

'NOTHING BUT THE REAL ME'

Patrik Fitzgerald: A Punk Goes Pop

Words: GRAHAM LOCK. Pix: PENNIE SMITH

*"I don't wanna end up as ugly as you
I don't wanna end up as grey as all the others"*

A SMALL back bedroom in a terraced house. The wall-paper is pastel-drab, typically suburban. A stereo deck lies on the floor, but there are no speakers. Instead, The Doors trickle from a pair of headphones hung across a lamp stand. On each side of the chimney-breast, shelves of paperbacks indicate a catholic taste — S.F., occult, pop music, R.D. Laing, a smattering of fiction from *Pilgrim's Progress* to Beryl Bainbridge.

The gas fire is turned full on but Patrik Fitzgerald looks cold. He's huddled in an armchair beside the rain-spattered window, a check jacket pulled across his chest. From time to time he pours himself a snowball. He drinks too much, he says, because he gets bored; but just now there's less chance of that happening.

For the past fortnight he's been recording his first album. Another week's work of vocals and re-mixing should see it completed. His play, *Babytalk*, in which he also acts, is now in rehearsal, due to open on February 28th at The Garage in SW1 — performed by a youth theatre group attached to The Royal Court. And a book of his stories and poems is soon to be published by the Tower Hamlets Art Project.

An impressive flurry of activity for an ex-punk with a battered acoustic guitar.

We're here in his mother's Leytonstone home on a dark, wet afternoon to discuss these events. I haven't come to praise Patrik Fitzgerald, nor to slag him off, but because I'm curious. Curious to see how people deal with the compromises and contradictions of the record business; to see if the mocking idealism discernible on his early records is still thriving.

Curious, too, that his critics have been unduly vitriolic, and even his supporters have spiced their compliments with patronising epithets like "cuddly" and "winsome".

Simply, I thought someone who could write such hard-bitten lyrics as 'Banging And Shouting' or 'Backstreet Boys' deserved a little respect.

What follows is mostly Patrik verbatim. The conclusions I've left to you. We begin by talking about his book.

Patrik: "It's just a little paperback. It'll only cost about 50p. It's got a load of poems in it, and some song lyrics. Some quite good stories too. I like my stories. I think I write better stories than *anybody* (laughs). A lot of my stories are moral tales. A lot of my songs are too. And people don't understand. I think most people just don't listen. It's sad."

I ask where this morality comes from and what it consists of.

"I dunno. I don't know if I have a moral outlook. I've always thought that I must do, cos I try not to get like a lot of other people. Like people who indulge in violence for the sake of it. I'd like to be a better human being and all this kind of stuff."

"I suppose it just comes from looking at people and thinking 'What a load of bastards', you know. Cos most people are when it boils down to it, and I don't wanna be like them. I wanna be me and an individual. I guess this sounds very hippy to your average reader."

Not really. It sounds like you hate people.

"It annoys me when people say that. A couple of interviewers came around and said 'Oh, people say you hate everybody'; and it's totally untrue. I don't hate anybody. That's stupid."

But you've just dismissed humanity as "a load of cunts."!

"That doesn't mean I *hate* 'em."

It suggests you don't have a very high opinion of them.

"I think there's a big difference between the two. I dunno. Maybe I just hate the way some people come across. I don't call it hate. I don't think the emotion I feel about people is strong enough to call hate. Maybe it's wanting to be an individual that makes you give off that aura of hating people. I don't think I do. It's silly."

*"When I get famous
There'll be so many people wanna know me"*

PATRIK FITZGERALD is a true London East Ender. He was born in Stratford, grew up in Leytonstone and went to school in Forest Gate. He says it's no big deal: "Millions of people come from the East End." He started to write at school, because he was bullied. "I used to get picked on all the time cos I was small, so writing was the outlet I had, the only way I could say what I felt about things."

