

# Anthony Lapwood

## Blue Horse Overdrive\*

A certain energy surged through the people and swept through the long grass of the paddock, towards the ragged pine trees at the far boundary. Batty turned to me and twirled his finger, meaning let's capitalise on this immediately, no more crowd banter. I turned to Rāwiri behind the drums and he hit four on the snare and then I laid into the bass for 'Damage Control'. This was touching the dream the three of us had had for six years. There were faces in the crowd that none of us recognised, come all the way from who knew where. And they hadn't come simply for an open space to drop a tab or guzzle piss either. They'd paid a fiver each to get in, and Batty's old man was keeping crowd control with his mates—which was fair enough, being his paddock, his property. I saw Batty's old man punch one of his mates in the arm and point up at the makeshift stage like, That's my kid, would you listen to those lungs, that crazy guitar! Our music wasn't Batty's old man's shot of liquor. Too much overdrive, like a fucked up weed-wacker—his words. But there he was, punching his mate's arm, grinning like hell, and bobbing his head though struggling to maintain the beat.

Having felt that energy discharge through their ranks, the crowd leapt and tore up the grass—while respecting each other's personal space, more or less. I was staring at each of them, goading them with a look that said, Go on, enjoy yourselves, you wonderful punks! I didn't need to look down. I can play bass totally blind, my fingers moving across the strings according to internalised patterns stored in some deep part of my brainmeat, accessible without mediation by conscious thought. I also write most of our songs, so they're a part of me right from the get-go.

I scanned the very back of the crowd, trying to connect with

\* First published online in the Capital Records *Story for a Song* series, offering first-hand insights into the origins of great Kiwi music from the label's catalogue.

every punk in the paddock, even those whose faces were cast in shadow by the dusk light. Where the half-dozen pine trees marked the far boundary of the paddock, I saw something like a piece of the sky move. It shimmered between the tree trunks. Its form was vaporous in the darkening evening, its motion flawless and fluid. It was a horse—a pale blue horse. It reached the end of the row of pine trees and then turned sharply, cantering back the way it had come. As it moved, its smudged form became gradually more defined until its lines were crisp, its musculature visible despite the distance between us. Then it stopped and oriented its body towards me and turned its head to the side. Its eyeline cut through the trees, across the overgrown paddock, through the perimeter formed by Batty's old man and his mates, through the jostling crowd of punks, and then entered my skull, warming the flesh of my forehead and the bone beneath.

Rāwiri said later that I dropped to the pallet boards of the stage with my hands still fumbling at the bass strings, hardly missing a note. He said I lay there making stupid strangulated sounds, with spit hanging from my lips. When I came around, Batty's old man's mouth was covering mine and his warm breath was flowing down my throat. Batty was standing over his old man's shoulder talking on his mobile, describing my condition to the ambo service. Rāwiri was out of sight but nearby, his voice in my ear saying, 'Far out—far out—you all right?'

Behind a curtain in the A&E ward, the doctor tapped my knees with a tiny hammer, flashed a penlight in my eyes, and worked her way through a list of other neurological checks. She looked the list up on a sheet of paper layered down in the mix of other papers on her clipboard. 'Nearly forgot one,' she said. 'Put your arms out for me and touch your nose, left index finger, then right index finger.'

I scored full marks. My body did everything it was meant to do:

My legs gave a little kick.

My pupils shrank.

My fingers touched my nose, left index finger, then right index finger.

My et cetera did all the et cetera.

I was mildly dehydrated, so the doctor had me sip on a cup of enriched fluids, though that wasn't the problem.

'It's unclear exactly what the problem is,' the doctor said.

That was a problem in itself, so she thought, and she wrote me a referral.

Rāwiri and Batty and Batty's old man were in the waiting room, waiting.

'What's up?' Rāwiri asked.

'Not sure,' I said. 'Could be anything. Could be sunstroke. Could be I'm stressed. Could be a tumour. The doctor doesn't know.'

'A tumour?' Rāwiri asked.

'They're sending me to a neurologist.'

Batty's old man gave Batty a look and Batty said, 'You want to bunk at our place?'

I could tell they'd been talking while they waited.

'Nah. I'm good,' I said. 'I'm all right to go home. The doctor just said to take it easy, and not to drive, or drink too much.'

Rāwiri piped up. 'I could stay at yours?'

Batty said, 'Me too, after Rāwiri. We'll take turns.'

'Nah. I feel steady,' I said.

The doctor had confessed she didn't know anything for sure. Her words were only words, pointing to no certain or immediate danger. And I was still processing the day's events—the crowd we'd pulled, the weird horse, collapsing—and hadn't quite caught up to the part where I'd been given a neurological onceover at the A&E. I didn't exactly feel as though I was hanging off a cliff just yet.

