

# DIED PRETTY

## A 2001 Interview With Brett Myers

*Noise For Heroes* featured Died Pretty twice during its print days...those articles cover the history of the band up through the CD *Every Brilliant Eye* in reasonable detail. But that still leaves the whole of the 1990s uncovered, and when I had a chance to do an interview with Brett Myers to be the basis of an article for *The Big Takeover* I jumped at it. (The article was entitled *Golden Days When Giants Walked The Earth*, and included the Celibate Rifles and New Christs. It appeared in issue #48 of *The Big Takeover*.)

Unfortunately, print magazines have space constraints so only a small part of what was covered in the one hour plus interview that Brett and I did ended up appearing in *The Big Takeover*. Here then is the entire interview plus lots more comments of my own added in for good measure. The conversation starts with *Doughboy Hollow* and runs through the 2001 album *Everyday Dream*, with a few detours here and there. But first, it's worth a recap of the recordings that the band has done over that span.

### Recordings from the 1990s

I've always said that Died Pretty records are growers and that it's common (for me at least) that I don't like them upon their first release. It often takes ten or so listens before it begins to take hold, but after that initial period, the records grow stronger and stronger.

*Doughboy Hollow* was one Died Pretty album that didn't require much time to take hold at all. It was their second record for Beggar's Banquet and came out in 1991. For my money it's about a tie between this one and the debut lp *Free Dirt* for the title of best Died Pretty album ever. What a batch of songs! Starting with the subdued but lush "Doused", it quickly crescendos with the majestic, piano-fueled opus "DC". Driven by a staggered drum beat, the song features a chorus that provides a lift that would make Vince Carter jealous. Then it's a more typical Died Pretty construction in "Sweetheart", a mid-tempo effort that alternates subdued verses blossoming into big choruses. Then it's the pounding rocker

"Godbless" followed up by the moody but powerful "Satisfied" and another rocker in "Stop Myself". This string of six songs opening *Doughboy Hollow* is as strong a set of tracks as can be found on any album anywhere. Each one has everything that should be required of a hit single...great use of dynamics, wonderful hooks, powerful singing and memorable tunes.

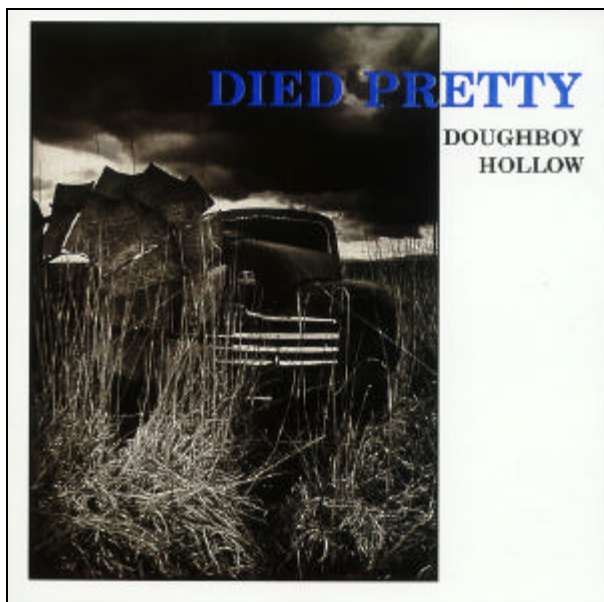
After these six, the band settles into a couple of more typical lp tracks, but then rebounds with another powerhouse in "Disaster" and a lighter pop track in "Out In The Rain". The lp closes down gently with "Turn Your Head". In all, an incredibly great record, and it's completely baffling that the US rock press wasn't giving the band cover features left right and sideways.



Despite lack of overseas acceptance, *Doughboy Hollow* did well in Australia, spawning a clutch of singles and getting substantial radio play. This provided the band with two benefits...money that gave the freedom to concentrate on the band, and their label's confidence that there was something that could eventually catch on outside of Australia.

The follow up was 1993's *Trace*. Like *Doughboy Hollow* it was produced by Hugh Jones, but it's a

tougher album to sink your teeth into. Repeated plays show that there's no shortage of great songs on this one, either, but the signature songs like "Caressing Swine" with its cryptic title and unusual drum beat or "Harness Up" take more time to appreciate than the more obvious smashes on the previous album. But with the benefit of a decade's worth of plays, I can say that this is another fine album with depth and substance and its own load of great songs to boot. "Headaround" has a keyboard line that reminds me of the *Next To Nothing* days of the band to go with a powerful tune. Myers steps up for vocal duties on the driving "Til We Get It Right" to add a varied feel. "The Rivers" provides much the same feel as *Doughboy Hollow's* "I'm Not Satisfied", and the quiet feeling of this song extends into "A State Of Graceful Mourning". But after that, "Just Forever" features a typical Died Pretty transition from quiet verse to loud chorus, and "Through My Heart" has the big single sound and throat grabbing hook that came so easily on the prior disc. Then "110 BPM" takes you back to the Suicide and Velvets underpinnings of the band with a disturbed, tearing guitar that could slice through anything and Peno's distorted vocals over all. A great song, but NOT a hit single. "Dreamaway" and the closing "Seize Your Ways" are both slow and moody numbers. Overall, *Trace* has more songs that rely on subtlety and fewer big statement tracks, and the result takes longer to appreciate. But it's a great record regardless.



