

SILVERCHAIR'S DANIEL JOHNS +
DANCE GURU PAUL MAC ==

THE DISSOCIATIVES

by Johnnie Clott

I don't have to tell you this! But I figure, what the hell, I'm going to anyway. Daniel Johns is the nominal head of the most successful international rock act in Australia in the last decade, Silverchair. Here's another fact. Paul Mac has been at the cutting edge of the dance music scene throughout his career. What's more, these two have now come together, a move that could be seen as dangerous to their careers, and formed another thing altogether called The Dissociatives.

They first worked together when Paul remixed Silverchair's *Freak* album. Then, a little further down the track, 1997 to be exact, Paul contributed 'keyboards and other noises' to Silverchair's *Neon Ballroom* and *Diorama* albums. He also appeared onstage with the band a few times. Then, as often happens between musicians who share similar experiences like success and fame, they became friends. So they expressed that friendship in the best way songwriters can. They simply wrote a few songs together and pretty soon they'd produced the EP, *I Can't Believe It's Not Rock*. In mid 2003 the pair got together again to record an album of songs, producing it themselves. After recording the basic tracks in London, as you do, they headed back to Newcastle and Sydney to put the finishing touches to it.

They had named themselves after a mental state that has been associated with a rare and mysterious psychiatric curiosity. The disorders centred around this state are now understood to be triggered by severe trauma in early childhood, most typically extreme, repeated physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse. It's also associated with multiple personality disorder. The question immediately arises as to why two highly successful musicians and songwriters like these would label themselves in this way.

"If you take out the abuse and the trauma part," laughed Paul Mac, "and the multiple personality part, that kind of state where your mind is split from your body is more of what we were going for rather than childhood trauma."

"We weren't really aware of the trauma part of it," added Daniel Johns amused at this new piece of information. "It was more to do with the dissociative state which is when your mind is disconnected from your physical body which is, to us, what music is or more, kind of, the state you get into when you write music."

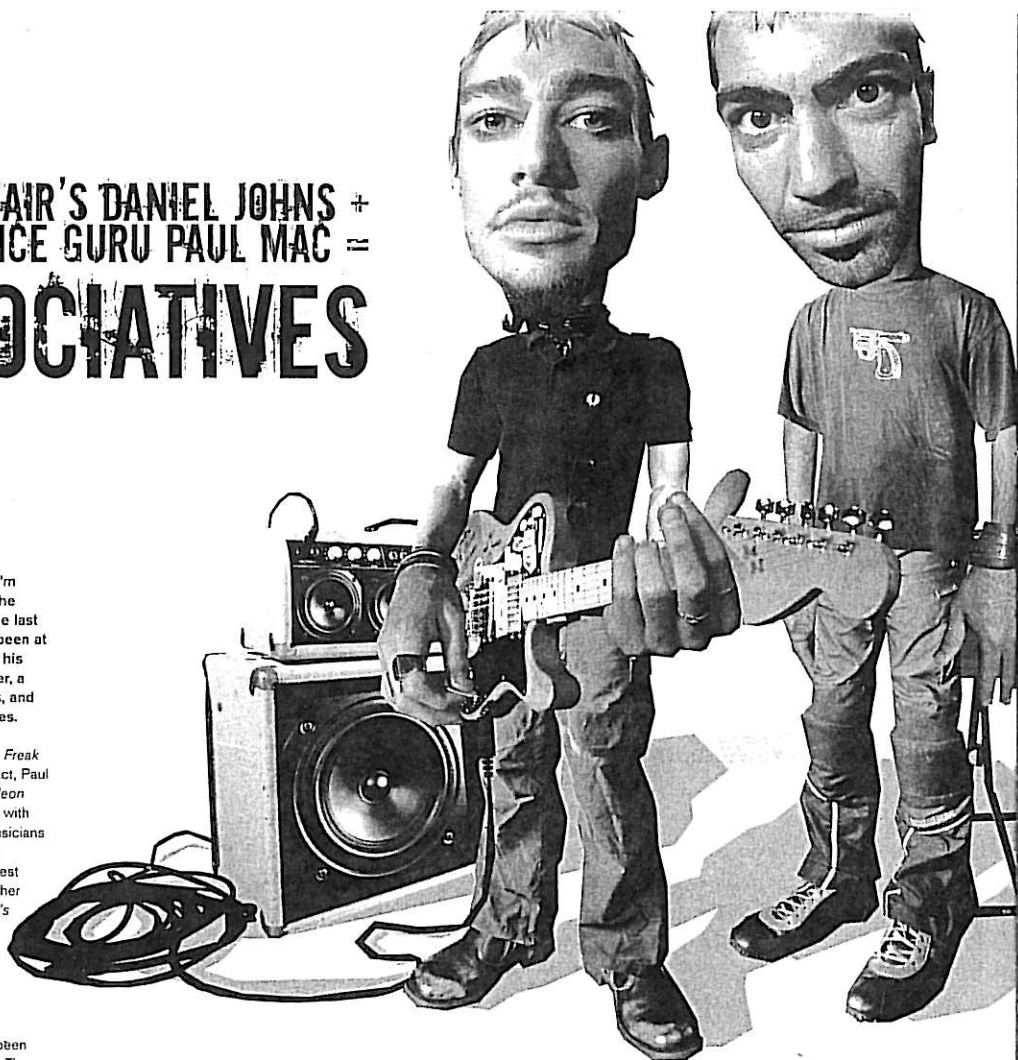
With both Paul and Daniel seeming to come from disconnected worlds, which down here at the fan level are most often antagonistic, it's also a surprise, then, to see a rock artist and a dance artist like these two getting on so well together.

