

With a Vengeance

Diesel, the artist formerly known as Mark Lizotte, and - to those of us admitting our ages - as Johnny Diesel, is back.

His last visit to the Gold Coast in January marked the end of a sellout tour of sixteen gigs in eighteen days, a gruelling schedule by anyone's standards. 'It was pretty full-on,' Diesel admits, 'and I really had to apply myself to get through it. When I'm on the road everything's focused on that one-and-a-half hours on stage, because the crowds want to see a powering performance. When you're doing shows every night you know just how much you've got in the vocal department, and you have to approach performing like an athlete.'

He learned that the hard way. 'I used to get hoarse a lot,' Diesel explains, 'and you can really hear that on the first record [*Johnny Diesel and the Injectors*]. But you learn with experience, and the voice tones up. It's like with opera singers - they don't usually peak until later on.'

Diesel followed the sixteen-gig tour with a trip to Thailand to give an Australia Day show for expatriates, then took some well-earned r & r, and is now back on the road promoting *Hear*, his latest album and first release on the independent Hepfidelity label.

And what a debut. *Hear* is a formidable collection of edgy tracks that forge a powerful blend of thinking man's lyrics and take-no-prisoners pub rock - *Angel Face*'s jangly strings and the resonant strains of *Faith and Gasoline* are arresting, and the soulful *Battleworn* sung with an urgency seldom heard since Bono was an angry young man.

But a Diesel show wouldn't be a Diesel show without the old favourites, and with plans in train to produce retrospective DVD of live performances to mark his career from 1989-2004, some shows on the present tour are to be recorded. Then it'll be back into the studio for the next album.

'I'm starting to get the songs together for that now,' he says. 'Because I've been doing so many acoustic shows, I want to create a more rambling vibe on the next record. I do a lot of jamming on stage because people dig seeing you up there chasing a sound. But being in the studio forces you to be concise, because jamming can seem extraneous off-stage, and you don't want people to get bored with it.'

So where do those distinctive Diesel songs come from? 'I get out and roam around wherever I am,' he says, 'and when I see people I make up [stories about] their lives and try to imagine what's behind their expressions. A lot of my songs are inspired that way. I think most of us enjoy people-watching; I just take it a step further and put music with it.'

'I also write from my own life experiences, which for me is a cathartic process. And it's a funny thing, but no matter how old a song is, it'll stir the same sentiment in you every time you play it.'

'I'm inspired by great songs like those by Bob Dylan and Neil Finn; you get a miniature movie from their imagery in only three or four minutes. Ultimately, that's what I'd like to create.'

A seasoned songwriter, Diesel takes a laid-back approach to writing: 'I keep a lot of it in my head and channel it into songs that way, because it can get tricky when it's down on paper, and I hate that.'

Channelling? Perhaps in more ways than one, as Diesel confesses that even he's unsure of where his best songs have come from. 'Sometimes it scares the pants off me, wondering which dark part of my soul has given rise to it', he reflects, 'but the melancholy is somewhere in most of my lyrics, so I guess that's just my character. I'm a moody bugger.'

And beyond his years, it seemed in the *Johnny Diesel* days, when the then only twentysomething penned lyrics whose content often bordered on the profound.

'I took on a lot of issues in those days,' Diesel recalls, 'and wrote like an old man, because my family had travelled a lot, so I'd grown up all around the world. I became a bit of an outsider, and because I was only fifteen when I started playing in clubs, I'd experienced a lot of stuff that kids of the same age wouldn't experience until later [in life].'

The vast range of moods and styles of his music gives no clue as to where Diesel's own musical preferences lie. 'They're just a reflection of my affection for all kinds of music,' he says. 'I'm not strapped to any particular style, and I've never been good at formulating myself. While I really love blues, jazz and the earlier forms of rock, I'm no purist - I just like great songs - and somewhere in the midst of it I come up with my own hybrid of everything. Music's my scene. For me it's intoxicating.'

Stay tuned, folks. Whatever name you know him by, Diesel's one to watch.