The promo push for *Trace* in the US included a giveaway CD called *Caressing Swine...And Some*

*History* that featured the single from the new lp and a selection of some of the best tracks from their earlier works all the way back to the start. It's a pretty nice introduction to the band and is well worth rescuing from the used bins if you are lucky enough to see a copy.

Prior to 1995's *Sold* CD, long time drummer Chris Welch left the band. It seemed like it would be a major loss, because Chris was such a force. His unique style left a huge mark on most of Died Pretty's early classics. But surprisingly, the transition from *Trace* to *Sold* feels pretty smooth in the drumming department, even though there are actually two different players on *Sold*. More on that from Brett below.

In my own view, of all Died Pretty albums of the 1990s, *Sold* has probably grown in stature the most over the time since it was released. I was completely unimpressed by it at first, and now I think almost every song on it is terrific. The buzzing "Cuttin' Up Her Legs" is maybe the most obvious track, but soon the jangling guitars and garagey keyboards on "Slipaway" start to gnaw at you. Then "Stops'n'Starts" kicks in...a jolting rhythm that reminds me of the feel of "Harness Up" and a typically dissonant Myers solo burning through the middle. The rest then connect all at once, it seems..."Cry" with its dreamy intro bursting into huge layers of guitar, "Which Way To Go" sounding like the band arriving one by one and just starting to jam at first and then working up to full throttle in the middle, the leadoff "Sold" with its cryptic words and great dynamics, or the jangly, chiming pop of "How I Feel". They're all terrific, and this is a superb disc.

But *Sold* didn't sell, and Columbia gave up on the band. They were on their own now, and had to decide what to do. They'd never been a big seller, but just being on a major label gave them resources to record that an indie band doesn't usually have access to. Now they were back to recording on a budget of a couple thousand dollars. Should they continue?

Talking it over with old friend and manager John Needham at Citadel Records, they decided to keep going, making the music they wanted to make and not worrying about financial success. They rounded up a new (and first rate) drummer in Simon Cox, and recorded the oddly named *Using My Gills As A Roadmap* (story below). Released from any pressures to suit commercial tastes, the band produced the most adventurous Died Pretty

record since the *Next To Nothing* ep. There's not a lot of bright pop songs, but there are plenty of noisy and slightly twisted tunes like "Slide Song" or "Paint It Black You Devils" or "The Daddy Song". Even "Radio", the most upbeat track on the record, starts with a scratchy guitar lead. And perhaps the biggest difference is that they've almost completely abandoned the usual songwriting approach of alternating soft and loud passages in favor of rather flat, repetitive structures that demand a different set of listening standards to appreciate. In large stretches of the album the music has an ambient quality about it. The best exception to this is the closing "Drive", which does the usual blossoming chorus thing, albeit in a fairly restrained manner.

But all that should not be taken to suggest that *Gills* isn't a good record...it's challenging, but it's challenging in a positive way. It wouldn't be my choice as an introduction to the band, but it's still a first rate record and a good listen end to end.



A couple years later and Citadel released the compilation package *Out Of The Unknown*. Named after their debut single, this CD collects a good cross section of Died Pretty's more obvious greats from their whole career. It's probably a good introduction for newcomers, but for a veteran fan it can be hard listening to a lot of these songs outside of their original context...it just doesn't quite feel right. The great thing here is if you were lucky enough to score the bonus disc that came with early copies of *Out Of The Unknown*. It's a collection of a few B sides and a lot of previously

unreleased material, and it's almost uniformly excellent to the point where it holds up as well as any brand new Died Pretty record with the exception of *Doughboy Hollow* or *Free Dirt* would have. As a set, the songs match up well to the more poppy and upbeat material of the first half of the 90s, with very few pace breakers.

Throughout the nineties, Died Pretty regularly released two or three CD singles from each album, and these often had 3 or 4 B sides that weren't available on the standard issue lp. The *Out Of The Unknown* bonus disc was so good that it motivated me to burn CDRs of all these other B sides and non-lp tracks. The result was enough to fill two more full 70 minute CDs with a load of songs that I'd never paid enough attention to and now realize are not the least bit sub-par...it's like discovering two new Died Pretty albums stashed away in my own collection.

*Out Of The Unknown* had something of the feeling of a swan song release, so when 2001 rolled around and the news came out that there was a new CD, it was quite a treat. I got to review *Everyday Dream* for *The Big Takeover*, and rather than paraphrasing, I'll just copy that:

"If there was an Australian rock and roll hall of fame, Died Pretty's longevity and the quantity and quality of their body of work would have to make them inaugural inductees. *Everyday Dream* is the latest in a line of something like 10 albums. It's probably their quietest effort yet, and like many Died Pretty albums, it's one that doesn't begin to reveal its strengths until it's been played quite a few times. **Ron Peno** sings in a much higher and softer register than he did in the early days, and **Brett Myers** continues as the most self-effacing lead guitar player around, always preferring understatement. Like other Died Pretty records, *Everyday Dream* focuses on soundscapes that build and break moods sonically more than lyrically. But the biggest difference from previous releases is the heavy reliance on electronic instruments here...synthetic drums and blippy-bleepy sounds pepper much of this disc. For a person like myself who has a natural antipathy to this kind of thing, this was tough to absorb. But having been through the experience of bad first impressions on 15 years worth of Died Pretty records, I kept listening and damn if it hasn't start finding a home in my heart just like all their others."

