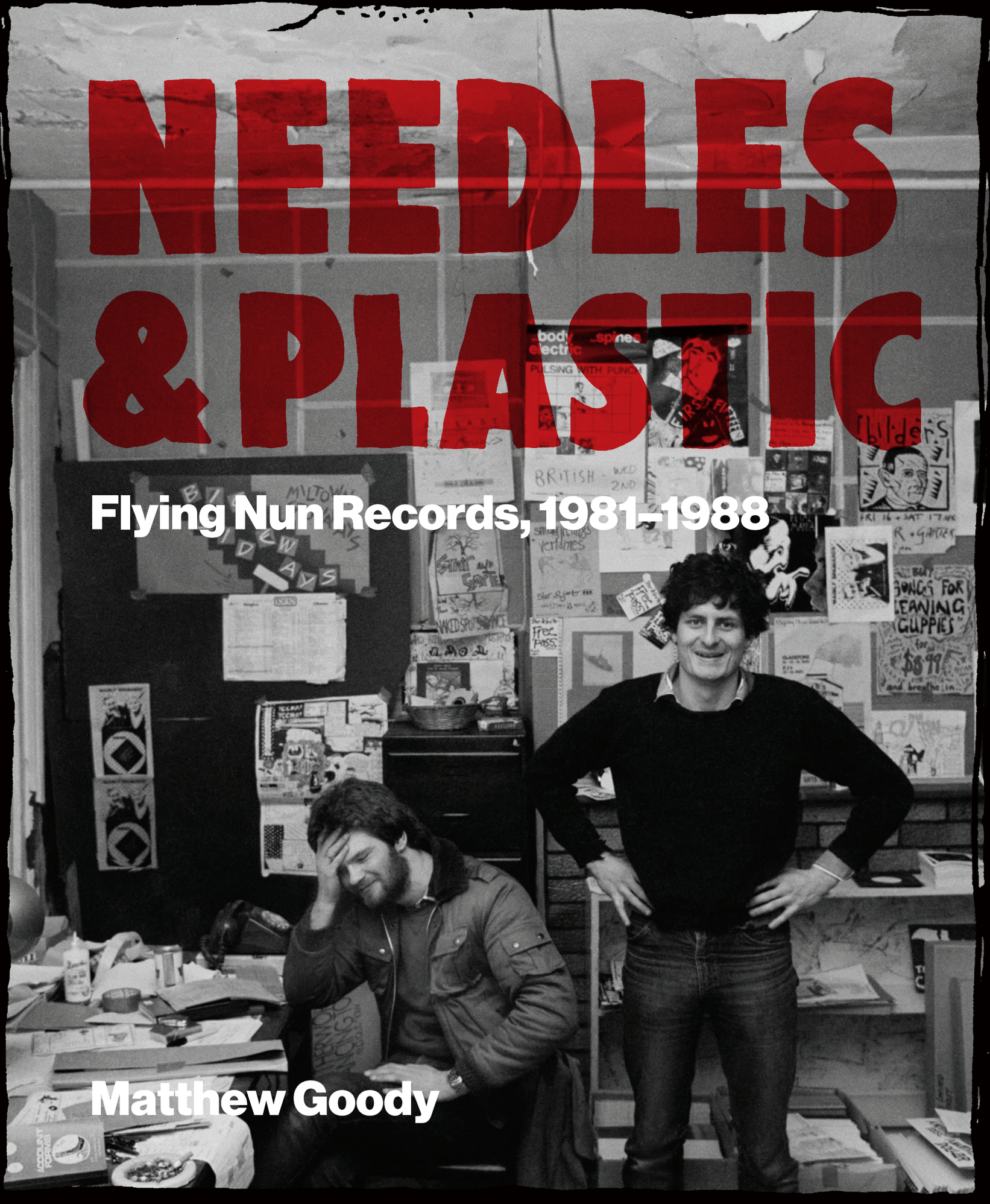
NEEDLES & PLASTIC

Flying Nun Records, 1981–1988



Matthew Goody

Ballon d'essai's new E.P. (7) songs excellent colour

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33 MINIALBUM

The new Ballon d'essai E.P. - resplendent in fabulis red, Yellow n Black cover songs are: isolation, False Projections, Simon says, Santabananag artificial Romance, Armchair Tourist & Why = a total of

on here
Yep this is wot it looks like
5 excellent songs from Ch. Ch. band - now dis banded, but more than just a documentation 'tis good.
FOR BOTH

