenal, and had all the hits: "Carousel," "Lucy In Her Pink Jacket," "Nothing Going Down At All," etc. I was really excited. There was a glut of NZ stuff coming out on international labels by that time, but they were obviously something special." Indeed, the group seemed to fit the Twisted Village ethos of home-baked psychedelia perfectly. "Songs + improvisation + noise," Rogers continues, "always with the melody lurking underneath = A total dream band for us."

The "Catnip / Carousel" single was released in 1992, but by this stage the group had effectively split, as Frusin and Johnstone's relationship ground to a halt. "We didn't have any contact with each other for the next year or so," Frusin laments. "Nothing was ever discussed between band members but The Garbage & the Flowers effectively broke up. The "Catnip" single came out on Twisted Village during this period, but the band's hiatus meant no further work was done on the proposed Twisted Village



marsh - ll day  
my name is four toed furrowed  
skinning time with a freak  
i stitch the eyes to silkworms  
vaseline in my sleep

wicked and shines bob dylan  
neat and chartered deceit  
my girls are smalland bony  
pennies grow in their cheeks

when by darkling arms i sell  
tearing stems from passionflowers  
knees are danned and seldom nailed  
marshall sign will he weep

am i like enough for you?

dear fortunate queen and twice  
this could be the last manifestation  
of your SOFT HORNETS  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL GEORGES VEHICLES  
TOSS last will and testamental forage  
in the meadows of  
PRINCE OF THIEVES  
Catnip  
LUCY IN HER PINK JACKET  
nothing going down at all  
all in the open set theory of  
rose 10<sup>6</sup>  
"holidaying at Bayreuth with a haggis  
thrice seen teetering on the brink with a  
receding chin  
originators often of the genesis of Turkey  
implicated in the naming of the Moog synthesizer  
Tip  
ten million tartan cloths"







album." And there it ended, for the time being. That totemic single, however, which mangled Bob Dylan's face on the front cover and mangled folk, rock and noise on the black vinyl housed inside, slowly accrued its status as a key artifact from the early '90s NZ underground, leading The Now Sound label to eventually gather together a collection of old recordings from the group for eventual release as *Eyes Rind As If Beggars*, the reissue of which you now hold in your hands. Meanwhile, Frusin and Johnstone ended up working together again, with Kristen Wineera and others, in *Dress*; Frusin had formed *The Drugs with Armitage*; an 'adjunct' of sorts to *The Garbage & the Flowers*, a brilliantly fragile pop-not-pop group called *Entlang* and featuring Johnstone, Frusin and Wineera amongst their line-up, released a 7" and a 10"; several members of the TGATF orbit would make free noise with friends from *Surface Of The Earth* in the New Zealand Guitar Orchestra; Johnstone would record a cassette with Sophie Moleta as *The Slow Scrape*; and Paul Ling (nee Yates) would form *Pit Viper*. Furthermore, many releases from these groupings would be documented on Frusin's own label, *Hell On Records*.

And *The Garbage & the Flowers* would

return to the stage in Australia in 1997, as part of the *What Is Music* festival, co-organised by Oren Ambarchi, Robbie Avenaim, and Tilly. Which is where I come in – having travelled from Adelaide to Melbourne to catch the 'NZ invasion' of that year, with Thela, Pit Viper, *Dress*, *Empirical* and *The Garbage & the Flowers* all playing at the festival, I ended up most bewitched by TGATF's brilliantly fragile, loose, gorgeous set of hallucinatory folk song. And I wasn't the only one, as Ambarchi remembers: "During their soundcheck all the members seemed to be lost and unsure of what they needed and when I spoke to them they would always respond in a quiet murmur – between their thick NZ accents and the inaudibility of their words I was at odds deciphering anything they uttered. Yet there was something alluring and charming about their way. All of their performances had a lulling, ramshackle beauty and when Helen Johnstone began to sing I, along with the rest of the audience began to melt."

When I ask the group about their music, Tilly offers a particularly apt description of their sound: "What I loved about the music we created is that it sounded like it had come from somewhere faraway, that it had traveled a lot of distance and gathered some



dust and debris along the way. That said, despite its unhinged qualities we were never really a noise-band even though some strange and beautiful electromagnetic noise would make it to tape. Most of the time it was all deeply rooted in a song. Obviously the Velvets were a big influence, and Yuni and Helen wore that on their sleeve. "Nothing Going Down At All" is a case in point. It was hard to get past VU in many ways, as they had already fused so many interesting ideas together."

"I think what set us apart from other bands of the time was in the way our music was recorded," he continues. "It wasn't big and clean and polished sounding, it didn't conform to the usual radio friendly production standards that a lot of more commercially oriented New Zealand bands aspired to. But to be quite honest, there wasn't any real connection there to Xpressway at this time. We were kind of isolated from what was going on in the South Island, and I got the impression we weren't really considered part of that sound."

This, of course, is one of the greatest parts of The Garbage & the Flowers' charm. They really did seem out there, on their own,

absorbed in their own world, dropping gem after gem of fractal noise-pop onto slowly corroding four-track cassettes, willing these songs into existence just long enough to let them catch breath and glide away from the speakers for a few moments, before Frusin and Johnstone would knuckle down and write yet more beautiful melodies for beautiful losers. "They created their own little bubble," Armitage remembers. "They were really really good at doing that. Even when you were just hanging out with them it was a bit like that—a bubble."