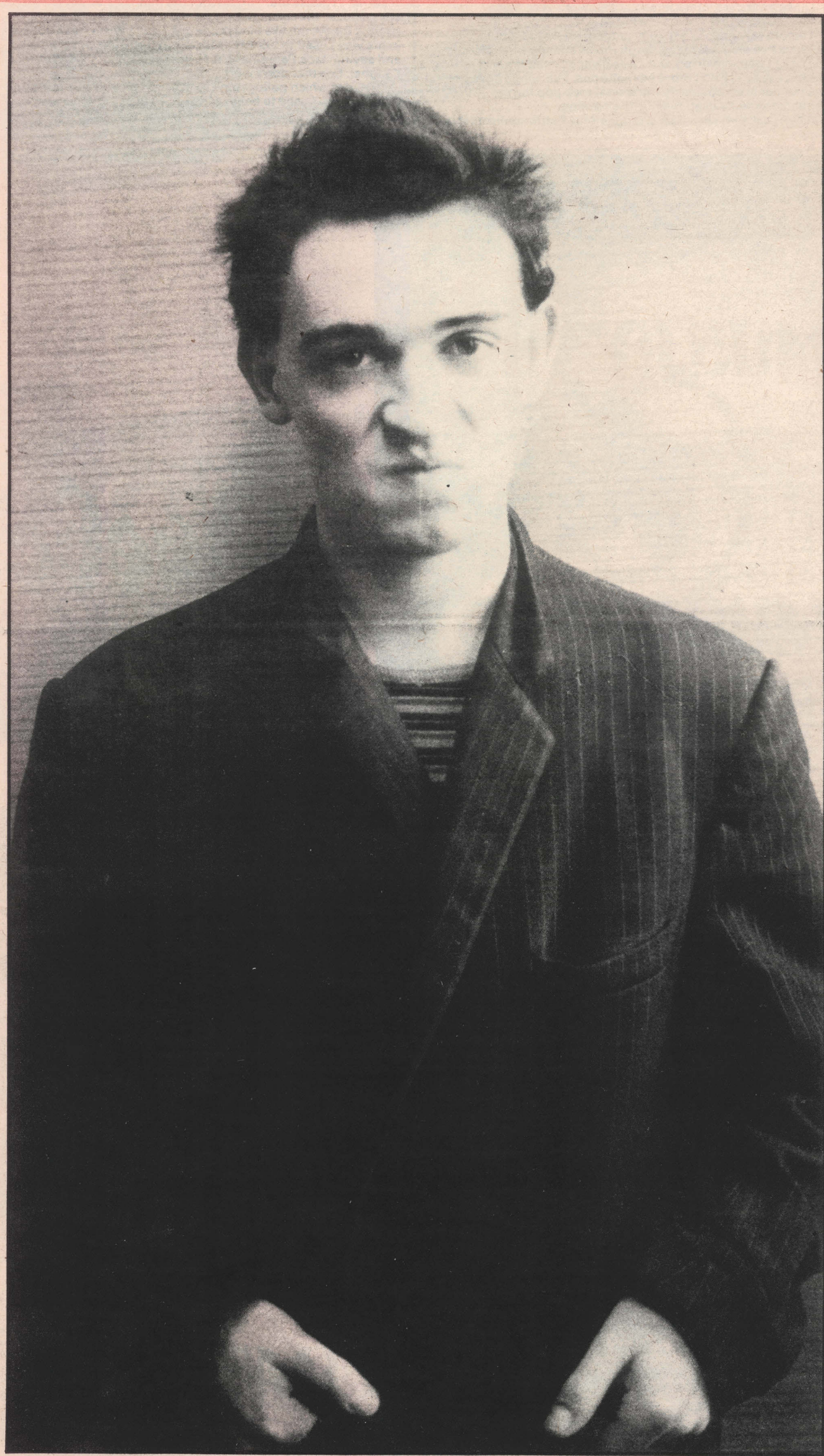
"If you've got a page in front of you, you've got the freedom to say what you want. Whereas if somebody's saying 'shut up' or kicking you in the back you ain't got that freedom."

He left school with six O Levels, worked in an office for a couple of years, learned to play acoustic guitar. Then came a long period on the dole and fruitless attempts to get a band together. "The very last band I played in was probably just going at the end of '76, when 'Anarchy' came out, cos I remember trying to get 'em to play it (laughs). Which they wouldn't — 'whaaat, we're not playing that rubbish!'"