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Flying Nun Records, 1981–1988

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Cover image: Roger Shepherd and Hamish Kilgour at Flying Nun's Hereford Street office in mid-1983. Photograph: Alec Bathgate

Preceding page: Ian Dalziel in the Flying Nun office, the Dominion Building, Cathedral Square, Christchurch, *c.* 1985/1986. Collection of Simon Grigg

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For Agnes, Emmett and Samara

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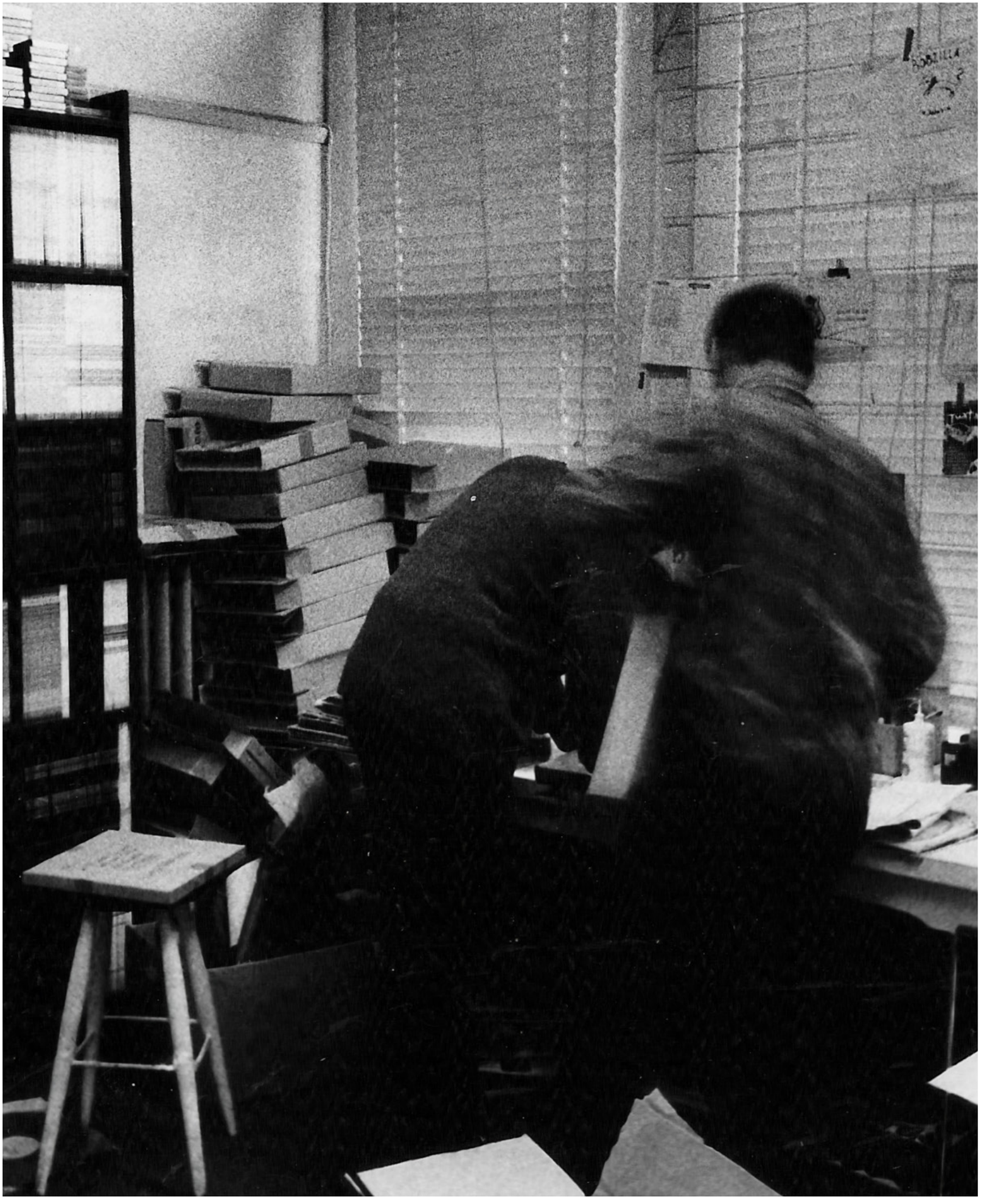
Preface

For me it all started in a record shop. I was living in London and stepped into my favourite haunt to do a weekly pass through the new arrivals. I came down the stairs and there it was, The Clean's *Boodle Boodle Boodle*. It was the first in the stack with Chris Knox's weird drawing of the band staring back at me. I'd never seen it before. I had been a fan of The Clean for some time but had only ever known their music through *Anthology*, their retrospective collection released in North America in 2002. I was vaguely familiar with their label Flying Nun as well, but I had never stumbled on any of the original records from New Zealand. Here was my chance. I grabbed it immediately.