They are still playing now, based in Sydney, venturing out from that bubble to play the occasional live show, or release the odd cassette, album or single. But maybe the final word should go, not to one of the members of the group, but to someone who had seen them develop through the years, with varying degrees of involvement. David Coventry was a member of Amazing Broccoli (with eventual Thela member and Touch recording artist Rosy Parlane on drums) in the early '90s, and shared bills with the group; he was also in a relationship with Rachel Davies when she was jamming with the band. He would eventually release a few solo records as La Gloria (his Jeremiad CD on Freedom From is well worth searching







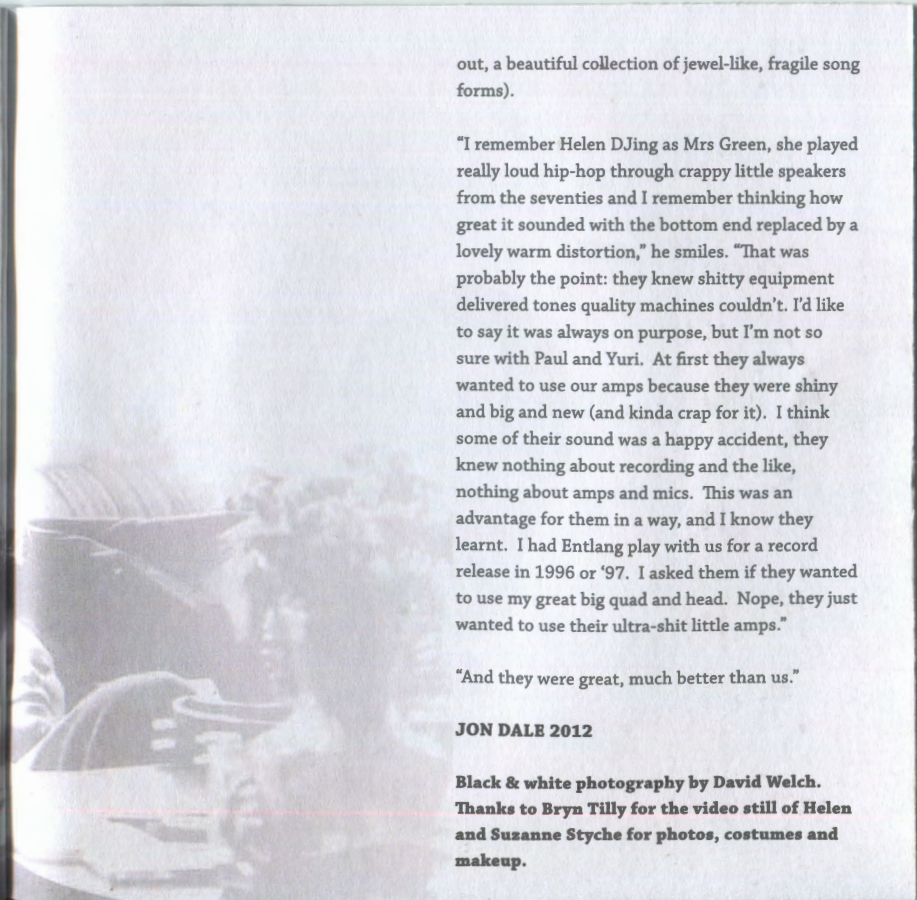
out, a beautiful collection of jewel-like, fragile song forms).

"I remember Helen DJing as Mrs Green, she played really loud hip-hop through crappy little speakers from the seventies and I remember thinking how great it sounded with the bottom end replaced by a lovely warm distortion," he smiles. "That was probably the point: they knew shitty equipment delivered tones quality machines couldn't. I'd like to say it was always on purpose, but I'm not so sure with Paul and Yuri. At first they always wanted to use our amps because they were shiny and big and new (and kinda crap for it). I think some of their sound was a happy accident, they knew nothing about recording and the like, nothing about amps and mics. This was an advantage for them in a way, and I know they learnt. I had Entlang play with us for a record release in 1996 or '97. I asked them if they wanted to use my great big quad and head. Nope, they just wanted to use their ultra-shit little amps."

"And they were great, much better than us."

**JON DALE 2012**

**Black & white photography by David Welch.  
Thanks to Bryn Tilly for the video still of Helen  
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makeup.**





the garbage and  
the flowers

hallelujah picassos



second child

Stax, thur Oct 3

The Rosicrucian Lovers

Miranda sip your milk in two  
There's really nothing else to do  
Sprawled out on the ~~floor~~ <sup>porch</sup>  
Table strewn with pretty drugs  
Telling on the upper crust  
You would never ask for much  
Soak your hands in fur and china  
Talking to the only lords of power

and a Rosicrucian lover  
Rosicrucian lover  
Rosicrucian lover  
and you bow your head to the Rosicrucian lovers

Greenstick fractures on the brain  
Burning candy out of shame  
Throw away those tarot cards  
Sacrifice your heart of stone  
Men will try to read your mind  
Whispering words innocent and sublime  
Churches crumble down to dust  
Taking out a priest and holy brother

and a Rosicrucian lover  
Rosicrucian lover  
Rosicrucian lover  
and you bow your head to the Rosicrucian lovers

Miranda sip your milk in two  
Fetch out your cat will knit your hair  
Roll it in a Spanish ball  
Send it to the King of France  
Slip upon your sequined dress  
Touch your ruby lusted lips  
On your knees and out of time  
Dissolving in the mist and alabaster

like a Rosicrucian lover  
Rosicrucian lover  
Rosicrucian lover  
and you bow your head to the Rosicrucian lovers