My apartment consisted of a tiny lounge and kitchen, with a door into a tinier bedroom and another door off that into an even tinier bathroom. Rāwiri was busting for a piss when I got up the next morning, a Sunday. He said he didn't want to wake me, citing bad patient care protocol. I said weeing on my couch was worse, so to just go ahead, I'm a heavy sleeper. He stuck around until Tuesday, then Batty came over. Batty had already taken the A&E letter into the Music Depot, where we both worked, explaining I needed the week off to recover.

On the following Saturday, the three of us hung out playing video games and working on a few songs—on acoustic, to save my neighbours getting ratty. I'd played Rāwiri a couple of new sketches when he was on nursing duty, and then played them for Batty, and it was good that weekend to all be in the same room, sharing our ideas, getting on with what we loved doing most.

I'd kept quiet all week about what I'd seen, about the blue horse. I told Batty and Rāwiri the same thing I'd told the A&E doctor, simply that my vision had blurred and I'd felt euphoric right before I dropped—and that was true. I couldn't explain the blue horse, the way it had seemed to manifest at the trembling edge of the wave of energy that rippled out from the stage. Not without sounding like I was half crazy—or maybe full crazy.

Rāwiri and Batty went back to their own places on Sunday evening, comforted by the knowledge I wasn't wasting away in bed, or lying paralysed on the bathroom floor, or else going into fits and choking on my tongue or busting my head open in an alleyway somewhere.

Monday morning I was back on deck in my black Music Depot polo.

That weekend, a sizeable number of guitars had been brought in for cleaning and restringing, and it fell to me to service them. The boss reasoned it was low-stress work, although they needed to be sorted for collection by five o'clock, some by three o'clock. It's a basic chore that, if you own a guitar, you should learn to do yourself. It's a piece of piss. You're welcome to hand over your money for nothing to the Music Depot or wherever, but it's neither necessary nor especially entertaining work for the people doing the servicing. Not withstanding that a guitar freshly buffed and strung with new life is always a pleasure to behold.

Late morning, my mobile rang and I told Batty, who was with me in the back room, that I didn't recognise the number.

It was someone from the hospital.

'Available to see the neurologist?' I said. 'My appointment's still two and a bit weeks away.'

'Another patient has postponed. We're offering you their timeslot.'

‘Any reason for asking me and, ah, not someone else?’

‘You’re just on the list. Sir, I wouldn’t read anything into it.’

‘And it’s this afternoon?’

Batty was at the door signalling in a big circular motion with his arm and he was hissing, *psst, psst, psst*. The boss walked into the back room and Batty repeated the words ‘this afternoon’ to her.

‘Am I available?’ I said, tapping my head with an index finger.

Batty nodded, then the boss nodded.

‘Sure, sure,’ I said into my mobile. The person on the other end gave me the time of the appointment. I said, ‘Sure, sure,’ again and hung up. ‘A cancellation. I’ve been bumped up the list, but they said not to read anything into it.’ Batty said, ‘Sure, sure,’ then turned to the boss and said he’d finish cleaning and restringing the guitars.

Batty’s old man drove the thirty minutes into town and took me to the hospital. ‘You don’t want to be mucking around with buses,’ he said. ‘And you don’t want to be coughing up for taxis either, not on your wage.’

‘Petrol’s not cheap, though,’ I said. Batty’s old man was having some money problems. We’d tried offering some of the takings from our gigs—given we’d started holding them in his paddock—but he’d said no, he’d sort it out somehow.

‘Thought I’d make the most of the trip and drop off some wood,’ Batty’s old man said.

‘You selling firewood in town now?’

‘Mate of mine manages a petrol station. He’s going to sell it for me without taking commission. Left him the spare trailer, stacked up pretty good. Should do all right.’

‘Every buck counts,’ I said.

‘It all adds up.’

I didn’t feel so bad about getting a ride with that in mind, though I knew he’d have taken me to the hospital even without the firewood.

The people on the hospital’s front desk gave us lengthy directions, which we misinterpreted a couple of times as we snaked our way through the sprawling, homogenous architecture, though we wound up at the right place with a whole minute to spare. I entered

the neurologist's office alone, while Batty's old man sat in the bright corridor, squinting at a glossy *Metro* magazine which he thought was a laugh.

The neurologist was a middle-aged guy who'd been a GP for decades, he told me, though he'd been enjoying life as a fully fledged specialist for a few months.

'How's that going?' I said, noticing dark-orangey finger smears near one pocket of his lab coat. My guess was lasagne.

'Nothing to lose my job over,' he said, and winked.

'A positive sign,' I said.

He invited me to sit on an examination table draped in white flannelette.

'An incident in a field, I understand?' he said, as he sat behind his desk and leaned back in his chair. 'Tell me what happened.'

I told him about the fainting. He had his eyes closed while I spoke, and he kept them closed for a while after I'd finished speaking. I couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep. Then he sprang forward in his chair and his eyes popped open. He reached towards his desk drawer and took out a tiny hammer and a penlight, then proceeded to run through the same routine as the A&E doctor, with a few minor variations in playing style.

