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# GOOD WEEKEND

## Something so strong

The rise and rise of Neil Finn

By DAVID LESER



Crowded House seemed unstoppable; then Neil Finn decided to pull the plug and return to New Zealand. **David Leser** met the singer there and found a man balancing domestic tranquillity against the edgy darkness of his own imagination.

# Better be home soon

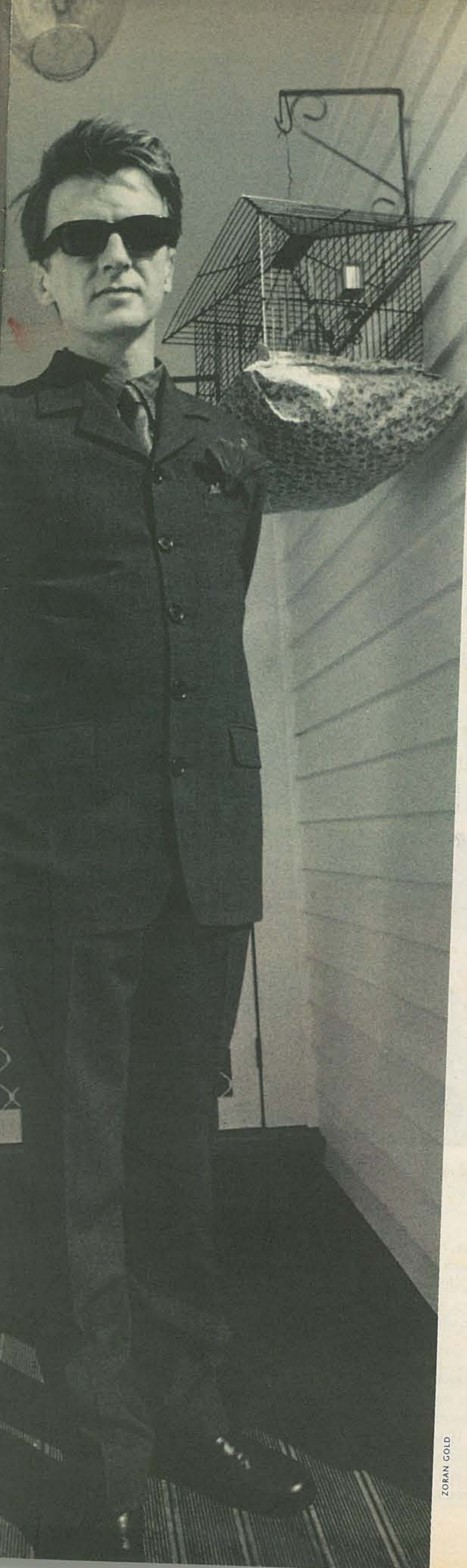
**U**nlike on that epic night at Bennelong Point, when one of the largest audiences in Australian history stood as one under the Opera House sails to sing and laugh and weep their way through Crowded House's last song, this was a more intimate affair. This was 100 of us squeezed into Neil Finn's wife's pub in the heart of Auckland, bowed, almost, by the prodigious talent we were witnessing as we sang along with strangers. Framed in the window were the faces of fans who were listening in the cheerless little alleyway outside.

If you closed your eyes for a minute and forgot where you were, you could have sworn that by some act of God both John Lennon and Paul McCartney had made their way to the stage and we were listening to their voices in unison once again. Only this, arguably, was better. This was one man, not two, and this was not a piece of 1960s Liverpool nostalgia but, remarkably, reassuringly, a performance for the Antipodes in the 1990s.

This was Neil Finn offering comfort through his aching lyrics, lifting a room through his melodies and reminding us all that in this beautiful, savage little country at the end of the world, anything is possible – especially the power of a song to move you.

You don't have to be a New Zealander to be taken by the Neil Finn story; to feel a kind of pleasure and fascination in the golden trajectory of this man's life and career. All the ingredients are there – exceptional musical abilities, a Catholic household that nourished and fired them, a gifted older brother, Tim Finn, with whom he was forever harmonising and competing; the brooding isolation of a small town – and the unquenchable ambition to leave it behind; the years of cult status with the first band (Split Enz); the heights of international acclaim with the second (Crowded House); a string of memorable hits over two decades and, now, still with a head absurdly full of songs, the launching this week of a solo album, *Try Whistling This*, which should reaffirm his reputation as one of the finest writers of pop melodies.





