

THE OFFTOPICS – EP

The Offtopics eight-track self-titled EP, the culmination of their *Back On The Zine* project, was a massive undertaking for the Melbourne soul band. Not just in the fact that they brought the EP to fruition, the eight-piece funk group released three acclaimed singles, complete with comic-style covers in the lead-up, but mainly for the 18-month period it took to record the 12-inch. That experience in the studio – marred in part by a departing band member and a restructuring of plans, a stint of ill-health – has helped carve out the final sound for the EP, punchy upbeat, funky, soulful and the ultimate party, pretty much everything that the Offtopics stand for in their live show.

It is fitting then that The Offtopics went into the studio with the aim of recording the songs and arrangements as close to their live shows as possible. Lead singer and funk dynamo Polash Larsen says they just wanted to create the entire release 'live'. "The idea was that the rhythm section, comprising of guitar, bass, drums and keyboards would lay down a bed over which we could put our horn parts, special solos and vocals," he says. "This could be sweetened with some percussion and handclaps if we felt like it. This is usually my rough and ready approach."

Things didn't quite pan out that way – losing their guitarist mid-recording meant a lot of the recording wasn't done in the order initially planned. Polash instead took the pragmatic approach of keeping the project on track and decided they would record all the guitar parts within the next two weeks, and took on all the guitar duties, ensuring the recording sessions went ahead and the sound the band wanted was achieved.

Leading into their studio time to lay down the eight tracks for the EP, The Offtopics needed to whittle down the tracks they wanted to record for the EP, which in itself was another process. "I think a band's first recording has to be a kind of statement that encapsulates the musical identity of the group," says Polash. "By the time we were set to record there were 20 songs (mostly original) that had been played live by the group at one point or another. The EP wasn't really written for, as the process was more reductive in that it was about letting the most appropriate songs choose themselves. I've never had the luxury of writing a bunch of songs specifically for recording so usually it's about culling. This is one part of the process I tend to struggle with so I open it up to discussion. Everyone in the band has been or still is currently, the leader of their own group so their opinions on what's a 'good' song counts for a lot. This culling process is usually informed by recording a very rough run through of everything that's on the table. We then go away and listen to it before working towards a consensus."

When it came to deciding where to record, Nick Herrera at The Grove came highly recommended. The band had already recorded some demos in a lounge-room mobile studio set-up, but didn't want to pursue this avenue for the final tracks. Nick was no stranger to recording with big bands, and came with a reputation of having worked with brass bands, something that was appealing to Polash. He engineered Hiatus Kaiyote's 2016 Grammy-nominated single *Breathing Underwater*. "Nick could record at both the band hall where we rehearsed and at his studio The Grove," he says. "In the end I opted for working at The Grove as Nick explained that he could work more efficiently there and he had access to more equipment. He was also willing to work in a piecemeal way over an extended period fitting the sessions around everyone's commitments – which was just as well!"

The EP was mastered by Joe Carra at Crystal Mastering, and all comic artwork was created by Melanie Miles at Hybrid Expression. The vinyl for the singles and the EP was pressed at Zenith Records. For Polash, the finished product is more than what he hoped for and a release that he and the band are proud of. Due to the effort that went into the EP, the band wanted it to be more than a one-off release – they wanted it to be something truly special. "It's a far more polished sounding product than what I originally had planned," he says. "I had always aspired to make a vinyl pressing but I hadn't really thought too deeply about the implications of that or what would be involved musically – Nick's sonic knowledge was really crucial here. CDs are becoming less important in inner-city markets. While a single song on mp3 doesn't seem all that special to me, a proper seven-inch vinyl with an A-side and a B-side with kooky cover art does. A vinyl 12-inch for me evokes all the positive nostalgia that I get when I remember 'discovering' my parents' record collection. Eight songs presented an opportunity to be repackaged as two-plus-two-plus-two and then six-plus-two equal eight. Working further along I imagined what these releases might look like all together. Around the corner from my house was a small comics studio and I hatched a plan to devise artwork that would create a narrative going from cover to cover to be resolved on the final release. The fold-out poster helps the covers hang together but also reflects the local focus of the project. The songs were written, rehearsed, recorded, mixed, mastered and the covers designed on locations somewhere on or just off the edge of that map."

The Offtopics self-titled vinyl EP is released 18th November 2018. The EP is also available digitally through all iTunes and GooglePlay.

For more information, please visit www.theofftopics.com

THE OFFTOPICS

SIDE A

1. Plans [3:12]
2. A Man Needs Cooling [4:41]
3. Red Eye Jane [3:10]
4. Fire In My Flue [5:05]

SIDE B

5. Funky Grandma [3:59]
6. Sunrise In Richmond [4:46]
7. Shape I'm In [3:44]
8. Big Booty Woman [4:32]

Plans (Larsen)

Plans in motion, a thought ain't worth nothing, unless you do something – for someone...