Disillusioned with groups, Patrik persisted with his acoustic guitar. And when local record shop Small Wonder decided to start its own label he recorded some songs in his bedroom and slipped the tape through their letter-box.

He's made three EPs since then — 'Safety Pin Stuck Through My Heart', 'Backstreet Boys' and 'The Paranoid Ward' — and played hundreds of gigs including tours with Sham 69 and The Jam. His modest stage presence and acoustic style have brought him hecklers galore, and he knows what it's like to be canned off stage. But he's still playing.

■ Continues over page



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Patrik: "I do get pissed off playing acoustic gigs where people just shout and shout. You can only put up with that for so long before you get driven totally mad. If I do gigs like that I'd rather go home and watch television, quite honestly. Because primarily it spoils everybody's evening — it means anybody that does wanna listen to me can't hear anyway."

"But I'm not gonna give up. I'm not made that way. I'm gonna keep performing until those people get sore throats from shouting at me. I'm not gonna give up cos I still enjoy it. And it's the only thing I've got."

"Buy me, sell me
Now I'm product, why me"

Despite his various activities it's obviously the forthcoming album that looms largest over Patrik's future. When Polydor release it — in April or May — it's guaranteed to split the critics asunder, particularly on the matter of the electric tracks.

'Don't Tell Me', 'All The Years Of Trying', 'Adopted Girl', 'Suicidal Wreck', 'But Not Any More' and 'No Fun Football' have Patrik on electric guitar, Buzzcock John Maher on drums, Penetration's Robert Blamire on bass and producer Peter Wilson on occasional keyboards.

These tracks are interspersed with many old acoustic favourites, the new 'Lovers' Pact' and a couple of poems.

It would be unfair to pass any judgement on the album, because I've only heard the rough mixes and the track selection still hasn't been finalised. But I was disappointed that the electric tracks weren't more adventurous. The songs have been fleshed out in an obviously traditional rock-pop format — the extra instruments used merely as a backing.

When I ask him about the arrangements Patrik confirms this.

"I wouldn't say any of my records ever come together as grandly as that, having arrangements and stuff. We just went into the rehearsal studio a week before recording and I sort of played through the songs and the others jammed along. There's nothing particularly inspired about it. They're basically just colouring for the songs."

"If it's just me and an acoustic guitar all the time people fall into the trap of saying 'oh it's all the same'. I mean, it's not. There are different chords, different melodies, they're totally different; but people still think it's the same."

I suppose my misgivings about the album centre on the lack of any great songs. It's the usual Fitzgerald ragbag of good and bad. He can be witty, moving and perceptive; he can also be obvious and trite — a Tommy Steele with a social conscience. Perhaps the most intriguing number is the recent 'Lovers' Pact'. To a remarkably attractive guitar duet Patrik sings tenderly of a double-suicide: "Can I share in your blood / Drink the liquid of your love / I will be there to feel the throes / Of your body as it freezes / Next to mine." The most unusual thing he's done, it'll either sound hauntingly effective or slick and pretty, depending on the way it's mixed.

As for the choice of songs it's noticeable that there are no explicitly political songs in the vein of 'Set We Free' or 'Work Rest Play Reggae'.

Patrik: "I guess there aren't. But the thing is, I've never had any political affinity anyway. I started off believing I was gonna change the world, like everybody did. I still believe I can but not in the way I used to think I could. Not in the sense of going out and saying 'look Parliament, fuck you' or anything like that (laughs). Cos that don't work."

"Besides which politics ain't worth changing. It's so fickle and unimportant. I used to believe in politics to a certain extent. I used to believe if you were politically inclined, and believed in

something very strongly as a group of people, you could change things. I used to think the punk thing was, er, gonna change the world a little bit."

"Like, I bought 'Anarchy' when it came out. I remember going into Small Wonder and saying 'oh, I'll buy this record cos I wanna help start a revolution' (laughs). Pete (Stennett of Small Wonder) must've thought I was absolutely fucking bonkers. I really believed in it at the time. Now I don't think you can change the world that way."

So how is change possible?

"Ian Dury said something like, if people thought a bit better of themselves and other people in 25 years time the world would be a better place. I think that's true, cos when you look around and see what people are doing to each other the world doesn't come across as a very nice place. So where's the fault? Either it's atomic bombs and silly rules like 'don't jump on the grass', or else it's down to people themselves."

