



## Flight Of The Conchords: interview

By Eddy Lawrence

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Ahead of their debut album, New Zealand's hottest band talk food chains, old-school ringtones and the Crazy Frog legacy



Despite a vast reservoir of hipster cachet, it has been a long time since Sub Pop produced a real band of substance. To this day, Nirvana's 'Bleach' remains the label's only release of cultural import, a feat which the poorly groomed, unmotivated The Shins or The Helio Sequence look unable – or unwilling, more like – to replicate. But all that is set to change with the debut LP by Flight Of The Conchords. We haven't been this excited by a new band since we first heard The Pity Party last week.

Power duo Bret McKenzie and Jemaine Clement have a gift for genre-blending that makes even David Bowie's efforts pale in comparison. FOTC shift comfortably from the soft-hitting hip hop of 'Mutha'uckers' to the admittedly vogueish retro-electro of 'Inner City Pressure', in which they movingly address the urban realities of alienation and second-hand underpants. These are themes the band are all too familiar with, from their days spent on London's mean streets, trying to hustle up a living in music's pitiless hometown. Unfortunately, the duo's stay in London coincided with a little-publicised lull in the capital's live music scene.

'I think we were in the wrong part of town,' says Bret, 'because there were no other bands in the UK when we were there, and we still weren't very successful.'

The pair did manage to score a long-term residency at Nando's, which they mistakenly thought was a venue for new bands ('That took us nowhere,' says Bret). Despite this, the city left its mark on FOTC, shaping their novel approach to exploring genres and themes.

'Yeah, the UK is definitely the home of the novelty hit, I think. I was in London when Crazy Frog blew up. That's a real landmark for me. Crazy Frog... that's my Beatles, that really captures my youth. In 20 years' time, that tune'll come on, and that'll really remind me of the good old days, like, "Hey kids – that's not music, this is music."

However, despite this grounding in classic rock construction and a level of post-post-modernism that would make Does It Offend You, Yeah?'s eyes hurt, in some quarters FOTC's sincerity has been called into question ('The concept gets muddled on their debut,' sniffed Pitchfork. 'Are we supposed to laugh at the songs or with them?' – *meow*). Unable to break the snooty London scene, and craving variety in their diet, a disillusioned Bret and Jermaine stowed away on a cargo ship to New York, hidden in a container of kiwi fruit.

'Eating those meant we didn't get scurvy,' says Bret. 'When you're out at sea, that's what you've gotta look out for.'

Having pitched up in Manhattan, America's equivalent of Hollywood, the Conchords resumed their struggle to be heard. This desperate period was captured on a short-lived reality show, for which the band neglected to give us the correct YouTube tags. Things picked up, however, when they secured another high-profile residency, this time at Pizza Hut. Here, they were spotted by Sub Pop's head of A&R, who, according to Bret, spends a lot of time at Pizza Hut.

'Apparently, Nirvana were playing Pizza Hut as well,' he says. 'Most of the bands they get are from Italian-based franchise restaurants. That's what brings all their acts together. Iron & Wine, The Shins, Nirvana and Flight Of The Conchords. Death Cab For Cutie and us, we did a big all-you-can-eat night. It was a long night, we played all our songs three times.'

Having honed their craft and secured backing, the band set to work recording their debut, on a Sony MiniDisc player Jermaine bought. Wanting to retain their live vitality on the album, the band recorded and multitracked the whole thing in one take.

'It took about 45 minutes to record,' reveals Bret. 'We had Mickey Petralia producing it, and he's a studio wizard. He's also an octopus. And yeah, we cloned ourselves as well to help, to play drums and bass and keyboards. Did I mention that? I forgot to mention that. We spent most of the time in the studio working on our clones, and then once we had our clones, the recording process was fairly simple.'

Live anthem 'Rock The Party' has been omitted from the final running order, presumably so the album doesn't become so uncontrollably awesome it explodes, potentially damaging thousands of coffee tables. This restraint and unaffected aura of mystery elevates FOTC above their peers, but they're still wise enough to have their global strategy mapped out. Considering the music industry's increasing reliance on secondary revenue streams, the band are exploring a canny approach to exploiting the lucrative ringtone market (worth £278 million last year).

'I'm making Conchord phone bells, to install in those old phones. It sounds like an expensive idea, but I guess for the number of people who have vintage phones, we could corner that market. They can't get a ringtone – they're pissed off. I've got a lot of bells that I've been making, I've gotta do something with them. We haven't sold any yet.'

With this kind of visionary thinking coupled with the band's chameleonic melodic genius, surely there is nothing beyond FOTC's reach. But what does the future hold – cult appeal, mass success or multimedia expansion?

'I'd like to do a rock opera, like "Bohemian Rhapsody",' muses Bret. 'A complex masterwork. Then hopefully from rock opera, we can take the easy step to opera. Most opera singers started off as rock opera singers, I think. Being an opera singer is a great long-term career option.'

*'Flight Of The Conchords' by Flight Of The Conchords is out on Sub Pop on May 12.*

[http://www.timeout.com/london/music/features/4753/Flight\\_Of\\_The\\_Conchords-interview.html](http://www.timeout.com/london/music/features/4753/Flight_Of_The_Conchords-interview.html)