

Return of the Pop Vigilantes

After three years of still waters in the music industry, pop terrorists **This Is Serious Mum** reappear to stir up trouble, Ian Bennington spoke to Ron Hitler-Barassi and Humphrey B Flaubert.

He stood at the edge of the stage with no shirt and wearing a hood shouting at the crowd. He had just finished using a converted leaf blower to shoot packets of potato chips into the audience, and now he was sentencing us all to "Fourteen years in Rowville".

The man's real name is unknown, but at the moment he is *Ron Hitler-Barassi* one of the two singers of the unusual band TISM.

For those unfamiliar with TISM, they are to the Australian music scene what the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* was to the King.

In a variety of colorful costumes they tell jokes of questionable taste, dance around like drunken yobos, evade direct answers and make life difficult for anyone trying to get any sense out of them.

TISM have often held the press at an arms length. They arrange interviews in abattoirs, or in the middle of football fields. Their refusal of answering a direct question has made them legends in some circles but pariahs in others. *Humphrey B Flaubert*, the second vocalist who is also one of the two guitarists said "My favorite fax interview was where our answers became gradually more and more diminished until we couldn't even answer yes, we answered y.

"Those were the good old days. There was a rather tension filled atmosphere between us and the press, which hasn't probably changed that much, but at the time we thought it was fun to print all that stuff. "It's very important not to take anything we say seriously of course. We've said a lot of things in the past, that we may have cause to regret, but it's important also to know that nobody gives a fuck about TISM, nor should they. So we can get away with saying pretty much anything because of our insignificance." Like *King Lear's* jester, TISM play the fool while making harsh judgments on things they see around them.

In the fifteen years since the Melbourne based band exposed their manufactured image to the unsuspecting pop world, they have ridiculed the beauty myth, casual sex, conformity, adoration of pop stars, racism, celebrity suicide, fashion and closed-mindedness.

No topic is taboo to them and they treat every subject with equal disdain. As Ron puts it "I don't like it when your *Secret Life of Us*, latte drinking, art directing inner-city video making crew slag off and joke about your outer suburb people. That sort of narrow-minded self-righteousness we satirize. But that's not saying that the narrow-minded self-righteousness of your red neck type isn't equally worthy of satire."

In a track unlikely to be played on their current tour "Kill Americans" the band encourage the listener to wipe out everyone from Americans, to themselves. Ron explains "There's a pointless self mocking stupidity to a lot of TISM aggression. I think a lot of people get it but a lot of people don't. I just think mate, you can't see the wood for the trees."

Like comic book superheroes, or liquor store bandits, TISM wear masks and do not use their real names. What is known about their real lives is only guesswork.

Humphrey's answer as to why they wear the masks is

quite cerebral, "The answer that makes me sound good is that we desired to circumvent the cult of personality that is inherent in rock music by choosing to remain anonymous. Unlike every other band in rock we chose to be anonymous.

"The answer that makes me sound good would probably also incorporate some lengthy discussion about Brechtian alienation techniques, about our post modernist grasp of ever cooling universe, and a dehumanizing society encapsulated in the somewhat paramilitary aspect of our clothing. All of those things would make me sound good, but actually we're really boring guys." When asked if they would ever remove the masks, "I cannot see any possibly good reason for doing that. No, why would you do that? It would be like if you were the lead singer of Powderfinger turning up to the ARIAs without shaving and wearing a hat. It's just not on."

Ron has a more personal reason for the mask, "I don't think my electorate would like it, marginal seats and stuff. If the Liberal party are going to continue on their course for Australia I want to be there right with them."

The band are well aware of the benefits of keeping their identities hidden, as Humphrey says "the trade off is that when we meet somebody they appreciate us for what we are, not what we represent. Also the people who hate us, and there are millions of them, don't know who we are, and that's very important."

TISM are not the first band to hide their faces. Best known for keeping their fans guessing as to what they really look like were the New York band, *Kiss*. Through the late 1970's large rewards were offered by the tabloid press for photos of the band members unmasked. The similarities end there though. *Kiss* were really a normal rock 'n' roll band who came across a fantastic marketing gimmick. TISM's modus operandi is more like the lesser-known San Francisco band *The Residents*, who are best remembered for their giant eyeball masks.

As to whether TISM were influenced by the alternative four piece, Ron commented "Maybe not directly, but *The Residents* were one of those groups that you were always glad they were around. I remember seeing them at The Ballroom when they came out (the 13th Anniversary tour, August 1986), and everything was considered. The live show was not just a live show, it had a sense of theatre and drama. The PR was manufactured. Even the albums, you could tell had a very strong and unusual stance.

"I don't know if they directly influenced us, but we're very similar. I think that there is nothing that TISM does that isn't strongly manufactured."