'All fairly normal,' he said, and returned to recline in his chair. A pad of paper and a pen sat idle on his desktop and I wondered if he'd begin taking notes at any point. 'Had any trouble with your vision—dark spots, bright lights, that type of thing?'

'Nah. Except—' I paused, wondering if neurologists could make referrals to psychologists. The neurologist stared levelly at me, silently encouraging me to get on with it, to spit it out. 'Except I think I saw a horse.'

'A horse,' he said. 'There a few of those around up there, in the countryside?'

'I mean an imaginary horse. It was weird. It looked blue and shimmery.'

'Where precisely was this horse?'

'In the next paddock, trotting along behind some trees.'

'Did you have a clear view of it?'

‘It was kind of far away. And there were the trees. I could see its muscles.’

‘And it was blue?’

‘And shimmery.’

He picked up the pen, tapped it twice on the pad of paper then set it back down, without a single drop of ink leaving the nib.

‘Probably a trick of the twilight,’ he said. ‘You get that sometimes, don’t you, in the open countryside. There’s not a lot wrong that I can determine right now. I’ll refer you for an EEG and that’ll give us more information about what might be going on under the hood.’

‘Yeah. Good,’ I said. The words *what might be going on* reverberated in my skull, their echoes suggesting other meanings. Like: *maybe something terrible is going on*. Like: *maybe nothing at all is going on*. Like: *maybe something unknowable is going on*. That last option seemed worse than something terrible but knowable, which at least sounded fixable. Unless it was something knowable but terminal—but I didn’t feel ill, did I? My guts were churning, but it wasn’t a sign of sickness, only nerves. I felt basically healthy. ‘Do I need to do anything?’ I said. ‘Or else not do anything?’

I was thinking of the music. We had songs to write, others to practise. We’d planned to hold another gig in a month. Batty’s old man would need to organise his mates for crowd control, and we’d need to sort out event posters and online notices, and Rāwiri was designing a fresh run of T-shirts to sell.

‘A bit of common sense will see you through. Don’t overexert yourself and don’t drink too much alcohol,’ the neurologist said. He cocked his head as if deciding something about me. ‘Best to steer clear of other substances as well.’

The same basic magazine selection was available outside the EEG technician’s room the next week. Batty’s old man settled down with a gossip rag featuring a celebrity newsreader looking typically rich and happy on the cover. Inside the room, I was directed to sit in a low chair. It forced my knees high into my field of vision, blocking my view of the computer setup opposite, unless I tipped my legs this way or that way. The technician attached electrodes to my skull and

I had the feeling that I was just your classic lab rat.

‘Got any cheese?’ I joked.

‘Lactose intolerant, alas,’ the technician said.

He dropped himself into a standard office swivel chair and hunched over the computer monitor, which presented to him, he reported, various graphs relating to the electrical patterns generated by my brain.

‘Hmm,’ he said, after a while.

‘Ah-huh?’ I asked.

‘Hmm,’ he repeated.

‘Spot something interesting?’

‘Hard to say. Perhaps something above your left temporal lobe.’

‘My left temporal lobe?’

‘Nothing significant. But not nothing, either.’

‘Not nothing?’

‘Something,’ the technician said. ‘Perhaps.’

‘Is the left temporal lobe prone to, ah, causing trouble?’

‘Depends,’ he said. ‘Hallucinations, sometimes, typically prefiguring temporal lobe epilepsy.’

‘Right. Does that seem likely?’ I pointed to the wires sprouting from my head.

‘EEGs don’t always detect epilepsy. Have you noticed any strange smells or sights or sounds? Even something that may seem ordinary in itself but doesn’t fit with the present reality?’

The neurologist’s dismissal repeated in my ear, right down to his breathy manner of speaking. *Probably a trick of the twilight. You get that sometimes, don’t you, in the open countryside.*

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Nah.’

The technician sat in silence another minute, then stood and detached the electrodes from my head. He advised that I could probably expect a referral from my neurologist for an MRI scan. It was the usual next step when the findings of an EEG were inconclusive.

In the corridor, Batty’s old man was engrossed in the gossip rag. I coughed and he shut the magazine and slapped it down on the pile.

‘Everything all right?’ he asked.



‘Perhaps,’ I said, raising my hands palms-up in the air like: *who knows?*

‘Perhaps yes or perhaps no?’ he said.

‘Perhaps,’ I said, jostling my hands up and down like: *who really knows anything?*

Batty’s old man frowned and stuck his hands on his thighs.

‘They still don’t know?’ he said.

‘No. They still don’t fucking know.’

Arrangement for acoustic guitar is the true litmus test of a melody’s quality, for any otherwise distortion-heavy song. This is conventional wisdom that bears out in many cases. However, there are important tonalities and aural textures that can only be generated through particular means of production. I mean, bringing electronics into the mix. Thus, Batty and Rāwiri and I planned to feed a handful of acoustically crafted songs through racks of effects pedals and launch them into the world via a modest stack of amplifiers.