Now to the interview. After the usual faltering introductions over the phone, we got down to the real business of asking and answering questions.

Steve: I've already done two features with you or Ron and have covered the 80s pretty well in the past, so I wanted to start with *Doughboy Hollow* and go forward, if that's all right with you. I thought *Doughboy Hollow* was one of the two best lps you guys ever did – one of the classic records released by anyone in the 1990s – and I wanted to see if you had similar feelings about it.

Brett: Yeah, it's a pretty special album, although at the time we didn't have a sense that it was light years ahead of anything else that we'd done previously. It just seemed to be a part of a continuous stream of stuff that we'd done. It was done with the same lineup as *Every Brilliant Eye*. I think the difference was that we had a slightly more sympathetic producer in Hugh Jones, and we made a decision to do it back in Australia in the studio that we'd done a lot of our previous recordings in, Trafalgar. And we did the same as we ever did...wrote a bunch of songs and went in the studio and recorded them.

I thought Hugh made a big difference in that he really made an effort to make sure it turned out like we wanted to and that we'd sound as good as we possibly good. With *Every Brilliant Eye* before that and Jeff Eyrich, we basically fitted into his mold. He had a certain way that he made records and we had to fit in with that or not do it with him. In some ways, *Every Brilliant Eye* is sort of the record we wanted to make...we wanted to do something that didn't sound like an indie sort of record, that sounded a little bigger or not as weedy sounding as some of the earlier stuff we'd done. But we probably went too far in another direction. So I guess *Doughboy Hollow* was sort of the happy middle that we had wanted to get to in terms of sound.

Steve: I had the sense that since you had all this time between *Every Brilliant Eye* and *Doughboy Hollow* that maybe you'd spent more time working out the arrangements and all the little details for each song.

Brett: Not really, no. There wasn't actually that much time between them. I think maybe there was a lot of time between *Lost* and when we recorded *Every Brilliant Eye*. That was quite a gap. That was at least two years. We recorded *Every Brilliant Eye* at the end of 1989, and we did

*Doughboy Hollow* I guess at the start of 1991 or maybe late 1990. There wasn't a big gap. I don't think the time factor had much to do with it...it was more the choice of producer and studio and the songs were all really good. That's something that's sort of out of your control sometimes.

Steve: I wanted to ask you about some of my favorite songs on there and see what you think about them. Those are "DC", "Sweetheart" and "Satisfied".



Brett: "Sweetheart" and "Satisfied"...yeah, they're probably two of my favorite songs off the album. "Sweetheart" gets mentioned a lot...it's sort of the quintessential Died Pretty song. It's sort of slow and brooding and has a nice melody, etc. I had a couple of acoustic chords written on a tape to play, and I played it to Ron...it was 50-50 if it was even going to be a song. And he heard it and said "That's really nice, let's do something with that." And he had a melody worked out in about a couple minutes, five minutes at the most. And we just banged it into shape over about an hour and it was done.

Then Hugh actually did a bit of a rearrangement...not a rearrangement, but we just had a nice little verse/chorus sort of thing and he suggested that we should have a little break there in the middle, which helped the song. And then Ron came up with a really good lyric; he actually wrote this sort of veiled reference to a whole other issue that sounds like a love song, but it's not really.

Steve: And then "Satisfied"?

Brett: Oh, "Satisfied", you mentioned that didn't you? I actually wanted to write a song like...there was a band called Traffic that Stevie Winwood used to be in. They were this psychedelic, jammy

sort of pretty hippy band. But I liked some of the elements of what they did, and wanted to make something like one of their long, sort of not-too-out-there songs with nice pop elements behind it...melodic elements. I don't know, I worked on that pretty hard, and I was really happy with it. It's just a slower powerful song, and I think it was great.



"D.C." was sort of ...Steve our bass player had a tape of some stuff he'd done, and he played it to me and I said, "I don't like the verse very much, but the chorus is good". Apparently I'd heard it the wrong way around; his verse was what I thought was the chorus and vice versa, so we ended up throwing out his chorus and making his verse the chorus, and I wrote a new verse...banged out a couple of chords, and that became "D.C.". I like it because it has a little groovy 60s sort of chorus.

And then Ron had this lyric about a friend that he was close to who drowned. It was great, though, because it wasn't a melancholy sort of dirge, but it was quite an uplifting sentiment.

Steve: So what does "D.C." mean?

Brett: It's the guy's initials. His name was David Cock.

Steve: There's a mystery cleared up! Overall, were you disappointed that the record didn't make more of an impact than it did?

Brett: Well, yes and no. Because it did basically nothing overseas, and lots of our previous records had got a lot more attention. But strangely enough it was really big in Australia and sold something like five times the amount of our previous records put together.

Steve: So how much is that in total?

Brett: (bursts out laughing) Not a lot! It was in the top 10 or top 20 in the commercial charts. We were on the mainstream radio and my mother would hear it and stuff like that. It was at that sort of level. It was pretty amazing for us. It was great on that level...not that we were ever chasing commercial success, but it's nice to hear your music on the radio when you're walking down the street or something. It allows you to do a little bit more because you don't have to fight for budgets and all that. But then again it did nothing overseas, which was strange because it was one of our strongest ever records.

Steve: Did you feel like it got promoted well overseas?