But things like the atom bomb aren't your fault — so how will changing yourself have any effect on what's wrong with the world?

"No, the world's not my fault, I'm not that presumptuous (laughs). But the way I always thought about it was, if I know what I want to do in my own head, and if I know the things that are wrong and need changing, and the reasons behind the way people act, then I can write these things down and put them on a record and other people have time to dwell on them. And that's the way I do it. You get things clear, write them down and give people time to think about them."

Then, the theory goes, these people begin to change; and they influence the people around them, who begin to change; and so on, until one day everyone wakes up happy. A nice theory — if it didn't ignore vested interests, wealth, property, control of the media and armed forces and suchlike — but about as practical as that one which says if the entire population of China leapt into the air at precisely the same moment, they could shift the earth's axis.

However ... Back to the pressing problems of showbiz.

I remark that Patrik's love songs are a little ... mm ... strange. Most of them seem to end with death, disease or disaster. He grins.

"Yeah, they're meant to be strange. They're about love and death, mainly. That's because I've always felt the word 'love' to be associated with things like that. The only times I've dealt with people being in love, or with me being in love, I've always felt it was a bit of a dead end. A bit like nowhere."

"I think that most people's opinions — the way the word has been abused and all the rest of it — turned it into that for me. I dunno. I mean, 'Lovers' Pact' is quite glamorous, quite 'film star' — the idea of loving somebody so much you'd actually die for them. I just felt that love was like a disease or something. I also think my views of that are changing. I don't feel like that anymore. Other people claim they do all the time but I don't. I like love. It's nice (laughs)."

"Don't ask me to be your hero
I will only let you down"

A couple of months ago there was a letter in *Gasbag* which claimed "punk died the day Patrik Fitzgerald signed with Polydor." So why did he?

"Mmm, well, people can't see the sort of things that go on. They say 'oh, look at him, big sell-out' and that kind of stuff. I mean, there are obvious advantages to signing with Polydor. I won't deny that. They can get me on *Top Of The Pops* or *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, and so what? I'd love to be on there cos if I'm on then the Dooleys or whoever's in the charts can't be on. And they might get me famous in other countries so I can go on nice holidays (laughs)."

"But the main reason I signed with them was that if I didn't I wouldn't have made records much longer. See, while I sold a lot of records at Small Wonder it was a lot of hard work for Pete and Marion. And there would've come a point where I felt so guilty about that I'd have been too pissed off to carry on. Or they'd have been too pissed off with the work (laughs). So I thought my safety valve was to sign with a big label. And I've only got a 'licensing deal with Polydor; so I'm still with Small Wonder and I'm with Polydor as well. I don't see that as any big deal. It's only another record company. They're all just record companies."