We set up the pallets for the stage in Batty’s old man’s paddock and hauled our equipment out there in Batty’s old man’s caged trailer. There would be no crowd this time—it was only us pissing around trying to work out our knitting and determine an appropriate palette of sonic treatments—but the stage kept everything nicely off the damp ground. I got busy implementing a revised pedal arrangement inspired by a new song provisionally titled ‘Outta Time, Outta Luck’. In the back of my mind, I’d dedicated the song to a guy upstairs in the apartment block who I sometimes drank with, who reckoned he’d seen the future and it was extremely bleak. He’d said the time for change is now—that is, each perpetual instance of now—because the future is constantly shaped by present action. We have nothing but the future and we can avoid or achieve anything, given enough time and enough will, he’d said, before trailing off—and the seed of the song was planted. Because of this theme of time, I wanted to utilise a particular delay effect on the bass, and although that seemed almost too obvious, there was a section in the song’s intro and bridge where it would probably fit. I locked a spanking new delay pedal into place in the signal chain. The arrangement felt

spot on, like the satisfaction of achieving a perfect Tetris play, and I wondered even then if 'Outta Time, Outta Luck' might end up being our best tune.

I was focused on the world only as it existed within arm's reach, resolutely ignoring the row of pine trees along the far side of the paddock. I hadn't been back to Batty's old man's place since the incident and my guts were giving me signals that I hoped to simply ignore, primarily by configuring and admiring that beautiful array of effects pedals and contemplating the sounds we were about to produce.

Batty's old man finished hooking us up to the generator he'd revamped a year or two earlier, and then he said to hold up, not to get too settled into position. He went away to his car and came back with an armload of old blankets and pillows, the stack so high he had to tilt his head sideways to see around it. He asked me to move aside, and then he and Batty and Rāwiri began arranging the soft materials around the place I'd occupy on the stage.

'Can't be too safe,' Batty's old man said. 'That thick head of yours is liable to crack those boards.' He laughed and walked off, then got into his car and headed back up the long driveway to his and Batty's house.

We ran through some drum patterns Rāwiri had devised, which Batty and I found our way into pretty quickly, improvising on guitar and bass. Then we took things song by song, blocking out the movements, noting down modifications to the arrangements, particular riffs, textures, et cetera. 'Outta Time, Outta Luck' was the third song we tackled. We ran it straight through a couple of times to find the rhythm and the places where it was most difficult to knit our sonic threads together. Batty skipped the vocals to focus on playing guitar. He liked to bark and howl out a vocal melody, to get the raw sense of a song, before committing the lyrics to memory. But even before that, he liked to first get the guitar part down solid.

We reduced the delay effect after the second run, all agreeing it was too disruptive to the energy of the piece, especially when applied to bass, even though the bass line serves an essentially atmospheric function during the intro and bridge. By the fifth run-

through, everything began to weave together, and Batty spat out his senseless vocal ululations. We each felt a familiar primal outpouring spill from our bodies, the music surging through us in a manner that shook the roots of our physical selves—our selves which were these improbable clusters of atoms responding in the only way possible to a universe that demanded our obsolescence. My body became hot with the feeling of the music.

Building to the final movement of the song, my neck dampened with the slow pulsing of a breath, which twisting around at the waist I observed was being expelled through the broad nostrils of the blue horse, standing to the rear-left of the stage, its iridescent muzzle poised a hand-span from my body. Rāwiri said later that my head was absorbed like a brick dropped into mud as I struck the thick layer of pillows and blankets that he and Batty and Batty's old man had placed in a protective circle around me.

The upshot was that my MRI appointment took place the next day, after I'd spent the night in hospital under observation. Most of the observing was undertaken by myself and Rāwiri and Batty, observing the television in the ward's shared lounge area, until visiting hours ended. As they were leaving, Batty said to me, 'Mate. You do feel all right, don't you?'

Rāwiri was looking at his sneakers and they weren't very interesting sneakers.

'Up here?' I said, pointing to my head.

'Yeah,' Batty said.

'Yeah. Fine,' I said, and then I lied: 'I really think it's the heat.'

'Yeah?' Batty said.

'Water,' Rāwiri said. He raised his eyes to look at me, then at Batty. 'We should drink more water on stage. Just take half a minute between songs.'

'We already do,' Batty said.

'I said, more water.'

'Right,' Batty said. 'And maybe wear caps.'

'Well,' I said. 'They'll stick me in the machine tomorrow and if it doesn't malfunction and transport me to another universe or

something, I'm sure we'll find out things are pretty much okay.'

Nobody said anything, so I added, 'Can't afford to lose a bass player as good as me.'

'Yeah. Bass players are completely indispensable,' Rāwiri said.

'Bit like drummers, eh?' said Batty.

'Even Queen replaced their singer, e hoa,' Rāwiri said.

'Yeah, and now they're more like a Queen covers band,' Batty said.

'All right,' I said. 'Let's just agree we're all somehow indispensable.'