Brett: Probably not. I think what happened was that *Every Brilliant Eye* was the first one that Beggars Banquet financed and there was a lot of problems with the producer, and there was problems with the lineups and personal stuff going on. For whatever reason, it didn't become a great hit. And then they agreed to do another one, but it didn't seem to get the push that *Every Brilliant Eye* got. We would have been more upset about that and probably got on their case a lot more, but it was doing so well in Australia that we just spent our time touring here instead.

Steve: You moved to CBS for the *Trace* album. How did that happen?

Brett: Primarily because of the success we'd had in Australia. We'd done four or five indie albums on Citadel or Blue Mosque, which was Citadel distributed by a major label here. But we weren't signed to anyone...just Citadel. And the distribution contract with Festival had come up, and we were dissatisfied with them. And the head

of Citadel (**John Needham**, one of the real forces in Australian rock – ed) was also our manager at the time...it boiled down to that we decided that if we were going to give it a shot on a major, now was the time. It was sort of a calculated experiment. We knew the pitfalls and the advantages and we decided to give it a go.

We signed with Sony because they offered us the most money. I remember thinking “they’re all evil and bad, so it doesn’t make much difference which major we sign to” (laughs). I think we thought Sony was the biggest and baddest of them all, so we’d just go with them. And they signed us for the world.

Steve: Was the deal with Beggar’s Banquet just for two records?

Brett: It was more like they sign you for seven albums, but they can drop you at any time.

Steve: So they let you go?

Brett: Basically, yeah. I think we went to them and said, look, do you mind if we go off with somebody else, and they said, no, go ahead! (laughs) It was pretty mutual. Everyone was quite happy to get out of the situation. I doubt they would have wanted to spend a lot of money on the next record. They’d paid for 99% of the cost of records like *Every Brilliant Eye* and *Doughboy Hollow* and 99% of the sales were in Australia where they didn’t get any money from it. (laughs)

Steve: Oh, well. Bad deal for them! Usually it doesn’t work out that way.

Brett: (laughs) No, it doesn’t, but fortunately for us it did. So basically we signed with Columbia for the world, got Hugh back in, and tried to make another record like the last one. We were really happy with it. But the confluence of circumstances...those sort of things only happen every now and then. You have the songs, everyone is up for it, the stars are right, I don’t know. At the end of the day, I don’t think the songs were as strong. We spent more time on it, worked with Hugh again, and we did it in Australia, but I don’t think some of the vocal performances were that fantastic. Ron will tell you that himself. Some of the songs weren’t fantastic. They’re not the best songs I’ve ever written. On that album I only wrote about two thirds of the songs or something like that. It just wasn’t as good.

Although, there are some good songs on it. It’s not a complete dud or anything, it’s just not as good as *Doughboy*.

Steve: I’d say it’s not as good as *Doughboy* either, because I like that and *Free Dirt* about the best of what you’ve done, but I don’t think *Trace* is bad at all...I was playing it just the other day. I dug out a bunch of old interviews you done the other day to get prepared for this, and I have one from *Time Out*, where Ron was saying that there were only two songs on it that he liked...“Harness Up” and “State Of Graceful Mourning”.

Brett: Yeah, “State Of Graceful Mourning” is a real nice song. But overall, it wasn’t as consistent. That’s the best way to put it.

Steve: What was the situation with Steve Clark leaving and Robert Warren joining at that point?

Brett: I dunno. Steve just basically had tour fatigue, I think. We’d done a lot of heavy touring up to that stage. He’d done two 60 or 70 day tours of Europe with us and 20 dates in America after each of those, and I think he’d just had enough. It was pretty amicable. It wasn’t like a big blowout or anything. He said “Look, I don’t want to do much more touring” and we said “Well, we want to tour a fair bit, so I guess we’d better call it quits”. He’d actually left the band when *Trace* was recorded, and he came back in and did the record for us. It was all that friendly.

Steve: Well, I can understand getting tired of touring. You guys toured pretty hard for a long time.

Brett: Yeah, we did. And obviously you didn’t see a lot of that, because from about 1991 onward we did 90 percent of our touring in Australia. We did a lot of tours here.

Steve: I don’t recall you coming to California since the early 90s.

Brett: We did actually. We came for one of these stupid Sony things...it was sort of fun being on a major label because you got to see the workings from the inside. It was sort of surreal at times. One time we went to California was just after the earthquake in 1994, was it?

Steve: Oh, the Northridge one, right?

Brett: Yeah, and we'd made a video for "Harness Up", which was the first single. And Columbia in America, much to our shock, actually really liked it and wanted to release it as a single. But they looked at the video and they didn't like it. So they said "Look, we want to make another video", and they just flew us over to LA for like a week and put us up in a hotel, and for one day we went down and did a video shoot in this soundstage in Hollywood. And then they just flew us home again. Picked us up in limos. (laughs) It's really strange. And we were like "Well, this is OK! This is fun!"

And then of course the whole thing went a bit sour with Columbia. I don't know if that video that they made ever got shown. It certainly never got shown in Australia. Then we had a bit of a blow up with them. Who knows? But I enjoyed all the absurdity that went on.

Steve: They did a really nice promo only release...that *Caressing Swine...and Some History* CD.

Brett: Yeah, I remember that. It was a good little sort of background look at all of our stuff.

Steve: They should have put that out for real.

Brett: Yeah, it was a good sampler, wasn't it?