But right behind *Boodle Boodle Boodle* were other records from the label, many of which I had never heard of. Someone had clearly traded in their collection. A stark black-and-white cover for an album by This Kind Of Punishment caught my eye. I bought it and took it home. When I put it on, my wife's ears perked up immediately. 'What is *this*?' she called from the next room. I had no idea, but I knew it was astounding and that I needed to know more.

The more I listened, the more I scrutinised the sleeves and read up on Flying Nun and the bands, the more questions I had. I wanted to place the records in the overall narrative of the label, but new mysteries kept emerging. The beginning and end of the period covered in this book are two good examples. Finding out something basic like what record came out first on Flying Nun proved to be far from simple. All the write-ups on the label's early days started with The Clean's 'Tally Ho!'. But The Pin Group's 'Ambivalence' had the first catalogue number. So, which was it? Then there was *Bird-Dog* by The Verlaines. Looking at details on the LP, the material was recorded in mid-1986, but the copyright and catalogue number suggested it had been released a year later, in mid-1987. Most sources used that release date, too, even Flying Nun founder Roger Shepherd's memoir and the label's website. But digging around I realised that *Bird-Dog* was only released in the middle of 1988. Why? A difference of a year may not seem like a big deal, but I quickly learned that a lot happened in that year. The late release told a story that mattered.

Weird catalogue numbers, murky details about releases, information on the sleeves that didn't quite add up: confronting those mysteries led me to write this book. I wanted to use my research skills and background as a collector to write a history of the early days of Flying Nun using its catalogue as the backbone – to fill out the backstory of each artist, explain how each record was made and follow it through to the music's reception by buyers and critics. From the start, I had a comment of Bruce Russell's kicking around in my head. He wrote in his book *Left-Handed Blows* that 'the



record is a dissemination device and a visual object, a record of the event in time and a commodification of a moment in history'.[1] It was an important perspective to keep in mind. I wanted to make sense of the history, character and spirit of Flying Nun through the things it produced, and in doing so trace the profound effects these records and artists had on listeners.

The starting point was always the label though, not a particular scene, group of bands or sound. As Michael Azerrad wrote in *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, the great history of US underground rock in the 1980s, independent labels created their own distinct identities. They did so as much as the bands themselves because for fans 'the label could be expected to not only be good, but good in a certain way'.[2] This was certainly the case with Flying Nun. When a record carried that name it brought with it a whole host of expectations and assumptions. At its core, that identity was grounded in a spirit of independence and DIY. At least for the first few years, lack of money, the small scale of the scene and a willingness from Roger Shepherd to give control to the bands meant that Flying Nun was very do-it-yourself. Bands made recordings in old halls and bedrooms, and then pressed up records that were housed in handmade sleeves accompanied by comic books or posters drawn by the band. It was wild and weird stuff and no one else in New Zealand was doing anything like it.

But the decision to focus on the records was also an acknowledgement that the people and events discussed here were distant in time and place from me as an author. I never got to see any of these artists first-hand. My passion and admiration for Flying Nun came from listening to the records. The records were therefore the best tool to help me write about the label. I realised I was not alone in taking this approach. I had heard Johan Kugelberg talk about something similar at the Utrecht Record Fair in 2010, discussing his work putting together his book *Velvet Underground: New York Art* with Jon Savage. He argued that music collectors often immerse themselves in a scene or subgenre that they just missed out on. He elaborated further in a later interview:

> *Some collect the romanticized trickle-down experiences of their older brothers and sisters, some collect the sounds surrounding the years of their actual birth, and some collect what they felt immersed in the zeitgeist of, but could not follow through as lifestyle, usually due to age, sometimes due to geography. This is bittersweet: It is possible that the collecting instinct stems from an attempt to reconnect to the very moment when art opened your mind to the endless possibilities of human expression for the first time.*[3]