"It's a very brave record," says Arnold Frolovs, music director of ABC's Triple J radio. "He could have sat back on his laurels and come up with just a whole lot of good, new songs but, instead, he's taken them further."

Says Paul Kelly, probably the only songwriter on this side of the world to rival Finn: "At his best, his songs sound like they come straight from heaven."

For 20 years now, Neil Finn has been a significant figure in the musical landscape. In 1980, three years after joining Split Enz at age 18 – and seven years after the band formed – he'd written *I Got You*, a song that was to become the biggest-selling Australian single that year as well as song of the year at the ARIAs, the national music awards.

The songs that followed: *I Hope I Never*, *Poor Boy*, *What's the Matter With You*, *I Don't Want to Dance*, *History Never Repeats*, *One Step Ahead* and many more, written either with Tim or individually, were to immortalise the Finn brothers as the two singer/songwriters of the region.

"The two Finns are Beatling down the home straight, shoulder to shoulder, hurling diamonds at each other as they run," wrote one local music critic at the time. Except that, in terms of commercial and critical success, Neil was to eventually leave his big brother in his wake.

After the break-up of Split Enz in 1984, the younger Finn formed Crowded House. In 1987, his stirring pop classic, *Don't Dream It's Over*, went to No. 2 on the US Billboard Top 100. The self-titled album sold two million copies worldwide, one million in the US alone.

Neil Finn had become an international pop star and, together with bass player Nick Seymour and drummer Paul Hester, started appearing on *The Joan Rivers Show*, the *Today* show, *The Late Show with David Letterman* and an assortment of others.

Elton John loved their music, Sting wanted to meet them and even Paul McCartney was apparently declaring Neil Finn the best singer/songwriter of the 1980s. And that was before a succession of new hits (written mostly with Tim) in the 1990s saw the band's *Woodface* album go to No. 1 in Australia and No. 6 in the UK charts, where it stayed for six months.

By 1994, Crowded House had been voted best international act at the prestigious Brit awards, the British version of the Grammys, and Neil Finn best songwriter of the year by *Q* magazine. But then in 1996 the pop world was stunned to learn that Crowded House was disbanding. Neil Finn wanted to go solo; he wanted to be free from the burdens that the band had imposed on him and he'd imposed on himself for 12 years.

He'd already come to be regarded in New Zealand as the all-conquering hero, easily the most accomplished pop musician to emerge from those fiercely patriotic shores. And what's more, but unlike his compatriots (in fact, who can think of another?), he'd decided to return there with his wife and children after 12 years of exile. Because, as he'll tell you himself, New Zealand smelt and sounded like no other place on earth and, in the soft, gloaming light, the magic and memories of an idyllic childhood often returned.

*The highest branch on the apple tree  
was my favourite place to be  
I could hear them breaking free  
but they could not see me*

*I will run for shelter  
endless summer lift the curse  
It feels like nothing matters  
In our private universe*

(Private Universe, Neil Finn)

I'D LOVE TO BE ABLE TO SAY THAT THE FIRST time I met Neil Finn there was instant chemistry; that we both took out our guitars and after a brief warm-up started doing harmonies together (me going high, Neil staying low); and that then he turned to me with an impish grin and said, "You know, we should do this more often." But it wasn't quite like that. I can't sing high and Neil Finn isn't as exuberant as that. In fact, he appears quite the opposite: watchful and remote, although still friendly in a buttoned-up kind of way. His mouth curves into a smile as he says, "Hi – Neil Finn," while his eyes bore through you with an electric intensity. A natural reserve combined with years of people wanting a piece of him has not produced a ready bonhomie. Indeed, he has a reputation for being both precious and prickly at times. Much of it springs from taking his work extremely seriously.

