

Now, Back to the Band

Between California, a Heartbreaker and a touch of social conscience, Powderfinger ensure their new album is a long way from their frontman's *Tea & Sympathy*. BY DAN LANDER

IN JANUARY, THE FIVE MEMBERS of Powderfinger left behind the backyards and barbies of their Brisbane comfort zone and set off to absorb the L.A. lifestyle. "It's actually quite a liveable place, really," admits guitarist Ian Haug, sounding almost as surprised to be saying those words as many people will be to read them. "The small apartment thing, I'm not used to – but it's been fun here this time."

"Yeah, it's good," agrees Bernard Fanning, before adding, "but I'm ready to see the back of it. You know, we've been here for two months now and that's kind of enough."

The reason for the extended stay has, of course, been the making of album number six. Powderfinger have made a big shift in operations for the record, choosing not to work with long-time producer Nick DiDia and instead striking out into fresh territory with L.A.-based studio guru Rob Schnapf.

"Nick is fantastic, and we know that," explains Fanning, "but this time we just wanted something different. We wanted to try a different approach to the songs – sort of come at them from somewhere new."

"Rob's got a good ear for cutting fat out of songs," continues Haug. "And I mean we did a lot of that before we got here, but he helped us in that way even more. Also, there's a lot of variety in there – less like *Vulnar Street*, and maybe more like the *Internationalist* album."

Schnapf – who is best known as the man who discovered Beck, and also had a key role in producing three of Elliott Smith's seminal records – also brought a lot to the project musically. A very accomplished guitarist, he was able to offer some fresh inspiration to Haug and fellow guitarist Darren Middleton, which was something of a new experience for the pair. Schnapf also had a big hand in shaping Fanning's vocals on the record, even if a large part of that influence was the result of necessity rather than any master plan.

"I was sick a lot of the time that I've been here, with colds and chest infections and that kind of shit," explains Fanning. "I've had three since we've been here – and so some of the tracks I actually recorded while I've been sick. And because of that I think more than anything, Rob encouraged me to not try to sing so well – it's just a little more like Rod Stewart and less like Jeff Buckley... a bit rougher. And a few people around here are quite happy when it's less like Jeff Buckley."

Although nobody was thinking a chest infection was the way to achieve it, there's no question the entire Powderfinger crew were keen to make sure the band's new album



Four Fingers: John Collins, Ian Haug, Bernard Fanning and Darren Middleton (from left). Photo: Jason Kimberley

sounded distinctly different to Fanning's solo material of 2006. Given the success the singer had with *Tea & Sympathy*, everyone was determined to make it clear Powderfinger are still a band and have a personality distinct from that of their frontman.

"They wanted to get as far away from it as possible," says Fanning. "That's probably the main impact of the solo stuff. And that's been part of the intention with this album – and the in-tension," he adds.

"We're all really happy for him that the solo stuff went really well," clarifies Haug. "And none of us – most of all Bernard – expected that to go nuts like it did. But it made us wary of having any songs on this record that anyone might confuse with one of his solo songs. Having said that, we also didn't want to ruin a song by mashing it into a direction that it wasn't going to go, just to achieve that – so it's kind of a fine line."

The album doesn't eschew Fanning's personality altogether – it's simply a case of emphasizing that personality in a different way. As with other Powderfinger records, the new one draws on what the singer calls "the personal experience sort of stuff". However, this time around Fanning couldn't

help but be influenced a little by the greater goings-on in the world. While he's careful not to overemphasize the social content of the new songs – "I wouldn't want to represent this as a Midnight Oil album," he says with a laugh – Fanning admits there is something like a message tangled up in amongst the usual ballads and hip-shakers.

"It's not all doomsday – it's more hopeful than that," says the singer. "But I think it's a kind of double-edged thing – there's certainly

a need for that, because things are so shit in the world at the moment, so there's a bit of a need for people to speak up and act and do something about stuff. But it's such a fine line as a musician whether you go down that road or not; whether you see your responsibilities as making good songs so that people pay attention to you and then if you have something to say then

someone might listen, or whether you go out with this intent to make a statement which maybe could be at the cost of some of the songs you've written. And the two things won't always coincide – the best messages won't always be the best songs on the record. But you know, it's probably about time to sacrifice some of those good songs for the sake of at least trying to draw attention

to some of the things going on."

One such meaningful moment is a song called "Black Tears" – "a ditty, really... just acoustic guitar and vocals, with a little bit of organ" – which Fanning says is a reaction to the continued mistreatment of the indigenous population in Australia.

"I went to Uluru last year," he explains, "and there were people climbing all over it, despite the signs asking them not to, and that just summed it up for me, the disrespect with which Aborigines are treated in Australia. And nothing's changed for the better – in fact it's gotten worse in the last ten years."

A little political ire isn't the only addition to the record either. On a musical level, the band have introduced some new flourishes, in particular more piano, courtesy of Fanning and keyboardist Benmont Tench, best known for his work with Tom Petty's Heartbreakers.

"That was really fucking amazing," says Fanning of working with Tench. "It was a total pleasure. Like, just having the chance to be with someone of that level, and to be there and able to watch them up close. And talk to them and ask them about stuff and just get some of that. And you know, he was a perfect gentleman too. He was sorta like George Clooney is to most men – they wanna be more like him – he was like that to us. When he left, we were all like, 'Man, God I hope I'm like that when I'm fifty-five.'"

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