

COAST TO COAST



COAST



L-R: Myles Wootton, Drew Wootton, Jae Laffer, Jules Douglas, Paul Otway

With the release of fourth album *Rain on the Humming Wire*, THE PANICS' Jae Laffer engages our Jenny Valentish in a conversation that meanders from sun-scorched school days to a Tim Rogers-shaped epiphany and a life lived well

JAE Laffer wants to just drive, to be by the sea, and so that's what we set out to do, in a borrowed old banger with a shrine of miscellanea built by various friends. The Western Australian boy has long lived in Melbourne, but he misses the ocean and finds himself drawn back there. As we park out in some nameless beach suburb and walk along pounding surf that whips the conversation from our ears, Jae talks of the early days with guitarist Drew Wootton, drummer Myles Wootton, bassist Paul Otway and keyboardist/slide guitarist Jules Douglas in the outer suburbs of Perth, of building fires in gravel pits at the foot of the hills of Kalamunda, designing a blueprint for success, and driving, always driving.

"A lot of what we do feels like a road movie," Jae says. "When we first built the band we were feeling the magic of what it was to make music together, out on the outskirts, and it became a template for us that's never left."

Jae originally moved to Melbourne for a girl ("didn't last long"), and wound up dossing down with fellow Panics and their girlfriends in a sharehouse slap bang in the muso-ridden suburb of Collingwood. Their group of mates included Whitley and Oh Mercy. Now Jae lives in Fitzroy, with a nearby office kitted out with a guitar and a piano. Here he can drop into the abyss and emerge 12 hours later, "hopefully with a song written".

When you listen to old albums, does it transport you back to that period and what you were thinking?

Completely. I can even hear myself singing, and depending on the character's voice, it takes me back to the day and what I was doing before I was singing.

Is there any album in particular you listen to and it gets you in the guts?

Yeah, the one before the last was called *Sleeps Like a Curse* [released in 2005]. That was our first trip to England and to Manchester. It takes me back; I can remember exactly the streets where I was walking and coming up with the words. It has a really good atmosphere to it. We did a quick tour of Australia when we got back. The last gig was in Sydney and the next day we went into the studio and literally set up and played it really quickly. I'm really happy that we chose to make some records like that. It's just the sound of a band that's really, really tight. There's not much I can't listen to, but there's so much I'd change about so many of them. We look back: goddamn, we could have had a lot of radio play if we just sorted a few things.

Even this song [Jay Z's 'Empire State of Mind' is on the radio], I remember dancing to it in Manhattan six months ago. Music is amazing like that. My favourite bit of the whole thing is being on radio. I remember the first time we got played, I'd spent years working in the

orchards and fruit farms. I was on one of those cherry pickers doing the high fruit and we came on and I was just so happy. I took the cherry picker into the air, it was really early morning and the sun was just coming up and I was looking down a valley listening to us. I felt amazing. There are guys in tractors listening to triple j. There are guys on construction sites, in bottle shops... and the idea that your music is even softly in the background slightly altering the mood of people's days, I just love that.

You've spent a couple of long spells in Manchester, thanks to your manager Pete Carroll (cousin of the Happy Mondays' Shaun and Paul Ryder). It must have been like starting from scratch again. Did that bring back the excitement of the old days?

The excitement has never wavered. Last time we were there was the first time we got good radio play. We had some good tours and had some good times. We were out in the suburbs of Manchester just driving around in the van to buy some gear for the tour and we came on the radio just as we were passing the Salford Lads Club. Do you remember the famous Smiths photo taken there? [On the inside sleeve of *The Queen is Dead*.] It was one of those moments; you become a child again. But this time, instead of thinking about the kid on the tractor, you have the picture of the quaint English housewife with her two-up, two-down; the radio on. You stop feeling like a backpacker at that minute.

As well as the 'Madchester' connection, you've done solo spots on Noel Gallagher's Australian tour.

Oasis were huge for me and Drew back in high school. It's not really in the sound of the Panics, but it's in our family tree. Drew and I were the kids with the Stone Roses records. We were heavy Britpop fans, with the haircuts and the guitars and all that.

Are there any defining musical moments of your teens?