Having decided to write a discographic history of Flying Nun, I also came to a fairly quick decision about the period I wanted to cover. Surveying the entire catalogue never entered my mind. It seemed too daunting for one, but also not very interesting, too encyclopedic, without much of a story. What drew my attention were two events in the late '80s that fundamentally changed the character of Flying Nun. In 1987 EMI, the country's last record-pressing plant, closed. That closure forced Roger Shepherd to abandon handling his own sales and distribution and sign with a corporate partner, WEA. Then in May 1988, Shepherd closed the Christchurch office and moved operations to Auckland. A label that was founded with a mission to support South Island music headed up north and many artists felt abandoned in the process. The moment when Flying Nun ceased being a South Island-based label bookended a particular period in its overall story.

A seven-year period also meant that I could ensure this discographic history was comprehensive enough to provide a picture of Flying Nun as a whole. Journalists love to gravitate to the 'Dunedin Sound' when writing about the label, but it is important to remember that the whole thing started in Christchurch. It was the Garden City bands that first convinced Roger Shepherd to start his label, and while they were soon eclipsed by what was happening in Dunedin, they still made great music. There is a reason why labels in the United States are still reissuing Terminals and Victor Dimisich Band records decades later. They were fantastic, but usually overlooked. As Bruce Russell noted in his liner notes to the compilation *Time To Go*, journalists that look back at the early years of Flying Nun often make a few mistakes. 'One is to think that the main creative impetus came from Dunedin, when in reality there was as much if not more really memorable music coming from Christchurch, the town that actually gave birth to the label.' He also argued that another mistake made was 'to think that the music being made was simply a

direct response to what was hip in the post-punk music of the day'.[4] While that may have arguably been the case in the South Island, some bands, particularly in Auckland, were reacting to a lot of post-punk, and they too have been ignored in most stories about the label. Artists like Phantom Forth, Marie And The Atom or This Kind Of Punishment (not really an Auckland band if we're getting technical) have never got their due because they don't fit a convenient narrative of what Flying Nun was perceived to be. But what Chris Knox and Doug Hood spearheaded for Flying Nun in Auckland was massively important and deserving of a lot more attention. It was not just their lo-fi four-track recording either. They left their mark all over the place: organising studio sessions, distributing records, designing adverts, helping with artwork, filming videos, organising gigs and tours. They embraced the whole spirit of the operation like no one else and got behind the bands in a truly inspirational way, with no real expectations about being compensated.

Hood and Knox are just two of the many characters that will pop out in these pages. Digging into the records drew out of the shadows people who existed in the background of Flying Nun's story – studio engineers, producers and sound people like Hood, Arnie van Bussel, Bill Lattimer and Terry Moore; photographers and artists like Paul Smith, Carol Tippet, Lesley Maclean, Stuart Page and Ronnie van Hout; and the Flying Nun staff who worked to build a name for the label around the world, like Craig Taylor at Flying Nun UK, booking agent Thomas Zimmermann in Germany, and the combo of Hamish Kilgour and Gary Cope at the home office. Then there were the friends and family who helped make it all work, people like the Kilgour brothers' mum Helen, 'Mrs Clean', who helped to distribute The Clean's records; Barbara Ward, who made what Chris Knox did for Flying Nun possible; or the endless distribution friends like Ian Dalziel or Chris Lipscombe, who got the records into the shops. And then there were the musicians themselves, whose full impact on the music of Flying Nun only became clear when you looked at the entire catalogue. People like Mary Heney or Peter 'Buck' Stapleton had their fingerprints on several great Christchurch bands. Peter Gutteridge's influence is evident in so many Dunedin acts, but he is often a fleeting character, appearing in bands for short stints or playing on one or two tracks for a recording session.

If the backbone of this book was built using Flying Nun's discography and the flesh was the characters involved, much of its colour was enriched through the archives. Early on, what astonished me most as I scrolled through old newspaper microfilm or looked through old fanzine collections was how much coverage New Zealand's underground music received in the 1980s. Scanning the endless reels of the *Press* newspaper from Christchurch, I routinely found things like multiple paragraphs devoted to an Axemen cassette released in an edition of about thirty copies, printed opposite an agriculture report about the price of dairy. It was astonishing to me as an outsider and I think unique.