In the morning, after I'd showered and eaten my breakfast of spongy scrambled eggs on a slice of spongy toast, the nurse arrived. He handed me a plastic bag labelled with my details. He said the M in MRI stands for magnetic, so I'd need to place any removable bits of metal on my body into the bag. Otherwise, the machine would tear them out and the machine and I would both be screwed.

'Incredibly expensive and you'd not look so pretty,' he said, waving a hand in front of his face like a magician's gesture of revelation.

I took out my dimple piercings and my labret piercing and put them in the bag.

'No other piercings?' the nurse said. 'Do you need some privacy?'

'Nah.'

'No jewellery, body modification implants, pins or artificial bones, any metal of any kind, on or inside your person? Anything in your head or neck is a showstopper.'

'Nah.'

'Great. We'll need you to sign this declaration.'

Rāwiri and Batty returned around ten, with Batty's old man in tow. They accompanied me to the suite where the MRI scanner was housed like some diabolical machine in an old spy film. Another nurse showed us to a row of seats in the corridor.

'Won't be long,' she said.

A few minutes later, a blond woman stepped out of the room. Her face was thin and grey, and she staggered like she was drunk on wine. The nurse took her by the elbow and pointed her in the right direction, back along the corridor where the four of us had just come from. The woman seemed completely unaware of our presence

as she shuffled down the corridor. She had a hand cupped over her mouth and she was making a low groaning noise like the sound of a single word—maybe ‘no’ or ‘oh’—stretching out forever. I looked into her face briefly, long enough to notice that she wasn’t crying. It was somehow worse that her eyes, rather than being tearful, looked remote, glazed, as if a deep frost had come over them.

The four of us watched her go, then we looked at each other and hung our heads. I reasoned silently with myself that this couldn’t have been the woman’s first scan. This was her second or third or sixth. They couldn’t have told her the bad news right away, could they? Hers was nonetheless the face of knowing and it chilled my guts. I craned my neck to see if there was another doorway down from the entrance to the MRI room that maybe led to an office for consultations. But the nurse’s body blocked my line of sight as she came back out of the MRI room, moving towards us with a light, friendly smile on her lips.

The nurse asked Rāwiri and Batty and Batty’s old man to stay in the corridor. Inside the room, she took my signed declaration and asked again if I had any metal on my body or in my pockets. Two technicians explained the procedure and the nurse handed me a pair of earplugs.

‘It gets noisy,’ she said.

I lay down on a long raised bench with a section down the middle that slid back and forth for the purpose of managing my insertion into and extraction from the scanner, which was a large mechanical donut, its central void being the space into which my head would be plunged. They told me to keep perfectly still for the duration of the scan or else the images would be useless. To aid my compliance, rigid plastic bracing nudged against my thighs and either side of my head.

I’d never considered myself claustrophobic, but as I was gently slid into the scanner, with the large bright room gradually displaced from my field of vision by the off-cream interior of the scanner’s casing, which was so near my face I could almost have licked it, I decided each of us has at least one secret fear buried inside us, just waiting for the right opportunity to emerge.

I closed my eyes and focused on not moving my head, or any part

of my body, trying to breathe slowly and evenly, as they'd suggested, 'like meditation.'

'We're going to get underway,' a crackling voice said through some protected internal speaker. 'The noises you'll hear are perfectly normal.'

The sounds were varied and rhythmic—too rhythmic to really be described as noise. There was to begin with a languid mechanical sweeping, followed by a deep buzzing like a faulty and amplified doorbell, its circuit switching on and off, on and off, on and off, now shifting down in pitch, sustained in a continuous assault. Then came eight blasts from an evacuation siren, followed by eight pounding beats like slowed-down machinegun sound effects in a war movie, then the cycle of siren blasts and machinegun thuds repeating, repeating, repeating.

The sounds were brutal but precise and I thought about sampling them. Rāwiri already used a trigger pad in about a dozen songs. Though how would we make such a recording? You had to be inside the machine to really feel it. The sounds wouldn't be as powerful from the outside. Might a shotgun mic do the job? We could borrow one from the Music Depot. I recalled a scene from a Joy Division biopic, where this eccentric record producer lugs sensitive recording equipment through the English countryside, capturing the distant sounds of the stars.

The scanner died down, its strange music silenced, and the voice over the internal speaker said that we were done. They slid me out and uncoupled the various braces, their gestures loveless and unflinching, and I was returned to my friends for transportation home.

Batty took up nursing duty again and stayed through the week. I was off work but had promised to be in by Thursday. I spent my daylight hours noodling on the acoustic and trying to get ahead on a few video games. I pitched the idea of sampling the MRI scanner to Batty and he suggested reproducing the sounds from memory with a drum machine. Rāwiri dropped his one around on Wednesday night.

I started by programming the machinegun thuds, adjusting the tempo and timbre of a kick drum, mixed with a sample of me slapping the outsides of my thighs to provide an organic overtone. I fired off a twenty-second blast and Rāwiri looked up from the laptop he had resting on his knees.

‘Hold up,’ he said.

‘No good?’ I said.