Steve: I saw you play in Long Beach...

Brett: Yeah, I remember that. That was ages ago. What was that place? It starts with B...it was a strange place. Devo used to play there.

Steve: Bogarts...

Brett: Bogarts! That was it! Yeah. We actually did a European gig in 1994. We were scheduled to come back and had this 30 day tour of America booked. But that also went wrong. Another ridiculous funny thing that happened...they had this conference where they get the heads of every country convened. It was in Scotland, and they had this old castle booked out. And in the main hall every night, they had like three acts. Each country would nominate one act, and they would have that act play with two others for three a night. So these executives and their wives would go and have dinner and then they'd come in and watch the three acts, and you'd play like four or five songs. So it was like a showcase for each territory's new budding act for the world, and we were chosen to do this.



It was pretty good...there was some interesting people playing. And we came on and Ron was thinking "This is our big chance, I'd better really go for it!", and he went a bit over the top (laughs). It was a full-on Ron show. He dressed in these...I don't know...they were pretty wild clothes, and they just hated it and they hated us. And within about 24 hours of that show our whole American tour was canceled and we just headed back to Australia (laughs heartily again).

It was only one guy really, the head of Columbia in America, who just hated it. So we did another ten dates in Europe and then we packed off home. And then we were dropped by Columbia in America about two months later. It was really too bad, because we were getting this great airplay and the record was going really well. They'd done a special single and people were ringing us up from the midwest saying "we've heard your song on the local commercial station, blah, blah, blah". And then they just dropped us. So that sort of killed that.

Steve: That's a pretty tragic story!

Brett: Well basically, Ron was really sort of camping it up to, and the head of Columbia at the time was rumored to be a pretty homophobic sort of guy and just hated the whole sort of vaguely camp element that Ron had, and didn't want to know about it. So that was it.

Steve: That's kinda funny, because I remember the last time that I interviewed Died Pretty I was talking to Ron and he told me a very similar story about a gig just before you got signed to Beggar's Banquet.

Brett: That's true! Yeah, except they liked it! He got really nervous. We had this huge gig to play

the Greyhound in London, and the place was completely packed. You had to fight your way just to get to the side of the stage. And the manager is going "This is a really important gig, we can get signed, it's a really big deal, make or break, blah, blah, blah". So of course, Ron's immediate reaction is to drink a bottle of bourbon and collapse, you know? Be revived for the show and just abuse everyone (laughs). And for some reason the Beggar's people thought it was great. There you go! The Sony big Columbia US people, well, THE person at least didn't anyway.

Steve: One other show I wanted to ask you about...I saw you play in San Juan Capistrano in California opening for Revenge.

Brett: Oh, yeah, I remember that. The Coach House. Bizarrely enough I remember the name of that one.

Steve: Yeah, and you were set up right on the edge of the stage. I still remember seeing Chris with his drum kit set right on the edge of the stage...I never saw a band set up like that before.

Brett: Well there wasn't much available room, so we had to make the most of it. But they were really nice guys. Peter Hook was great. I don't know if musically we were that compatible, but we were just grabbing beds where we could. Peter Hook was a big hero of mine. Joy Division are very big in my book and so are New Order. He came backstage the first night...we'd finished our soundcheck and hadn't met any of the band, and Peter Hook just popped his head in the dressing room door and said something like "G'Day, me name's Pete. Is there enough beer? We'll have a few whiskeys later." That was about it. He was just really nice and disarming.



It's like when we did a tour with REM in Australia. Mike Stipe was just the same, dropped in and said hello. It's really nice when you're playing with someone who you respect, or has some sort of...is above you in terms of power of the whole sort of set up that you're on...it's nice of them to break the ice like that.

Steve: Stipe has a good reputation that way.

Brett: Yeah. We did that tour...basically REM just pick their band and they'd actually asked for us, which was really nice. And we did the whole Australian tour with them.

Steve: Getting back to the chronology here, after *Trace* it was a couple years and then you did *Sold*.

Brett: Well things had sort of deteriorated a bit with Sony. But we had John Watson, the A&R guy who'd signed us was still in place, although he was doing the job shitty. He'd fostered this band called Silverchair, and he'd signed them up and eventually became their manager and quit. But he was still in place, and he was our champion. I think he made sure that we got the money for *Sold* through.

*Sold* is the album we should have made after *Doughboy*. To me it's a much stronger album than *Trace*. We made a small step backward to make it a little less pop and a little more hard edged. And that's when we got Rob Younger back in to produce it with Wayne Connolly,

Actually, we did a little ep that was really good called *Days* for the REM tour and we worked with Wayne on that. Wayne had produced a lot of local bands at the time. He's got a great ear and I thought he was really good. So we went to Sydney again and recorded with Rob and Wayne and tried to make it a bit tougher and a bit more harsh. Get some of the more pop elements out of it.

Steve: I've read where you said that it's more raw sounding, but it feels softer to me.

Brett: Well, OK, there you go!

Steve: Also, Chris Welsh left before this record, right?

Brett: I think that's the same story. He'd had enough of touring. He had two kids and I think it all just got a bit much.

Steve: He was always one of my favorite drummers.

Brett: Yeah, he was pretty wild. He was really exciting to watch. The thing about Chris was that he was quite a volatile drummer, which was exciting from an audience point of view but sometimes a bit nerve racking from a playing in a band point of view. You didn't always know where he was going to go. But on his night, he was one of the best drummers I've ever played with.

