

## Nick Lowe's brainscram scam!

Bruce Rosenstein

In the ever-fluid rock world, Nick Lowe comes as close to being the man-of-the-hour as anyone. To paraphrase a Stiff Records ad phrase, he is playing "today's music today," but it may have nothing to do with what he'll be up to in six weeks. Emerging from the relative obscurity of Brinsley Schwarz (the band), in which he served several years as lead singer, songwriter and bassist, followed by a period of general laying about after the breakup of the Brinsleys in mid-1975, Lowe has literally burst into prominence by dint of a virtual landslide of recent projects. From cult band to cult leader, Lowe seems on the verge of becoming a household name, an honor he has long deserved.

I talked with Nick in late July about the highlights of the past year, his plans for the immediate future and his feelings about being nearly famous...with a bullet! Clearly a busy chap, Lowe has, in the past two years, produced albums for Graham Parker and the Rumour, the Damned and Elvis Costello; released two solo singles and an EP (named *Bowi* to get back for *Low*); produced and played on parts of the *Bunch of Stiffs* album; produced a 45 for an American band, Clover; written songs and played on Dave Edmunds's *Get It*; and joined Edmunds's Rockpile band for his aborted US tour.

Judging by both his inventive production work for others and his non-pareil songwriting and solo performing, Lowe has developed quite a rep for his talented self. His dry humor and bitter enthusiasm makes him the perfect fed-up rock star, but one who doesn't ride to gigs in a Rolls. Armed with a knack for doing the right things with the right people, Lowe has shown so many glimmers of brilliance lately, that his threatened solo album may just be a masterpiece.

Because of his involvement with the Damned and Stiff, Lowe has been associated with the new wave, which in true Lowe fashion, is old wave to him now.

"I got off on them," Lowe says, "because of their attitude. They had something going for them. This was before punk-rock was even one-quarter of what it's blown up to be now. I thought they were obnoxious wankers when I first met them, but I got off on them for something kind of obscure. It was because a lot of musician friends, they didn't just say to me, 'Oh, the Damned, they're shit.' They'd say, 'The Damned ought to be stamped out, they ought to be put down now with a hammer!' And I thought, well, any group that can generate this kind of reaction in somebody must have something going for them."

He is much more positive and enthusiastic about Elvis Costello, whose next album he is also producing. About the first, *My Aim Is True*, Nick comments, "It's a fantastic record. I'm not saying that because I produced it; it's just the music on it. It's not particularly anything I had to do with it. The music on the record is exciting because it's new wave music in a way, but it's very, very musical. It's not hundred mile an hour bashes — 'I'm so bored, I'm so pissed off,' the way they all go on nowadays — it's old-fashioned to me. It's not that I'm an old fart, or I don't understand what they're going on about. I just think that sort of music is old-fashioned.

"People have called me a punk-rocker because I did the Damned. It's pop music to me; I just do whatever I think is interesting at the time. I ain't going to do any more Damned LPs; they asked me to do their next LP, but I won't do it. I'll do Elvis' next one because I think it is going to be even hotter than the one he's got out now. I'll do it not because I think, 'Ooh, I'm onto a good hot one here; I'll make myself really well known by this.' It's not that. It's because I think it's hot music. And I just get on with what I think is hot music."

The first Nick Lowe solo album should be out in October to coincide with a British package tour by Stiff artists. He put together a band which will do the tour with fellow Stiffs Elvis Costello, Wreckless Eric, and Ian Dury, leader of the now-defunct Kilburn and the Highroads.

The Nick Lowe Band will include guitarist Larry Wallace (look under the Pink Fairies), along with a Finnish guitarist Nick calls "Mush" because his name is, according to Nick, unpronounceable. On keyboards will be Penny Tyburn, and there will be two drummers, to be picked from Terry Williams (ex-Man, now with Rockpile), a 17-year-old named Dave Berk, and Pete Thomas (a member of Elvis Costello's band this summer) who was with Chilli Willi and recently returned from the States where he did a two year stint with John Stewart.

To those who have followed Nick Lowe's career since Brinsley days, public recognition seems long overdue. If anyone has the raw ingredients to be a star, it would be Nick. He's got tall, natural good looks, an engaging personal manner and of course lots of singing and songwriting talent. However, the Brinsleys' approach to rock was low-key, a trait which in the end did them in. Brinsley and keyboardist Bob Andrews became relatively well-known through Graham Parker and the Rumour, and now it's happening with Lowe, who could conceivably end up bigger than Parker himself.

We talked a good deal about possible stardom, and if his current degree of popularity has affected his life. "Well, I mean it has a bit," he answered, "I pull a lot more chicks now since they've seen my name in the papers; so it's affected me in that respect, which I completely welcome.

"I think in a way it's sort of inevitable. I don't make any moves to make myself famous, if you know what I mean. I don't give a shit about that. I'm an acid casualty; I have enough trouble every day just opening my eyes in the morning and keeping my sanity together. I'm involved in the music business as my work, my job. Some people fry hamburgers, some people work in biscuit factories; I involve myself with anything that's a challenge. I've got to keep my sanity together. . I don't think of fame as, 'Oh, I'm starting to make it now, man.' I just get on with what I think is good music and for some reason it seems to fit with the times."

If you've listened to Lowe's songs for the Brinsleys, you know that he can write well in almost any rock style. Funk-rock, country-rock, light soul, reggae, pop ballads, hard rock, pop-rock — it's all on their albums. With a catalog of many great and some brilliant songs behind him, Nick's now staking out new territory.