‘Look,’ he said, turning his laptop around to show the screen. Our BandCamp profile was displayed, specifically the private messaging inbox. Rāwiri maximised a messaging window and lines of text expanded across the screen:

Hi guys! Been super digging the tracks on your page and the crowd-shot vids on YouTube. Killer stuff and you play excellently live! Saw one recent video where your bassist had a bit of a spill? Hope they’re doing OK because I have a fantastic offer I’d like to discuss with you all . . . Hint: it involves a recording studio ;-) This is not a drill!

Yours, Danny Irvine (Rep. of Capital Records)

We’d put out a few CDs that we’d recorded and pressed ourselves, selling them at gigs, but we weren’t signed to any labels—big or small. And Capital Records were big even then, with a bunch of their bands getting regular distribution across Australasia, a couple even making it in the American and European markets. In the tiny living room of my apartment, our three churning imaginations blew out really big, really quickly.

‘Wait. Search for him,’ I said.

Rāwiri searched for *Danny Irvine, Capital Records*. Several consistent results came back, including pages on the official Capital Records website. The man was more than a representative, he was a producer. His mug shot showed him to be a bald white guy, probably in his forties, who favoured old Kiwi band T-shirts. He wore a big grin despite his wonky teeth. His goofy, heuristic digital profile endeared us to him—to Danny, Danny Irvine, Record Producer.

‘Could be a fake message?’ Batty said. ‘Like, someone faking us out?’

Rāwiri pointed to the two phone numbers Danny Irvine had left beneath his name in his private message. They matched his contact details posted on the Capital Records website.

‘If it’s fake, they want us to call the real person,’ he said.

‘We have to call,’ Batty said. ‘We have to, right?’

‘We don’t want to risk losing our edge, though,’ I said. ‘We already have CDs, gigs, the internet. What do we gain from this?’

‘We can have more of all those things. A much bigger audience. We can reach thousands or millions more ears,’ Batty said. ‘Most bands signed to Capital Records keep their, you know, their essence intact.’

I didn’t mind the sound of that, a bigger audience, a wider reach, essence intact.

Batty bobbed his head from side to side. ‘There’s the money, too,’ he said.

‘We don’t know what kind of cash they’re offering,’ Rāwiri said.

‘Thinking about your old man?’ I said.

‘Only out of my share,’ Batty said.

Rāwiri looked at me. I nodded, then he nodded.

‘Let’s see what kind of cash they’re offering all of us,’ Rāwiri said.

Batty looked at Rāwiri and me, and we nodded.

‘Okay. But let’s still play it cool,’ Batty said. ‘We’ll call tomorrow, around lunchtime. Make him think we’re not suckers, make him think maybe we’ve got other offers to consider.’

‘Yeah,’ Rāwiri said. ‘Lunchtime long enough to wait?’

‘We don’t want him to think we aren’t interested, either,’ Batty said.

‘We’ve all got work tomorrow,’ I said. ‘Let’s call him now, while we can all talk on speaker. We don’t have any other offers and there’s not much point pretending we do. We’ll just . . . see what he has to say.’

The other two hardly needed the prompting, yet a silence settled over us.

‘The thing he said,’ Batty said. ‘About seeing you fall in the video—’

‘I’m fine,’ I said. ‘I mean, they didn’t say when I’d get the scan



results. But it's been three days already, so it can't be anything too terrible, eh?'

It was simple, Danny Irvine told us. We were terrific and Capital Records wanted to sign us up. 'This is not a drill,' he kept saying. He encouraged us to find legal representation, but he said the contract was straightforward—he'd post a pro forma copy for our initial inspection, what address should he use?

We gave him mine. It felt like the natural solution, being the locale where we were seated at the time. My band mates decided that my flat was now our official HQ. I wondered if they felt rough about doubting my health. It was a fair doubt, but asking for the contract to be sent to my address—band HQ—it felt like a goodwill gesture, a vote of confidence. We were in this together, me and them, them and me, all of us. It was an agreement to our indispensability, at least for the moment.

The contract arrived in my mail slot on Saturday, in a crisp A4-sized envelope addressed to the band. Extracting it, I discovered underneath it a smaller envelope addressed only to me, with hospital branding. Inside the smaller envelope was a letter summoning me to see my neurologist.

I phoned the hospital and they made an appointment for Monday afternoon.

'That's quite prompt,' I said. 'Is it, ah, urgent?'

'I'm not sure, sorry, sir.'

'You work for the hospital, though?'

'Sir, I wouldn't read anything into it.'

Batty's old man drove me to the hospital. Outside the neurologist's office, he didn't even glance at the magazines. We sat silently side by side in our chairs until the door opened and the neurologist invited me, somewhat gravely, to enter.

'Fingers crossed,' Batty's old man said, crossing the fingers of both hands, a tight smile on his face, and I disappeared into the office.

I moved towards the flannelette-draped examination table but the neurologist signalled for me to take a seat across from him at

his desk. He lowered himself into his chair and reclined. I noticed a textured green smear on his lab coat, and imagined an accident with a saag curry.