Steve: I practice along to records at home, and one that I play to all the time is "Winterland", and something I'd never noticed until I started playing with it is that there are several points where the speed suddenly increases, so it's much faster by the end than it is at the beginning.

Brett: Yes it does. Chris as I said is a volatile drummer and he was never renowned for his steady time keeping. He was known for his more Keith Moon-like style than his time keeping. I guess that's the polite way to put it.

Steve: I find that playing along with it after a while you get the hang of where the tempo is going to change. Of course, in a performance you don't have the luxury of having heard this particular take 50 times. Did you feel like it hurt you when he left? He seemed like such a big part of the band sound for so long.

Brett: Well he was, especially at first. But as time went on, our songs as a band had changed a bit, and it was a bit more restrained. So at the time he left it didn't make as big a difference to us as if he had left during *Lost* or *Free Dirt* or something like that. He was playing a sort of straighter style by the time he left, so it was slightly easier to replace him than it would have been if he'd left in that early period.

But then we didn't have a real drummer for ages. We worked with a whole variety of people. Mark Kingsmill from the Hoodoo Gurus played with us. We had a guy named Shane Melder, who was in lots of local bands. He recorded half of *Sold* with us.

Steve: Along with Nick Kennedy...

Brett: Yeah, Nick Kennedy, he was a friend of Wayne's and played in a band called Big Heavy Stuff, and he also played with Wayne Conolly's band Knieval. He was great. He never played with us live, but he recorded with us.

So we had a floating lineup with drummers for ages. It was sort of fun, because we'd only ever really played with Chris, so it was interesting. But we ended up with a guy named Simon Cox who was a friend of Jim Dickson's. I don't know if you know Jim Dickson, he used to play in the New Christs.

Steve: Yeah, and the Survivors, right?

Brett: Yeah, the Survivors! That's a LONG time ago (laughs). And he recommended Simon, and we had a try with him and he was fantastic. He was great. He's been a real godsend to us...he's a great drummer.

Steve: I know he's on that new Ed Kuepper CD.

Brett: Yeah, and he played in a band called Tumbleweed as well. He's on their new record as well. He started playing with Ed Kuepper and Tumbleweed about six months after he joined us, so he's had about three bands on the go for three or four years now at least.

Steve: That's three different sets of music as well.

Brett: Totally different styles, yeah. Well, he came from sort of a jazzy background, so he can do a lot of different stuff. He's quite a studied drummer and can cover a lot of styles.

Steve: That version of "Fever" he does with Kuepper on *Smile...Pacific* is mind boggling. Tell him I thought his playing on that is great.

Brett: OK, I will.

Steve: So after *Sold* there's a pretty long gap and then you did *Using My Gills As A Roadmap*, which has to be one of the stranger titles of all time.

Brett: Well, yeah. After *Sold* Sony dumped us because we didn't sell enough records. And we were at a bit of a watershed. We had to decide what we wanted to do. It would have been an opportune time to split up, because we'd sort of gotten quite used to having a lot of corporate backing. There was money and all sorts of studios and whatever we wanted basically we could get.

So we had to look at ourselves and decide what we were doing and why we were doing it and did we want to keep doing it.

And I guess what we decided was that we did want to keep doing it, and we wanted to do it just for ourselves, and as long as it was interesting and exciting to us, that was the only criterion that we'd have. And we weren't going to look to try to make money from it anymore. And everybody got jobs, because the alternative was to resign with another label, tour all the time, blah, blah, blah, and nobody wanted to do that any more. So it was a conscious decision to just do it to make music because we loved doing it and that would just excite us. So that's what we did, and the first album was *Using My Gills As A Roadmap*.

That was a totally different approach. We really wanted to try doing something a little more left field. Something that was a little, if not in sound, at least in spirit, a little more like we were when we first started out. Which was trying to combine a whole lot of separate influences and make them our own.

Steve: Early on in your career you used to talk about Suicide being an influence, and I hear more Suicide in this album than any of the others.

Brett: Yeah, it's a lot more mechanical. Well, not mechanical, but mechanical in a good way. Sort of incessant. That's a good observation actually.

Steve: Tell me about how that album got its name...I read this somewhere else and it's a great story.

Brett: The title came because there's a society here called ACRA, like the local ASCAP, and they often get song titles and they don't know who the author is. And they sent a letter to Ron saying "We have you as the author of this song, is this correct?". And the song title was *Using My Gills As A Roadmap*. And Ron had never heard of the song, but it was a funny title, so we just used it. We basically just stole it.

Steve: That's pretty funny. To get a little deeper into it, another article in the Italian magazine *Rockerilla* quotes you as saying that you were trying to make the guitar almost disappear on this CD, and I thought that's a pretty non-traditional view for the lead guitar player to be taking.

Brett: (laughs) Yes, well that's true. Wasn't that in Italian, that article?

Steve: Yeah, but I saw a translation of it on the web.

Brett: Oh, OK. Well, I did, I wanted to make it sort of transparent and not be the hinge of the song. I wanted to make some weird ambient noises and the drums to be the pivotal part of the sound. And I wanted the traditional elements, Ron's voice and the guitar, to be sort of transparent and just sort of float above it. Not to be as a traditional rock/pop sort of thing.