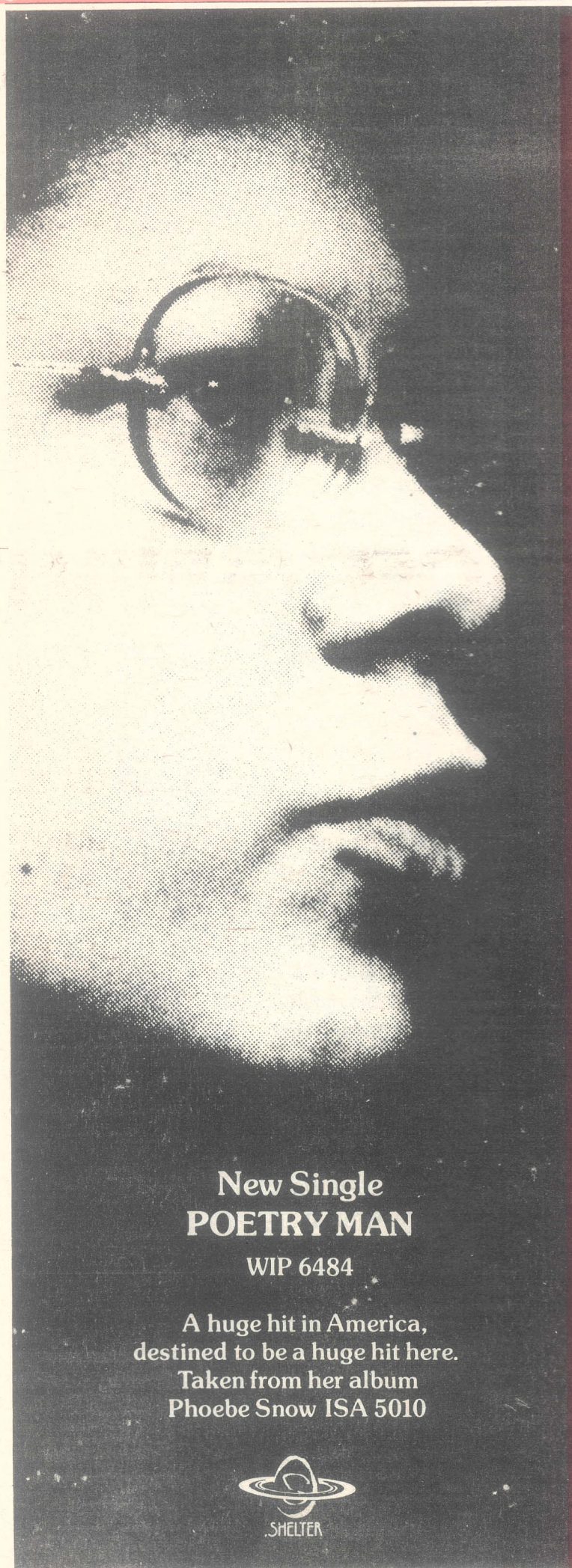
Isn't there a danger Polydor might try to exert an influence on the music, the marketing etc?

"Not really. They might try a few tricks, but basically I take in a tape and they just press and distribute the records. If they're unhappy about something then fine (laughs). But they're not a bad company and really they just save us a lot of effort. I mean, you either fade out, go on doing shitty records, or sign with a big label and have a bit of scope. If you wanna make records in a serious way, which I do, you need some scope. I don't wanna do just bitty little records forever."

The other recent controversy in Patrik's career was his playing the Great British Music Festival at Wembley. When I ask about that he groans loudly and mutters "horrific." So why do it?

"I did it because it was part of The Jam tour, and I was enjoying that tour so much — so it was a silly reason really. Just that I wanted to do the whole tour. Also because it was a

■ Continues page 57



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DOLL BY DOLL

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word 'magic' as a term which anyone has an instinctive and heartfelt understanding of.

"The grievous thing is that the art or craft of rock 'n' roll has been continually distorted."

LEVEN'S definition of magic — something he believes one instinctively comprehends or doesn't — gets a practical work-out when he addresses the recent affair when, as initial support group to Devo's last British tour, the band were considered an unsuitable appendage to the headliners and, after two dates, promptly asked to leave.

Leven had high hopes about

the tour itself, viewing it in terms of an amicable Devo vs Doll By Doll or, more pointedly in his frame of reference, magic (D by D) vs Science (Devo).

"It could have been the tour of the decade," he states now without any definable hint of regret, "presenting two sides of the coin to the essential human condition. But my mistake was believing that they (Devo) were serious about what they were doing. I now realise they long ago lost the ability to account for their actions."

Leven's seriousness about his own role in Doll By Doll is defined by its instigator thus: "I personally see myself as the global idiot who can

interpret to those who want to know. It's not coming from my ego though. In a very real sense, it's very de-personalised."

Without claiming to despise established forms of 'rock' — rock as simple fun, rock as outlet for frustrations etc — Leven still regards the mission behind his music in brutally self-effacing terms.

"Doll By Doll want rock 'n' roll simply to have a healthy attitude to its own inevitable decay, death and equally inevitable resurrection."

When pressed for a more concise definition of the terms utilised, he waxes virtually enigmatic in his mode of dogmatism.

"I see it (resurrection) in

terms of an escalating and relentlessly ferocious set of mind games between those who orientate themselves around us and those that don't."

"See, I believe all wars are essentially conspiracies, and myths are discredited truths. And people who believe that myths are alive don't see any connection 'twixt the image and their feelings. And it's the closing of that gap that is the greatest conflict and most critical job facing rock 'n' roll in its relation to the human race."