"I'm not following any fashions. Far from it; I want to make up my own fashions. I don't want to copy anybody else. I don't mean to sound at all big-headed. I feel almost bemused by it. I feel almost humble about it. If I hadn't grilled my brains on acid I would have been a Captain and Tennille sort of character. That's what I am; a pop guy who's grilled his brains on acid. And now even though I'm still well out to lunch, I can't shake off the fact that my roots are in pop. Whereas I used to be ashamed of it, nowadays I kind of groove on it.

"That's how I can produce records. I think of everything in terms of two-and-a-half-minute, three-minute pictures. It's like painting a picture: every spare bit, every bit you don't need, dump it. You've just got the idea of a song, you've got the vocal good, a little bit of an arrangement, a clever bit in the solo or something like that; so everything is needed. I'm good at doing that, I know I am. There's not many things I'm good at but I know I'm good at doing that."

Nick's current projects include producing the next Dr. Feelgood album, which he is doing at London's Pathway studios, a small eight-track place used for all Stiff sides chiefly because the rates are cheap. Although such considerations are important to Stiff on their shoestring budget, United Artists, the Feelgood's label, couldn't care less.

"Andrew [Lauder, UA's head of A&ZR and the man who signed Brinsley Schwarz way back when] didn't like the fact that I was gonna do it on eight-track, but I said to him, 'Fuck it man, they're only a three-piece group. Christ, eight tracks, three-piece group, we can do it easy.' In any case I'm charging them a huge amount of money to do it, so I said, 'You can cut down your expenses, man.'

In 1974 Lowe and the Brinsleys brought Dr. Feelgood to UA's attention. They also were the opening act on the summer '74 tour of Britain which featured Dave Edmunds (backed by the Brinsleys) and the Brinsleys doing their own set. Of Dr. Feelgood, Lowe says, "I've always wanted to produce them, and now Wilko's left they've got a new guitarist who's fantastic. No one gives them a hope in hell since Wilko's left, but they're much better than they were when Wilko was with them. I think I can make a great LP with them. I've written some stuff for them and I've collected some material for them to do, obscure R&B stuff, because I want them to sound less bluesy than in the past. I thought their sound on record has been really wimpy, so I want them to sound much tougher."

I asked him if he likes *Bow*. "Good question, that, because those are really outtakes; they're alright tunes and everything, but they're like a sample of what I've got, what I've recorded at Pathway. I just banged them out. When I went to America, with Edmunds, Jake [Riviera, Nick's manager as well as head of Stiff] said, 'Look, if you're going to be away for three or four months you've got to have something out.' So I said, 'All right, let's do this track, this track and this track, bang 'em out, run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes it.' I don't think it's very good, I think some of the tracks are kind of interesting, but it was done purely to keep my name in the papers."

Most of the songs on Lowe's own album will be originals, though there will be a Jim Ford song (the Brinsleys did several Ford tunes) called "36 Inches High," and his version of a Billy Fury song, "Halfway to Paradise." Some of Nick's own tunes are "Shake 'n' Pop," "Music for Money," "Tonight" and "I Love the Sound of Breaking Glass." He described the LP as "killer stuff, all pop, real melodious pop stuff. But it's got a bit of a catch in the words."

Although Nick said he had a great time on the Edmunds/Rockpile tour of America (supporting Swan Song label-mates Bad Company), he wasn't thrilled about the way the band was dropped from the bill. He figures there were three reasons: (1) attendance was relatively poor and it was felt a stronger opening act was needed, one which could fill a few seats on its own; (2) the reviews of the tour either were negative to Bad Company, ignoring Rockpile, or (worse?) negative to Badco and quite complimentary to Rockpile; and (3) which according to Lowe "is more incredible than any of the others. I've heard this said from some quite reliable sources, some sources quite close to Bad Company, and I find it absolutely incredible, but another reason why we got thrown off the tour is that they [Bad Company] are so freaked out with what's happening in England at the moment — not so much the punk-rock thing, but the whole new wave thing in London — they're so paranoid about it, that they figure because I produced

the Damned I was ringleader of a conspiracy to overthrow them, something like that. They actually didn't like me, didn't want me on the tour personally."

Although Lowe and Edmunds have been working together for several years, Nick left the band after the US tour. He said that apart from the fact that he liked the band members and their music, the main reason he agreed to join in the first place was to tour the US which he had never done before.

On their solo album, *Max*, the Rumour has recorded Nick's "Mess with Love," which was going to be on the last never-released Brinsleys LP. A song Nick wrote and recorded as a joke, "Bay City Rollers We Love You" (by "the Tartan Horde"), went to number one in Japan, so he's done a follow-up, "Rollershow." It's on UA/Toshiba in Japan. And perhaps to bring things full circle, he's produced an EP for the satire-rockers Alberto y Lost Trios Paranoias; a take-off on punk. It has songs from a successful play they are presenting in London called *Sleek*. Instead of punk rock, it's "snuff rock," and you can guess what happens. Lowe and the Albertos recorded the EP in one day.

"As soon as it comes out it's gonna scotch all the 'one-two-three-four!' BEEEDLEEDL million-miles-an-hour stuff. I mean, if I see another group with dyed hair that thinks they're tough with razorblades around their necks, I'll go mad. They're wimps. I don't think it's a threat anymore. It used to be good fun when it was a threat. But now it's wimpy. It's what the Easybeats were to the Beatles."