On that record I probably play acoustic on 95% of it. And I wanted it to sound like bad acoustic guitar, too. Because if you go to the studio, the engineer will set up these really expensive microphones and you get these real lush acoustic guitars, like a Martin or something. But I just got a real cheesy battered old \$100 acoustic guitar. And I used to take it through a tape recorder...a really old cassette recorder and press record on that, and take the outputs and put it through multi-track, and that's how we would record it.

Steve: Throughout the history of the band your approach to playing guitar is pretty different from other people in that I always get the impression that you're more focused on how you make the song sound good as opposed to how you make the guitar sound good.

Brett: That's pretty accurate. I'd agree with you. I'm sort of a song person first before I'm a guitar person. I guess because I'm primarily a songwriter, and I can get a lot of satisfaction by just the song itself rather than the instrument I play. I guess if I didn't have any input into how the song was structured or anything like that, maybe I'd be a bit more insistent about having my guitar stuck in there all the time. But I don't know, I just don't care. I look at the song as a totality and think about what's going to make it happen for me. I guess that means that if no guitar works, great, and if that means saturated from start to finish and loud guitar, that's great, too. It doesn't really worry me at all.

Steve: Can you talk a little about your relationship with John Needham?

Brett: That cranky old bastard...

Steve: (laughs)

Brett: That's what he is! Well, it's been quite a long relationship. Originally we made a record called "Out Of The Unknown" out at a studio in, as we term it, the bush...it was miles out of town in this studio that the Celibate Rifles hooked us up with. This was like 1984 or something. And we had this idea...well, it was myself and Frank Brunetti, we had this idea that we wanted to release it on a label called Hot Records, which was the Celibate Rifles label as well. Neither Frank nor I wanted to be on Citadel because at the time we were a bit sort of loath to get involved with the Radio Birdman connection, because every second band in Sydney at the time basically wanted to be Radio Birdman, and we were sick of that and didn't want to be associated with that.

Anyway, we'd taken it to Hot, and they liked it and wanted to put it out, but they as usual had no money. And they had problem with this and problems with that and it was going to be like six to nine months before they could put it out. And we said, nah, the hell with that!

And Ron said, "Well, I know John Needham, the guy who runs Citadel, I can go and talk to him about it." And we sort of grudgingly said OK. So he took it to John and John said "Oh yeah, it's really good, I can put it out in about two or three months". So we were like, OK, great! And then he said, "oh, except I don't like it, so you're going to have to remix it"! Because Ron had taken in the original sort of rough mix that he'd done...Rob Younger produced it...and he took the original rough mix that he'd done to John. And then John made us go into Trafalgar and he and Alan remixed it. It probably sounded a lot better too.

But we eventually decided that we'd put it out on Citadel anyway. I guess we decided that we had faith in the band, that we were so great and so different (*says this tongue in cheek*) that we would never be lumped in with the Birdman stuff. As it turns out, this was pretty accurate!

So John put it out. At this stage all he had released was basically all this stuff that had Radio Birdman connections, like his own record, the Minuteman. John was a big friend of theirs...Deniz Tek singles and Angie Pepper singles, and blah, blah, blah and Rob singles. So it was a very Birdman oriented label.

Anyway, we put it out and it started to do OK and got some airplay, and we started getting the extra

gigs. I think he sort of saw something more than we could see, and he said, "I'll manage you if you want, and I'll get you gigs". At first we were a bit reluctant because we didn't want someone else telling us what to do or interfering with the band. But it became obvious that if we had someone doing that we could have a lot more time to ourselves to do whatever we wanted to, so we thought that was a good idea. So he eventually started to manage us. Plus our present manager at the time, that was Frank Brunetti, wasn't doing a particularly good financial job, so we decided we should have John to look after it. And it worked out great. He got us a lot of shows and we started a happy - well some of the time - relationship, that's extended until now.

Steve: It seemed like he was pretty much ratcheting down when you came back to him after CBS let you go, but now he's starting to release a lot more CDs once again.

Brett: Well, yeah, basically none of the stuff he was putting out was particularly popular. That was the bottom line at that time. But yeah, he's starting to have a few more things now. I guess you'd have to talk to him about that.

Steve: How did that *Out Of The Unknown* compilation CD work out?

Brett: Oh, good. Not sort of fantastic, but it did well. I thought it was a really good retrospective. I thought the bonus CD was really good. There's a lot of interesting stuff on that. Did you get the one with the double CD?

Steve: Yeah, I did. I had a whole pile of them that I sold through my mail order. They sold instantly...in about two weeks I sold about 20 of them, and I never sell 20 of anything, so that was amazing.

Brett: Well, that's good, then! I'm happy for you.

Steve: One of the things I like about Died Pretty records is that the songs kind of go together to make a whole, so it seems to me like pulling songs from the different albums to try to make a greatest hits record is a really hard thing to do. Each album has certain songs that are obviously the corner pieces of the record, but when you collect up only the corner pieces it's like you don't have any mortar there. Did you have that sense yourself when you were trying to put *Out Of The Unknown* together?

Brett: Well, it's always hard dragging bits and pieces off seven or eight separate albums and trying to put it together to make it a whole. I dunno, it was either not have it, or you have to do something like that. At the end of the day, it's all still us. So I know that sounds like a pretty lame excuse (laughs). I dunno, I feel quite happy with it, I thought it worked quite well.