Does Leven see any potential co-conspirators?

"No, I don't. I see ambassadors from other camps. They have their affiliations, loyalties and a power-base, but . . ."

Any kindred annihilators then?

"I don't like the word 'annihilation'. See, we are dealing with everyday problems and realities and the fact is people don't regard that as entertainment. People can't stand to be reminded of them, which is what I find so laughable about the new wave, or should I say the axis that the new wave seems to operate on."

"I'm not looking for solutions . . . I'm just trying to point out the conspiracy which everybody knows is going on, but won't let on. I know what's going on. I've got to show those people around me — without being wilfully destructive — what am I prepared to accept. And compromise is out of the question because I don't have to compromise whatsoever because I don't need to in any way."

FITZGERALD

■ From page 8

challenge. And because I don't think you can criticise things unless you do them first. I thought I'd do it so I could tell what I thought about things like that."

And?

"I thought it was terrible. There was no respect for the artists involved, no kind of understanding. And there was all that trouble outside, people getting knifed. And things get like that if people don't like the situation — if you stick them in a place like Wembley Pool, which is like a glorified aircraft hanger, and expect them to get on with it. The sound was abysmal, everything was abysmal. It was a complete farce, an easy way to make a lot of money. But I found out

by doing it."

"See me, feel me
Nothing but the real me"

As he's just mentioned money I ask Patrik how he views the possibility of becoming rich and famous.

"I dunno. I'm still living at me mum's, and I've still got money problems. I can't honestly visualise it. I'd like to have a bit of money cos I've never had any at all before. I've never been able to buy anything I want. I ain't got big dreams for that. I'd like to be able to buy some new clothes. I haven't bought any for ages. I'm still stuck in the same old Oxfam clothes. I can't even find any I like in the Oxfam

shop anymore (laughs).

"It would be nice to have a bit of money just to be able to do things. Cos I don't like the idea of getting free things. I like to actually buy what I want cos it makes me feel the same as everyone else, if you like. Cos basically I am, and always will be. I'll still be me all the time. I can't see myself turning into a Rod Steward — I'd get too guilty about it. I don't know how the man lives, I really don't (laughs). I hope he's reading this. It's his turn today (laughs). There's always somebody gotta be a target."

Patrik Fitzgerald will be 23 next month. His time is coming. He'll be rich; he'll be a target. He may even be on *Top Of The Pops*.

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ACROSS

1 Could this describe Nick Lowe's reflections on reggae in general, and Third World in particular? (Could this be one of those crosswords? — Ed) (4,10)

6 Bedtime tale for young Robert? Or one of those continental combos? (6,3,5)

8 Nirvana for the surfing punk! (3,4)

9 Be late and confuse a Moptop!

10 '60s Brit songthrush (*hi there Keith Fordyce*) whose gimmick was to sing in her bare feet (6,4)

12 Girls sent loon (anag. 2 words)

14 But you may have heard of his sister Ryvital! (2,6)

18 &19 Slovenly Rutle

20 Bowie's punk-prophecy LP (7,4)

21 See 7 down

DOWN

2 Alison's ex now wants a fight! (7,4)

3 HIC! MOO! BURP! (4,3,7)

4 "Drift Away" was his biggest non-hit

5 Glasgow folkie who's big in the USA (according to his publicist) (2,7)

7 & 21 Time-honoured riposte used by fans of the big beat when engaged in debate with students of classical music (*No, it's not F... Orf W... k... r!*) (4,4,9)

11 Detroit rocker who chose German camouflage!

13 Every schoolkid knows the gallant one who braved the snow. This isn't him. This is the berk who sings with Daryl!

14 Megs' favourite crooner (but where was *he* in the *NME* Poll?)

15 Record container?

16 To Rods what Rocky is to Replays

17 Least would be an apter name!

19 See 18

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DOWN: 2 "Interiors"; 3 Lindsey Buckingham; 4 Jane Birkin; 5 Esther Phillips; 6 Eagles; 7 "Happy Days"; 8 Jimmy Page; 12 Robert Palmer; 18 "Heroes"; 19 (Brian) Hyland; 20 "Exodus"; 21 (Sex) Pistol(s).