On one celebrated occasion at Byron Bay, he punched his own brother in the face after a performance where Tim, in Neil's opinion, had not measured up on keyboards. "Let's not talk about it too much," he says now, "I'm not proud of myself. It was a shocking thing to do. My overriding memory of it is that, afterwards, I was out in the car park in just a complete lather of angst and this hippie woman kept coming up to the window going, 'I can help you, Neil. I can help you release your chakra. I'm a healer.'" An exasperated Finn told her to "f... off". Another time, during a Crowded House performance in Milan, he had a major altercation on stage with drummer Paul Hester. Hester kept tapping a drum while Finn was talking to the audience. Finally, Finn stalked to the back of the stage and smashed his guitar over Hester's snare drum. After the concert the two continued to tussle backstage with Finn ending up on the floor, to the surprise of fans who'd been waiting nearby to see him.

Today, we've met at his local cafe in Parnell, a gentrified inner-city suburb of Auckland full of Edwardian architecture and chic restaurants with names like The Java Room, Metropole and Antoine's. Clad in jeans and a daggy orange shirt, Finn strolls in like the archetypal guy-next-door, nods at a few fellow denizens and then orders a coffee and muffin.

"I don't have any kind of opinion about Parnell," he says when the subject turns to his choice of suburb. "I only know it's a really leafy, good environment and the people that live here don't tend to give a shit about me or who I am."

Indeed, last year this dalmatian-owning, Volvo-driving, post office-queuing husband and father of two was voted the most "invisible man" in Auckland, a superstar who'd gone to ground. "I prefer to keep to myself in Auckland," he explains. "The local radio station has joke awards at the end of the year and they said the award for the most invisible man in Auckland goes to Neil Finn and this politician called Clem Simich, who they said hasn't been seen since he's been elected."

"And they said since I moved back to town [in 1993] no-one ever sees me. That's been partly deliberate because one of the reasons I came back here was to be able to disappear into the community. I'm very disinclined to get my face out and about here. It's so small that if you just do two things, you're suddenly everywhere."

Small though it might be by Sydney or Melbourne standards, Auckland is overwhelming by comparison with the smudge of a town that Finn was born and raised in. Te Awamutu (meaning the place where the river runs short) is a dairy-farming community of a few thousand



souls two hours' drive south of the city in the Waikato valley. It's the kind of place that could send you mad or turn you to song.

There is beauty enough in the mountains that stand like giant cones beyond the neighbours' fences; in the milk-and-roses countryside that rolls endlessly away to the sea; in the silvery mist and distant bird calls that envelop you at dusk. It's just that, for all its privilege, especially during the 1950s and '60s when Finn was growing up, it's a breathtakingly ordinary place to be.

Today, the most stimulating thing you can do in Te Awamutu is smell the 80 varieties of roses for which the town is famous or go on a Finn brothers tour for which the town is even more famous. This will take you past the house where they grew up (now a rest home); on to the local St Patrick's School (where Neil learned to become an altar boy and considered becoming a priest); past Martins Electrical Store (where Neil played piano on Friday nights); then to the former craft shop Pot Pourri (where, amid the

perspective. Sleepy little towns, you know, there's always undercurrents brewing and just as much darkness and light as anywhere else."

You can hear this rumbling of the earth in Neil Finn's songs. Although they often send the spirit soaring, at another level they disturb the heart. Finn might be a lapsed Catholic but his language is suffused with Catholic obsessions. All through his lyrics are fingers of blame, descents into temptation, possession by dark forces, gods that have abandoned us, chapels that have burnt down and sinners who've cast off their faith.

*Under moonlight I stood wild and naked  
Felt no shame just my spirit awakened ...  
... Where's my faith? Is it lost?  
Can't see it till you cast it off*

(Sinner, N. Finn/M. De Vries)

"It [Catholicism] never completely goes," Finn says. "The connection to a greater truth, or whatever, is never going to leave me." But, at the same time, the Catholicism that Finn was exposed to

Maunganui, a beach resort near Te Awamutu, which were to lay the foundations for the Finn brothers' success. Neil and Tim (who is six years older) would be wheeled out by their parents to sing harmonies (Neil going low, Tim going high) for family and friends.