New Zealand stands apart during the 1980s for the leeway rock journalists had to write about what they liked without interference from above. Nowhere else I know is there an example of obscure bands and a small independent label getting proper write-ups in daily papers with good circulation. Over the years covered in this book, hardly a week went by when a Flying Nun-related article did not appear in the *Press*, the *Christchurch Star* or the *Otago Daily Times*. Chris Knox recognised this was a luxury and said as much in a 1986 interview. 'I think we're quite lucky in New Zealand . . . with the newspapers,' he said. 'I'm sure that the average Manchester newspaper doesn't write about independent Manchester labels as much as New Zealand newspapers write about New Zealand labels. So, I think we're reasonably lucky as far as that's concerned. . . . Luckily most newspapers don't take much notice of their rock columns.'[5]

In the early days, papers gave legitimacy to what Flying Nun was doing where radio failed to do so. Christchurch reporter Rob White, in particular, was fair in his assessments of Flying Nun's output in the *Star* and rebutted claims of amateurism lobbed the label's way. Flying Nun also had a lot of friends working for them on the inside. David Swift, for example, was a rock critic for the *Press* by day and drummer for early Flying Nun band Mainly Spaniards at night, and then later a staff writer at *NME* in the UK, where he helped get the label some of its first overseas write-ups. Other friends of the label like Roy Colbert, Russell Brown and Richard Langston wrote about Flying Nun's bands whenever they got the chance. Langston's *Garage* fanzine, which he started in 1984, played an essential role in chronicling the bands and the records.

Critics jumped out of the pages as well. George Kay's biting early coverage of The Clean revealed the sort of adversity they faced before 'Tally Ho!', while Mike Chunn's regular column for the *Herald* reflected the barriers that Flying Nun faced from the country's music establishment.

Most of the direct quotes included in these pages, especially from the musicians, are thus taken from press clippings, promotional material and ephemera that date to the period covered in the book. While numerous interviews were conducted with a lot of key people for background and to confirm details, there are no direct quotes from anyone I spoke to for the book. This approach was partially for practical reasons. Geography and time made conducting any kind of comprehensive oral history difficult. But using sources from the time was also a conscious choice. Filling the book with retrospective recollections risked veering toward storytelling tinted with nostalgia, regret or countless other motivations. Plenty of other first-hand accounts have been written by musicians like Matthew Bannister, Graeme Jefferies and Shayne Carter about working with Flying Nun, and label founder Roger Shepherd himself has published a memoir. Instead, the details and character of this history of Flying Nun came primarily from archival research. Teasing out comments made during the period places the key characters into the story and reveals some of their attitudes and opinions while they were in the midst of things.

Finally, as an outsider, one of my other motivations was to trace how Flying Nun was discovered by the rest of the world. International recognition for Flying Nun in the 1980s was fundamental both in determining the label's survival and in shaping a lot of international trends in independent music that would follow in the coming decades. Without The Chills going to England in 1985, Germans buying up anything with a *Musik Aus Neuseeland* sticker, or a compilation like Homestead's *Human Music*, it is likely Flying Nun would have never made it out of the 1980s. By 1985, export was an essential piece of the business, fuelled by an often fanatical overseas fan-base. The fruits of this international interest only became apparent in the 1990s, when big-time indie acts like Pavement, Cat Power or Yo La Tengo started covering Flying Nun bands.

A majority of the records from Flying Nun's early years have long been out of print and only some of the back catalogue has seen contemporary physical or digital reissue. Early singles and EPs are largely out of reach to the casual listener as the vinyl pressings have become high-priced collector's items. In 1989, US magazine *Billboard* declared with great exuberance, 'there doesn't appear to be anything on Flying Nun Records that is less than excellent.'[6] Over thirty years later, it is important to look back on how this streak of excellence came about. Assembling a complete discography of the label's output during the Christchurch years is a chance to rekindle the DIY spirit of Flying Nun and celebrate their astounding years of independent creative brilliance.

PAGE XI: **Ian Dalziel and possibly Roger Shepherd in the Flying Nun office, the Dominion Building, Cathedral Square, Christchurch, *c.* 1985 or 1986.** COLLECTION OF SIMON GRIGG

RIGHT: **Ian Dalziel in the shipping and warehousing space of Flying Nun's Dominion Building office in the Square, 1986.** COLLECTION OF SIMON GRIGG