Now TISM don their balaclavas, take on their alter egos of Hitler-Barassi, Flaubert, Jock Cheese, Eugene de la Hot Croix Bun, Leak Van Vtalen, Les Miserables and Jon St Peenis and record a new album about every three years. According to the band's legend, the seven members became friends at university. As Ron puts it "we were the sort of kids not good enough for the footy team, not smart enough for the debating team, that sort of non-entity type kids.

"We tended to band together, not so much out of self protection, 'cos people ignored us, just out of a pure sense of shared mediocrity. A bit like the liberal cabinet, or Dennis Napthine's front bench. That shared sense of 'no ones looking at us, no ones listening and that's fair enough 'cos we got nothing to say'".

Without an album release since 1998's www.tism.wanker.com TISM were able to sell out two shows at the Hi-Fi bar. That this band could sell 1,760 tickets on the basis of their name alone says a lot about the audience that TISM attracts. "They certainly have a very dedicated fan base" said Mark Goodwin, the manager of the Hi-Fi bar "I think their uniqueness, is what their appeal is. People know what to expect when they go to a TISM show. It's not going to be a mundane show, it's going to be a very entertaining performance."

Tonight Ron's habit of falling into the crowd packed at front of the stage has cost him his shirt and three hoods. With any luck he will retain his pants. Mark was familiar with the band from his days managing Sydney's Metro club. "When they played (there) last tour Ron Hitler-Barassi took off through the crowd. He had his balaclava on but otherwise he was completely naked. He ended up at the bar in the foyer asking to be served. The bar staff just said 'fuck off and get back on stage'. Off he went again". Humphrey adds "As anyone who has been to a TISM show knows there is a certain amount of nudity involved. You would never find



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me nuding up though, because I am ashamed of my body.”

TISM's shows involve far more extreme theatrics than is normal in the rock and pop scene. As Ron explains “We’ve had painters, debaters, a full wedding, Shakespeare. After that we had the jumping castles and the latest show had 14 trumpeters, a giant footy and the leaf blowers.

“The leaf blowers rocked. Backstage when we were starting the leaf blowers up I was pissing myself (laughing). All the costumes were getting sucked into the air intakes of the leaf blowers, so we were being eaten alive by our own props. This is real rock ‘n’ roll. I don’t reckon that *You Am I* and *Radiohead* get this sort of shit. Their roadies don’t have to take apart the leaf blower engine and get the tinsel out so that it can be returned to the hire firm and we can get our deposit back.

“That’s what TISM’s all about, getting our deposit back on the garden equipment you’ve hired for the show.

“We got a lawn mower stolen once, from the Corner Hotel. We used three lawn mowers on stage. There are amps, guitars and mixing desks and some prick steals the lawn mower. That’s some weird junkie. Why wasn’t that on *A Long Way to the Top?*”

The bands anger was vented tonight on a fan who had managed to climb out of the crowd and reach the stage.

The fan tore off Ron’s hood exposing him as an average middle aged guy who would not stand out in a crowd. For his trouble the fan receive a good kicking from the four members of the band who had been busy with their dance routines. With this sort of barely contained aggression it is difficult to believe that Ron suffers from nerves before the show.

“I shit myself before every TISM show. It doesn’t matter how little I play, it doesn’t matter how often I play.

“I think one of the great things about TISM is we have never played live enough for it not to be a really frightening experience for us. A lot of the energy and chaos of a TISM show comes about from the fact that unlike other bands who play 140 shows in 180 days we play 25 shows a year, and some years we play none. The stage for us is still a unique world, to be on a stage is like being nowhere else and to get there for us still means transforming yourself from your normal off-stage persona to your onstage persona and that’s where the shitting yourself element comes in. I’ve never played a gig where I haven’t been really nervous and I reckon that’s the only way to be.”

The night finished with TISM being joined on stage by a 14 piece horn section, to perform their 1996 hit “Greg, the stop sign”, before the band left the stage to be bundled into waiting cars. We will see quite a bit of them this summer before they take off the hoods again and return to their day jobs and animosity.

“It’s a little bit like a continually dislocating shoulder” said Humphrey “(if) you’ve done it once there is always the fear that you will do it again. There is a weakness in the joint. So it is with TISM. We have managed to create an idea that has made some people around this country keen to see it repeated every three years. This of course strikes fear and horror into the minds of record reviewers, music programmers, promoters and so on, because there is an audience for TISM that keeps coming back. And they pass it on to their younger brothers or their friends up the road, and so indeed we will keep coming back.

“The improvements in medical technology over the years will ensure that it is quite possible that we will be working well into the next century. So every three years like a recurring bout of dyspepsia you will see us.”

Whatever the future may hold for the mysterious seven, it is good to know that they are out there trying to protect popular culture from taking itself too seriously.

TISM's new DeRigueur Mortis is released on Festival records and in shops now.

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