"It was about performing," Tim told me in an interview five years ago. "That was a big gift they gave to us really, because we might have had the talent, but they helped to ignite it. [Except] I remember basically that I would fight it almost to the death and Neil would pick up on a bit of that and fight it a bit, but with less conviction because he was enjoying more being this little cute kid who could sing with his brother. For me it was more tormenting. Too

During that time he has also created an entire canon of memorable pop songs and inspired millions of fans around the world. Trying to balance the two has been his greatest struggle.

"A lot of the people who succeed the most in the music industry have miserable personal lives," Finn says. "I made a decision early on when I got married and had kids that I wasn't going to let anything come between that bond. But that's been very difficult at times. The music machine doesn't recognise family commitments. But I think I feel best and proudest to know that I have maintained the family. It's the hardest thing you'll ever do, bring up kids, but if you do nothing else with your life except deliver two or however many really well-rounded, compassionate



Neil young: (above) Neil, third from left, as a star cadet in Split Enz with brother Tim, second from right; (far left) Crowded House take a final bow at their last performance outside the Sydney Opera House; (left) with his wife of 16 years, Sharon.



macramé wall hangings, Neil belted out Cat Stevens songs on special holidays). Further out, past the local prison and mental hospital, is the road to the nearest major town, Hamilton (one of the suicide capitals of the world).

On the surface, a normal town. Underneath, Te Awamutu has the same dark, edgy emotions that seem to percolate through much of New Zealand life. "In some ways," says Finn, "small towns are bland and in some ways they contain everything. You don't have to live in a big city to see diversity and in some ways what happens in big cities is that people seek enclaves. They seek to be among people who are like them. Whereas in a small community you are forced every day to deal with people who aren't necessarily like you at all, but I think that gives you quite a rich

through his family was relatively free from dogma. "My parents were really good, they had some strict rules ... but there was always this chance of a real celebratory mood and letting rip and the priests would be flirting and it was quite a pivotal lesson for us about the power of music."

Finn's father, Dick, worked as an accountant but his lifelong passion was jazz. He first became attracted to Finn's mother, Mary, the daughter of an Irish farmhand, through her ability to play tunes and sing. "She was very good at parties," Dick Finn told Chris Bourke, author of *Something So Strong*, the authorised account of the Crowded House years. "She could play all the tunes by ear and was a very good dancer."

It was these parties, especially during the Finns' summer holidays at Mount

much ego wrapped up in it, I think. It was probably partly because it was so unusual in New Zealand to be a performer."

By the age of five, Neil had won his first talent quest with a rendition of *You Are My Sunshine*, although his favourite song was still *Terry*, an unsettling little tune about a bikie who'd been killed in a road accident.

**N**EIL FINN IS LIVING PROOF THAT Mick Jagger was wrong when he observed that domesticity was the enemy of creativity. For 16 years, Finn has been married to his childhood sweetheart, Sharon Johnson, and together they have produced two sons, Liam and Elroy.

people into the world, then you've done the best thing you could possibly do."

And yet, for all Finn's veneer of normalcy, there appears to be a turbulent soul under that woolly sweater. "He is very, very intense and driven," says Toby Creswell, editor of *Juice* magazine. "I think he is more complex than Tim. Tim is the straight-out tortured artist whereas Neil is the tortured artist with all the success [that Tim has not had]." During the success of Crowded House's first album, for example, Neil was barely able to enjoy it, so guilt-ridden was he about what the other members of Split Enz, particularly his brother, Tim, might have been feeling. (Split Enz had always wanted, but never quite achieved, true international recognition.)

"It was pretty pathetic feeling like that," Neil told *HQ* magazine some years ago, "but it does tend to happen. As much as it's quite ugly to witness glorious confidence, I am slightly envious of it and I can't help thinking it is our New Zealand upbringing of not getting too big for yourselves that has caused it. It would be nice to be more relaxed and



uninhibited about being successful ... and I'm damn sure I won't be feeling guilty if it happens to me again."

But still he is prone to the kind of dark thoughts that are difficult to articulate, unless they come tethered to a haunting melody. "I don't know many people out there who aren't wrestling with some demon or another," he says. "I think that beneath the surface most ordinary people are grappling with something."