Penned on a Melbourne tram (the #70 to be exact) in the 1990s, *Plans* is the kicking off point for the EP – a call to action so to speak. Scribbled in a cheap notebook that lead singer Polash Larsen used as a diary, journal and sketchpad, he recalls the lyrics as being “barely more than a rhythmic reminder that words are meaningless without action”. The EP’s version of *Plans* was the third recording of the track and the one that helped the song find its right home.

“Musically, there’s not much behind it,” says Polash. “I think, in all honesty, the song marks the point at which my fingers learnt the minor 9th and major 7th chord shapes. This iteration has some excellent muted trumpet by Howard (Norseletter: trumpet). We went through a number of mutes before settling on the Harmon, but I think the real star of the show may be Tim’s (Webb: bass) percussive triangle in the chorus. The studio didn’t change this song much. It still sounds like Johnston Street in the 1990s to me. Linc (Yow Yeh: drums) instinctively punctuates my vocal phrasing. Howard throws himself into creating the scene: a smoky bar full of eavesdropped conversation.”

A Man Needs Cooling (Larsen)

I’m trying to be cool, while my bladder is full, I’m jiggling my thighs, while meeting your eyes, it’s a hop to the left, a slide to the right, like I’m dancing, I’m dancing, I’m dancing alright!

The ‘prototypical’ Offtopics song, *A Man Needs Cooling* pulled together all the elements from the band’s live set into a hilarious funk romp. An awkward sexy monologue – with the hero busting for the loo – and inherently, all about dancing. For Polash, it is a little bit more than just tongue-in-cheek. “It might be a silly scenario to set to music, but it’s also a fairly accurate reflection of my world,” he says. “We’re all just hopeless idiots groping around blindly in the dark.”

The song was pretty much complete when the band headed into the studio. “It was one of those situations where I came in with a solid concept, lyric and structure at the outset like some kind of genius and everyone jumped on board,” says Polash. “It’s nice when that happens, but the real me is more likely to half-arse it and then spend weeks whipping a thin idea into shape. Full credit to Nick Herrera here as it would be tempting for many producer/engineers to attempt to change the direction of the song. Instead the

studio process takes the concept even further. The vocals drip with both reverb and slap back. Mark’s (Shannon: keys) keyboards are energetically bouncing back and forth through the dance break. By the end the protagonist’s full bladder is almost something to celebrate.”

Red Eye Jane (Larsen)

Now how can I explain? We gotta give this girl a name, she liked a toke, and a little smoke, so we’ll call her Red Eye Jane...

The inspiration for *Red Eye Jane* came out of ‘tall tales’ told in rehearsals, some of which didn’t need much of a nudge for Polash to try and turn it into something comedic. Musically, it was inspired by the New Orleans 60s groove sounds made famous by the likes of Allen Toussaint, and turned into a guitar-driven rumba boogie. Heading into the studio, there were a few special tweaks the band used to get their desired sound.

“The main rhythm guitar is a hollow-body Gretsch recorded through two amps,” says Polash. “Both amps were close mic’d and there’s a third mic catching both signals plus a bit of acoustic plunkety plunk in the middle of the room. We also went for a dirty-sounding keyboard tone but on the first listen the rhythm guitar and keys were sitting in the same sonic pocket. Everything was a bit thick in the middle. That’s ok for cuddles on a cold winter’s night but it doesn’t cut it in a mix in my opinion so I quickly overdubbed a trebly guitar part using Nick’s hybrid Strat/Tele thing. It sounds like an ice-pick but it’s the right tonal counterpoint to everything else. I was a bit rushed laying that part down and I tend to be all thumbs on a Strat. The playing is a little erratic but hopefully it adds to the quirky vibe of the song. We had great fun putting handclaps and shouty BV’s on the song concluding with yelling and whooping for an end of party feel.”

Fire In My Flue (Larsen)

I didn’t know why I’d break down and cry in the middle of conversation, you wouldn’t say it’s true but now we blue in negotiation, I didn’t want it like this... is this the kiss of separation?

Fire In My Flue was another song penned thanks to inspiration provided by great musicians. Polash says he originally written with the Oz-reggae stylings of Ross Hannaford in mind, it is the angst-ridden dissection of a break-up. While he can’t remember who he was breaking up with, the now holds history to that moment. The

saxophone parts changed a bit in the studio as they were built initially around a former band member, but Omid (Shayan: sax) found his feet with this song, turning it into an introspective number.

“It was incredibly hot in the studio when we recorded this,” says Polash. “The song was meant to be a platform for Omid to show off and there’s both Tenor and Baritone sax on the song, plus there’s his jazz-mento fusion style solo, but the heat was giving us all the intonation squeebles. Parts of this song sound a bit crunchy to me but Tim, our resident expert on everything to do with Jamaican music, says that that happened a lot back in the days of those steamy, Kingston studios too. He maintains you can hear it on those old rocksteady records... makes sense I suppose.”