When Drew and I were 15, and old enough to go down the city on the weekends, we saw a You Am I show in this big warehouse. That night changed a lot of stuff for me. They were just firing. I don't think I'd had an Australian record up until that point. I was just coming out of my Nirvana haze. Back in those days you could probably afford two CDs a year and you'd live off it. That was your whole world. For me it was Nirvana and the Pixies, so it was a big eye-opener for me to see this Australian guy kick arse. I didn't know if I was going to allow myself to idolise someone who was local [frontman Tim Rogers is from Kalgoorlie, WA]. It just sort of clicked over in my mind that it was okay. Suddenly I had a path in life myself.

Would that be the Hourly, Daily period?

That was the tour, yeah. He just walked up on stage, put his hand in the air, saluting the crowd. Fuck, man, that's the look of someone who's just reached a peak and is so happy about it. That was the pivotal moment.

Do you reckon kids in Perth have the same conflict about liking the Panics?

If you feel that strongly, the best thing is to probably stay out of people's faces. Keep a little distance but not too much distance. I don't know. I find it hard to imagine myself in the same light [as Tim Rogers that night] because I hold those memories of my own with a high amount of romance around them. I hope something I've done has contributed similar feelings for people... I can't judge myself without sounding pretentious.

What was your first band like?

Covers of Nirvana and the Smashing Pumpkins. That American stuff. I remember the first band talks were at age nine, in primary school, back when I liked Bon Jovi, with me saying, "I don't think we should play too many covers. We've really got to get our own repertoire going." I called a band meeting in the library, which basically meant making this thing serious by going inside. Maybe we'd draw an album cover.

Those early bands, were you always the singer?

Originally I thought I'd end up being Slash. That was the first dream: to become a famous lead guitarist. No one wants to be the singer when you're 11 years old. It took me a long time to get into the nature of being able to get on stage and sing. Certainly it took me years and years to get to where I'm at now. I still hit or miss. The thing is, it works for me most of the time. I can do terrible gigs and completely lose control of my voice and wonder what's going on. But most of the time when it's working I can really tune into the song and I know I can deliver it well in terms of honesty. I'm very good at zoning out and thinking of what I wrote the song about and the character. I do a lot of daydreaming up there on stage. I think about some ridiculous things. I have to shake my head because there are all these people watching you and you're thinking about the girl in the blue dress at the bus stop.

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Was high school a happy time?

I suppose so. I had this one-track mind. I just walked around like a rock'n'roll star, talking in rhyme, thinking about my career that didn't exist. And I'm so proud of my younger self. I think he set me up well. I think he thought it would be a lot simpler but I think he'd be happy.

I'm always glad I've been one-track minded. That's how you get places. I have wildly ambitious and ridiculous dreams. I'm confident in all of them. But sometimes the track changes and things alter your path. Things take longer or things happen a lot differently. I've always felt blessed that I had one idea in my mind of what I wanted to do when I was older and it's never altered. Some people don't know what they want to do in life and I think that's really sad. Everybody's got a skill, but some people don't see it.

Do you read what your peers are doing?

Yeah. I hate reading about our [stuff]. Even if it's a slightly good review, I don't want my day altered by opinions of one person. But I read about my friends' bands all the time.

I listen to the radio a lot and take a great interest. I feel really blessed to have got to this point in my life. I always try and remind my high school self how happy he'd be if he knew he was friends with all these bands that I used to listen to that I can now call if I need to borrow a guitar.

Trying to keep that magic alive for yourself.

It's always alive; I just try and remind myself it's really good. We've got to stop and enjoy the stages that we're at. ■





THE ALBUM



The Panics recorded *Rain on the Humming Wire* with producer John O'Mahony (Metric, Alberta Cross) in New York state. The process was "seven boys in a church out in the woods for a month", Jae says. "It was wild. The nights consisted of a bonfire and carton of beer, sitting in the woods."

A recent breakup goes under the microscope in 'Move On', 'Shot Down' and 'Low on Your Supply'. "Probably more songs than that," Jae admits. "Ex-girlfriends always say to me, 'You're going to use this for your next album, aren't you.'"

Elsewhere, Jae draws on the Polish folk music his extended family would play at gatherings, breaking out the accordion for 'How Long', a Pogues-y stomp. The album's adorned with the panoramic spaghetti western flourishes the band have made their trademark: witness the classic Australian guitar tone on 'One Way Street' and the epic drumming on 'Not Quite a Home'. 'Walk That Mile Alone' is classic driving music, all twangy guitar and brooding imagery.

"The record moves really well," Jae says, "and there's a good intent behind it all. I also think it's a record that takes a few listens, which is generally a good thing. It's going to be a lot of fun to tour, I know that much."