A few heavy seconds passed before he spoke.

‘Myself and the radiologist have reviewed your scans. With a fella your age, there shouldn’t be any possibility of an issue, not a shadow of a shadow of a doubt, such as the EEG and your experiences suggest. Yet there appears to be nothing wrong that we can determine. The MRI results are clean.’

A pause.

‘Nothing?’ I said.

‘Nothing beyond your experiences.’

A feeling struck me that I first mistook for disappointment. It felt like several of my internal organs had suddenly vanished, creating a slight vacuum that made me slump forward in my seat and let out a loud huff. It felt like stuffing up in the middle of a song—back when I first started playing with others—and not recovering quickly enough so people wouldn’t notice. Except, there wasn’t the accompanying shame. I realised the feeling was actually a deep relief, mixed with the frustration of insufficient closure. Naturally, I hadn’t wanted the neurologist to confirm anything terrible, but I’d hoped for more of an answer, for a conclusion that made some sense of things.

The neurologist handed me one small white paper envelope and one large white plastic envelope. The first contained, he told me, a written report confirming my results. The second contained a copy of the sheets of film with images of the inside of my head that the scanner had captured.

He stood and extended his hand towards me. Clutching my envelopes under one arm, I also stood, and he shook my hand with three robust jolts.

‘Eat well, stay fit, don’t abuse your system, and contact your GP right away if you feel like your wheels are coming off,’ he said.

I went home and examined the sheets of film, pressing them one by one against the living room window for a backlight. If there

was a problem, it was that the various things inside my head felt completely unrelatable. I couldn't recognise myself in them. In some views, my insides had all the geometrical sophistication of a kooky cartoon: coils of brain, bulging eyes on conical stems, vertebrae like batwings. In other views: top-down slices of brain like a series of smashed butterflies. Or like a series of Rorschach inkblots in which all I could see were smashed butterflies, but certainly not a brain. Incredible that this sloppy mess could give rise to consciousness, that all the facets of my psyche were somehow locked up inside a pile of sausages dragged by some starving creature into a cavern of bone.

Yet somewhere in there, weird synaptic sparks were flying.

I had a vision of strumming an unplugged electric guitar. The strings still vibrate, of course, but all you hear is a cold and empty twanging. It takes a spark to draw the real sound out and send it coursing through the coiled pickups, the signal chain—the compounding pedals imparting their sonic inflections—and then to fire it through the amplifier and out into the world, vibrating through the subtle medium of the air we breathe, and from there transferring back into the body, beating on tiny fleshy drums and bony hammers, spiralling through the coiled inner ear, reverting into an electrical signal interpretable now by the shivering brainmeat inside the skull, but not only yours, because this is not a closed loop, there are other people listening, a whole throbbing crowd, their ear bones and auditory nerves also quivering under the pressure generated by the strumming of strings by your hand, and here comes the next wave of sound, and the next wave, the next wave, the next wave.

The soul we now know is electrical and can be communicated with directly.

I slipped the sheets of MRI film back into their plastic envelope then shoved the envelope as far away as I could under my bed, to slowly gather dust in the dark.

I picked up my mobile.

'Contract arrived,' I said to Rāwiri.

'Wicked,' Rāwiri said. 'I'm sure there's still time.'

‘Time?’

‘You talked to Batty?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Call Batty.’

‘Good news,’ I said to Batty. ‘Contract arrived.’

‘Cool,’ Batty said, flatly. ‘Dad’s put our place on the market.’

‘Oh. Well, tell him to take it off.’

‘How much money is the contract worth?’

I paused, then admitted, ‘I don’t know.’ I hadn’t looked at the contract at all. I flipped through it quickly—the pages that mattered, at least. ‘It says stuff about profit share with the label. I can’t see anything about money upfront.’

‘No advance?’ I could hear the hurt in Batty’s voice.

I began flipping back through the pages, rubbing the corners to check none had stuck together.

‘No,’ I said. Then, as two pages separated, ‘Wait.’

‘What?’

‘I’m not sure what it means.’

‘But there’s something?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I think so. It doesn’t say how much.’

We already had a conversation booked for Thursday with Danny Irvine—what he’d demurely termed ‘having coffee’—but I thought he wouldn’t mind if I gave him a call before then. His mobile rang but went to voicemail and I left a message asking him to please return the call as soon as he could. Then I headed out to meet Rāwiri and Batty for a few beers. Rāwiri and I were buying, commiserating with Batty over his and his old man’s misfortunes. Being within sniffing distance of a paying contract was worth a drink as well, we said. It offered some hope and it was a milestone for the band. Batty wasn’t so convinced on the first point. We could all agree, though, that the cancellation—or the postponement, thinking long-term—of my personal doom was something worth celebrating.