Funky Grandma (Larsen)

Someone funk'd my grandma, she's got a platform zimmer frame, someone funk'd my grandma, her boiled fruitcake ain't the same...

Funky Grandma is not one of those world-changing songs, it is a straight-up song for dancing. “Paul Simon has said in interviews that he is at his most honest, direct and exposed in the first line of his songs,” says Polash. “If you apply this to *Funky Grandma*... not very profound, my dear old grandma hasn’t made a fruitcake boiled or otherwise for quite some time.”

With these funky themes in mind, the band took the live dancing approach when they headed into the studio to get the vibrancy of the track. “The song originally had an extra verse and chorus but we combined the funky postman/sadhu verse into one to get to the bridge a bit earlier,” says Polash. “Our former guitar player didn’t particularly like this song as he felt it was ‘too jerky’, but the addition of horn parts evened the feel out. No direction changes here. The arrangement is basically the same as the rehearsal version with the addition of some wah on my heart-attack guitar solo. Tim doubles up with some energetic congas to go with that fat bass playing of his. We also had some fun with Mark’s (Bretherton: keys) backing vocals. I really like that deep voice of his when he uses it that way.”

Sunrise In Richmond (Larsen)

Didn't get back home till 4am in the morning, eyes aren't heavy and no one seems to be yawning, pops tells us Frankie thinks he's a muffin, a sevlev donut and we all lick out the stuffin...

Sunrise In Richmond is a time-travel song. It casts back 25 years to seeing bands in the pubs around Richmond, and was actually penned a quarter of a century ago. It has been reworked several times over that period before coming into its current incarnation. As the first single that launched the *Back On The Zine* series, it was the first track to get the full treatment in the studio.

“There was solid playing by everyone in line with the way we rehearsed it, plus additional percussion from Tim, after he puts his 60s Yamaha bass down,” says Polash. “I’m particularly fond of the Guiro in the bridge section. There was no direction change in the studio, other than me

playing the guitar. It’s my Korean made Epiphone Casino on the rhythm and my much beloved – though not often played these days 1971 Gibson SG for the guitar solo. With the exception of the bridge the song is a Two – Five (like Donny Hathaway’s *The Ghetto*).”

Shape I'm In (Camilleri, Burstin, Faehse)

Oh baby, you got me in the shape I'm in...

The Offtopics only cover song. It is a fitting inclusion on the *Back On The Zine* series, as essentially, the big dream project was part inspired by a conversation with Joe Camilleri in the early 2000s. A chance meeting in the studio at Woodstock when Polash was recording with another band was fortuitous. “The album was being engineered by his younger brother Peter Camilleri,” says Polash. “Joe asked how it was going and I said, ‘yeah good... It’s a bit slow, but good,’ and he replied, ‘It’s better to have one really good thing than a whole pile of shit’. Later he stopped by during the mixing of the song to have a listen. ‘This you singing is it?’ I nodded. ‘Sounds good,’ he grunted and then left. Suffice it to say I’m hoping that *Back On The Zine* will be my ‘one really good thing’.”

There was no ambiguity about doing a cover for the band, they just went hard on it and played it with their usual Offtopics style – emulating what audiences experience from their live shows. “A lot of musicians are afraid of the bureaucracy associated with digital and mechanical licensing,” says Polash. “Do not be afraid. I encourage everyone to cover my songs! I will make it easy for you! Our recorded version is pretty faithful to the original, with a couple of additions. We had to give the percussion some special attention, so rather than congas, Tim is embracing his inner beatnik with some bongos. There’s also some subtle sweeping wah on the bongos in the middle section of the song.”

Big Booty Woman (Larsen)

I was held back at school, too much the booty fool, obsessed with booty my whole life, but now I've found my booty wife...

A solid-nod to legendary delta bluesman, *Big Booty Woman* was penned as a show-closer and is still used as that for every Offtopics gig. Polash calls the song his ‘embarrassing love-child of Sir Mixalot, Spinal-Tap and Joe Tex. “Besides being for dancing, it has some of my daggiest and silliest lines,” he says. “Ones like *my baby jiggles like a soft-boiled egg*... This was the first ‘sexy’ monologue I’d written for performance in The Offtopics. When we do it live I tend to adopt a deep Barry White style delivery.... Ooooooh baaabbbbyyyy... I also tend to take my shirt off revealing a white singlet underneath. Because I’m short and a bit paunchy it comes across as quite ridiculous – a bit like a Jack Russell terrier trying to hump George Clooney’s leg. On the recording however, the aural impression isn’t juxtaposed with the visual. It’s really important that the song doesn’t sound creepy or threatening so I lightened my delivery a lot. I raised the pitch of my voice so I sound more like an affable MC down at the bingo hall – rather than a sex crazed bum fetishist.”