Finn says he regularly suppresses his feelings because of a fear of hurting others. He also admits to being grudging occasionally in his praise of fellow songwriters' success.

"Sometimes my ego comes out in the ugliest ways when I get jealous of other people's work," he says. "I can't enjoy something for itself because I'm thinking, 'Shit, I wish that was me.' It's an ugly ambition, but maybe it's necessary, too, I don't know." Who do you talk to about that? "My wife - she's very

she's well beyond seeing anything directly from a song as being a sign of anything in particular."

Not a new declaration of love? "Well, she's used to me writing slightly angst-ridden lyrics and she'd probably love for me to write a really straightforward love song. But I grew up listening to songs even before I'd ever fallen in love, and the ones that I liked the most were the melancholy ones, the ones that had some yearning to them. So that's what I'm chasing."

**F**AMED NEW ZEALAND WRITER Janet Frame once wrote that New Zealanders - both Maori and Pakeha - were "at the long end of the poking stick". They were so far away from the rest of the world, from the seat of Empire, that it was possible to imagine they barely existed. "But now," she wrote, "we're ourselves, and we can't be ignored or made nothing and

**"My wife's very unimpressed by the music business, which is a valuable thing for me ... Her solution for me having an angst crisis is to tell me the rubbish needs taking out."**

unimpressed by the music business, which is a valuable thing for me. She's very supportive of my music, she loves it, but she's a great foil for my non-specific anxieties. Her solution for me having an angst crisis is to tell me the rubbish needs taking out."

But surely not when you've just written lyrics like these:

*Seven worlds collide  
whenever I am by your side  
and dust from a distant sun  
will shower over everyone*

(Distant Sun, N. Finn)

Or weren't they for - and about - her? "It's a complex question," Finn replies. "I'm happy for things to be open-ended, but I would say that generally there are elements of reverence or hope that come through in my lyrics that [derive] from my relationship with Sharon and my family. But at the same time there's certain aspects that become fictitious or enlargements upon those things. Certain lines appear and I go, 'I'm not sure that's me but I can understand where that's going and I'll follow it. I'll let it have its head.' It's to do with the extremities of any given day - your internal conversation can run the gamut of being extremely hopeful or extremely negative and I like songs that have a little bit of both those angles."

"So it's a vulnerable position that Sharon is in, in the sense that if people make assumptions based on my lyrics about my real life, then that wouldn't be appropriate or correct. Besides, Sharon and I have been together a long time and

no-one, because the distance has gone."

Well, almost. Although Neil Finn has arguably done more than any other New Zealander to announce his country to the world, he still feels stranded now that he's home. He revels in its sights and smells and extraordinary freedoms but he notices keenly its remoteness and the deadening effect that forces such as economic rationalism have had on a sense of community and culture.

"I despair of the mentality here sometimes," he says. "Culture is not valued. People are looking overseas for culture and they're not regarding what we have here as being worth anything. It's a wasteland out there for young people. Apart from the ones who have very interested parents who keep their kids involved in good things, there's a lot of kids wandering around with nowhere to go and no-one giving them opportunities to be expressive or creative."

"Culture is what creates a healthy psyche in a country, I think. It's a feeling of connectedness. But look, the last thing I wanted to do when I came back here was jump in and say, 'New Zealanders should be doing this, that and the other.'"

"I haven't lived here for 12 years - and you know, to some extent, the best thing I can do for myself and for New Zealand is to just try and write really good songs and bring up good kids."

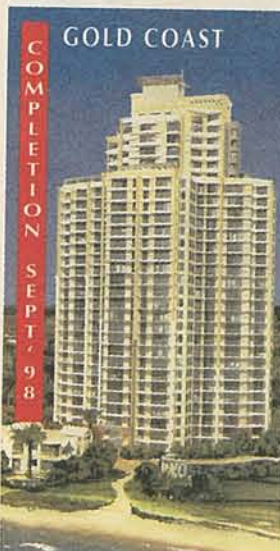
That night in his wife's Auckland pub, the songs just kept tumbling out of him - new anthems that no-one yet knew the words to but no doubt soon would; old hymns that had us bursting with pleasure and sorrow. One large choir led by the master of the minor chord.

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