I was taking a piss when I felt my mobile vibrate in my pocket. Fishing it out, I almost dropped it in the urinal. Danny Irvine said that he hoped it wasn’t too late to be calling me back. I said the

timing was perfect and then I blurted out the question I had rung him about—about what kind of money we could expect upfront. I couldn't decide if he was hesitant about naming a figure because that was part of the game, or if he was nervous about the way I was slurring my words. Eventually he gave a range that he thought was reasonable. Before hanging up, he managed to repeat four or five times that nothing he'd said constituted anything formal.

I went back into the bar and told Batty and Rāwiri what Danny Irvine had told me.

'You're flying low,' Rāwiri said.

I looked down and saw that he was right and I zipped myself up.

'Think we can ask for more?' Batty asked.

'Āe rā. He's got to expect us to,' Rāwiri said.

'Yeah,' I said. 'What if that's the limit, though?'

'We'll push him on Thursday,' Rāwiri said. 'He's just giving a range to make the larger number seem generous. But it's actually his real starting point.'

'It might be enough anyway,' Batty said. 'To hold the wolves off.'

The news gave us fresh energy and we tried to carry on past midnight, but the bars were closing. The staff at the last place threw us a pathetic look and reminded us it was Monday, when we begged for one final jug. They relented and in return we helped them wipe down the tables and turn up the chairs, then they kicked us out on to the street. The simplest solution from there, as usual, was to grab a taxi to my apartment for some bourbon-and-Cokes.

There's a certain experience of elation that will expand your energies to cosmic proportions and then send them collapsing inward, shrinking your ambitions for a good time to nil, knocking you out cold in the process. This was our experience as soon as we arrived at my place, and Rāwiri and Batty made their poor camp on the foldout couch-bed in my living room. Sheets un-tucked and cushions for pillows, they sprawled out in their T-shirts and underwear, snoring deeply within minutes. Standing there in band HQ, watching their collapsed bodies, a stillness crystallised in my being, which perhaps was a sense of certainty that the present would continue to propel me towards the future for a long while yet,

and that each of us truly was in some rare way indispensable.

A groaning sound woke me a few hours later. In the stuffy haze of sleep it took me a while to recognise my own name. Batty was calling me, then Rāwiri, back and forth, their murmuring voices alternating like the call and response pattern of two animals who knew only one raw sound between them. I stumbled out of my bedroom and straight into the living room.

The blue horse was standing at the foot of the couch-bed. Rāwiri and Batty were backed away from it, staring wide-eyed, though there was hardly any space to move.

Taking in the full sight of it, the horse's flesh seemed not exactly nonmaterial, but not quite solid either, as if the spaces between its composite particles were very nearly discernable. The horse blew out a hot breath, whitely visible in the humid night air, expanding from its muzzle like smoke.

I shuffled forward to stand beside Batty and Rāwiri. We began whispering in strained voices.

'You guys can see it too,' I said.

'Couldn't miss a horse standing in the fucking living room,' Batty said.

'Well,' I said. 'No.'

I reached out and held my open hand above the horse's muzzle, then touched the velvety grey-blue flesh of its nose. With the back of his hand Batty gently stroked its broad cheek. Rāwiri hesitated, but seeing the horse respond with a gentle nudge to mine and Batty's touch, he placed a hand under its chin, feeling the soft hollow there.

'It's really warm,' he said.

'You thought it'd be cold?' Batty said. 'It's a mammal.'

'I thought—I dunno,' Rāwiri said. 'It's fucking beautiful.'

'What's it doing in my apartment?' I said.

'Escaped from a float, maybe?' Rāwiri said.

'How'd it get inside?' Batty said.

As if in answer, the front door blew open in a breeze and bounced off the doorstopper, then clicked shut in its frame.

The horse dipped its head and the three of us withdrew our hands. It pawed the carpet and looked towards the door, so I went

over and opened it, then stepped back as the horse whinnied and carefully picked its way across the room. Its glowing flanks brushed the doorframe as it passed through. We watched it saunter along the ground-floor corridor and exit out through the double doors, out into the world. A shiver crept from the nape of my neck, along the centre of my skull, and into my forehead. I looked into the mystified faces of my band mates, who stared back at me, and at each other, all of us aware that we had seen the manifestation of something righteous.

Later, Rāwiri and Batty told me it was almost like a dream. Except that they could recall the moment perfectly, which never really happens with dreams. The details usually get fudged, as the inconvenient stimuli of the waking world impress themselves upon the brain. The three of us still discuss that moment in the early hours in my apartment, though not often. We try to describe the way it made each of us feel, so that we might shed some greater light on one another's experience and gain a shared understanding. But it's impossible, because how do you begin to comprehend your own experience of such a thing, let alone express it in words to others?

The only way to capture the feeling is to play the song.

That's really the only way.

It's not been as big a hit as 'Outta Time, Outta Luck', which is still the top track from our two albums so far, in terms of radio airtime. But people love this song, especially when we play it live. I imagine us forty years from now—maybe playing a special gig for a small crowd, on a portable stage in the old paddock, just down from Batty's old man's homestead, across from the row of pine trees—and still savouring the song's delivery during the third encore, or something.

So listen up.

Here is that song.