"I think the link between rock music and dance music is simply music," ventures Paul, "and we're both just in love with music. I think we've individually expressed that differently. I've done it through bleeps and electronics and beats and Dan's done it with organic instruments. It's still doing the same thing. We both liked what each other did in those respective worlds and when we bought it together it wasn't like trying to do rock meets dance or anything. It was more just like 'okay, let's melody out and have some fun with whatever tools we've got available'."

These two also seem to be acutely aware that the divisions and antagonisms that dance and rock aim at each other can be seen as simply the product of marketing.

"Yeah, definitely," Daniel agrees. "When people heard of the new band they assumed it was gonna be some dance-meets-rock album. I'd never listen to something if it was labelled that way. I really had respect for what Paul did musically and vice versa so we got together. We both just have a love of melody and songcraft."

With Paul being a conservatorium trained musician and Daniel being, like most rock musicians, an auto-didact, it's interesting to speculate on how they communicated as writers.



"I really enjoy that split," Paul responds enthusiastically, "because often my training's been really cool and it helps me develop stuff - arranging, orchestrating and making things work. Like I know what notes we need. But the beautiful thing from where Dan comes from is it's just all stuff that he's hit and I think he's not technically sure of what's going on, what chord it is, so he sort of thinks outside the rules. So it's a really nice combination of those two spaces. You get the best of both worlds."

"Yeah," Daniel agrees, warming to the subject. "I've got a lot of ideas and sounds which I want to create but I have no idea how to articulate that. It was really helpful getting together with Paul on 'Diorama' for instance. I had all these ideas and it was like 'what's this chord' and Paul analysed the notes and goes 'well that shouldn't actually work but it does'. He talks me through it and tells me why it works. And then I can make some sense of my thoughts which doesn't happen very often," he laughs.

With a strong body of work already behind each of them it's easy to see a continuing development of their own personal traditions. Daniel's song structures have gotten looser and looser as he's continued to write and record, veering closer and closer to film music. It's an area that both share an interest in. But the recent single, the catchy and highly impressive *Somewhere Down the Barrel*, is a tightly structured record. It fits perfectly within the pop song tradition. Everything that should be there is there, from the Beatlesque pedalling intro-hook right through to the false stop at the end, a tension/release technique pioneered in the sixties by bands like the Easybeats with *Friday on My Mind*.

"Well that tight structure was kind of enforced by Paul actually," admits Daniel, "because I was zeroing more and more towards unconventional structures. I had a real aversion to pop structures until I met Paul and Paul kind of introduced me to how beautiful they can be providing it's an interesting song. I always thought that if you structure a song in that way you were conforming and it no longer was of any artistic relevance. Paul showed me that it can actually be of more artistic relevance because it's more palatable to people and you can open their minds to different forms of melody and so on. That is one of the most valuable lessons I've learnt from working with Paul. I don't think I would've learnt it from anyone else."

Lyrically, the words have all been Daniel's. They're not straight narratives but are indirect in what they're trying to say. The closest description may be the stream-of-consciousness style Jim

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Morrison used to use with the Doors. There are bursts of seemingly disconnected images here, there and everywhere.

"The most influential lyricist and poet that I've been exposed to," explains Daniel, "the one that opened my mind to stream-of-consciousness, was William Burroughs. When I got into that when I was about eighteen it changed my lyrical approach. I just stopped thinking. As soon as I stopped thinking my lyrics became more intelligent. For this album I just kept what came out. All the lyrics for this album were written in one night. It was originally written as one poem that was fourteen pages long and I cut out the bits I thought were relevant. I just sat there and let it all pour out. Even if I sit down and have a concept of what the song is going to be about, I usually just try to evaluate what I'm feeling and then try to express an emotion."

Emotion. Stream of consciousness. Head space. It seems these two songwriters have stayed true to their understanding of the dissociative concept after all. But then again, what they do as songwriters has been better described as autotelic experience. It's a state where most writers have a sense that their skills are, and I quote, "adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there's no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces these experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it's difficult, or dangerous." Like they say, it's what you do when you write music.

Meet The Dissociatives is out now through EMI. The boys tour nationally throughout July.