Steve: Did you have any problems with getting the rights to the songs you'd done for CBS or Beggar's Banquet?

Brett: No, well we didn't have to worry about Beggar's Banquet, because it was an Australia only release and they actually don't have the rights to any of the songs in Australia. And Sony were fine. They could've made a fuss, but I think they were just happy with the prospect of getting some money back. So they were like, yeah, go for it.

Although we did get the shits with them, because when we were with them, one of the luxuries we used to indulge in was when we were doing these albums, we used to rehearse for six or eight weeks and we'd go in and just write songs each week and record them at the end of the week. So we ended up with these stockpiles of about 50 songs for both *Trace* and *Sold* and then we'd record the ten that we liked at the time. So we had all this stuff left over...lots of really interesting songs. And we went to Sony to get them to make a compilation so we could put them on the second CD as unreleased stuff, and they'd thrown them all out!

Steve: Oh, you're kidding!

Brett: No! Well, they said they couldn't locate them. Fortunately for us, we had a few DATs left of our own. Plus about five of those songs were mastered off cassettes that I had that I'd just taken home for the day.

Steve: Well, it's good you got some of them, but I'd love to get a chance to hear the rest.

So that brings us up to *Everyday Dream* now. Can you talk about what were some of the objectives going into making this CD?

Brett: Well, I guess we wanted to do something a little left of center still. We wanted to make something that didn't sound like anything else we'd done, but still have a bit of left of center stuff like there was on *Using My Gills*. And Ron wanted to

become more involved in the whole process. Because previously we'd go in and I'd have songs or jams written and he'd write over the top of that, but (for *Everyday Dream*) we went in a room together and wrote songs from scratch. And they ended up being a lot more as he is...he's basically quite a pop oriented writer. They ended up being a lot more poppy, though there are some dark songs there. And we had a few new bits and pieces that we were making a lot of fun noises with.

We were trying to use stuff as a song base that we had never used before. We tried writing songs not from a guitar base as well. A lot of them were written with drums and bass first and then adding the guitar in later.

Steve: A lot of strange drum sounds compared to the normal stuff.

Brett: Yeah, probably about 50% were actually played, and another 50% were a mixture of some sequenced drums and some real drums. But we'd just never tried it before, so we thought we'd jump in there and see what fools we could make of ourselves.

Steve: I find this one to be the most different...this album sounds like the kind of thing you'd expect out of a band making their second or third album, where they are going to make a significant step and don't have a sort of signature approach to making records yet. But you've done that late in your career at a point where most bands are just doing more of the same stuff.

Brett: Well, it probably is the biggest sideways step soundwise that we've done. Like I said before, we decided after *Sold* that if we were going to do it on our own that we've got to do something that number one interested us and made us excited, and that's what we're doing. We made a pretty big sideways step on that, and we had a good time doing it. What can I say?

Steve: What are some of your favorite songs on it?

Brett: (whistles) I sort of like that one called "Here Comes The Night". That's a good song...it's sort of this incessant thing with this nice slide solo over the top. "Burning Mad" is good. That's sort of a – dreadful term – but "modern rock" song. That's really bad (laughs). Um..."Call Me Sir" is pretty funny, too. It's got lots of bits and pieces that we sort of stitched together on it. It's fun.

Steve: Are you playing a lot of this live around Sydney now?

Brett: Yeah, we've done about a half dozen shows doing basically this whole album from start to finish. There's about two or three songs where Simon just basically hops off the kit and does other things and we just use a drum machine, and there's another couple songs where there's a mixture of him and some other stuff. And the rest of it's all him playing. We jump around...I play some keyboards on some songs.

Steve: How are people liking it?

Brett: It's going down really well here actually, bizarrely enough. It's got a lot of radio play and has sold more than the last album.

Steve: What are some of the other band members doing outside of the band at this point? I read that you are working on a PhD in archaeology?

Brett: Yeah, that's true. I do classical archaeology at Sydney University and do digs in Italy and stuff like that. It's interesting. I work in a museum at the university as well, called the Nicholson museum, which is all Greek and Roman and Tunisian stuff.

Steve: When did you start getting into that?

Brett: Well, I liked it as a kid, but I kind of rekindled my interest strangely enough when we were touring Europe. We tended to spend 90% of our time in Spain and Greece and Italy and France, and in the down time I used to go and look at all the old stuff, and I got right into it.

Steve: It is amazing over there. I'm sure Australia is a fair bit like San Diego in that there's not really a lot of old buildings there.

Brett: Not European, no that's for sure.

Steve: But if you go to Europe...like I was in southern Spain over Christmas and went to the Alhambra and places like that...

Brett: Yeah, we played a couple shows in Granada, the place where the Alhambra sits above...it's a beautiful place.

Steve: I'm surprised that you toured down there...I always thought of bands going to Spain and playing Barcelona and Madrid but not going south.

Brett: No, we played Granada, and we played Seville...did you go down there? That's really out of the way. And we played up in Basque country. We played Barcelona and Madrid as well, but we used to get around. We used to go to Sicily. We must have played a dozen shows in Sicily over four or five tours.

Steve: You think you'll be going to Europe again to tour?

Brett: I dunno. You never know. Anything's possible. But we don't have any immediate plans for it. It'd be nice.

The rest of the band...Robbie the bass player does web design. Simon Cox the drummer just plays in like four bands constantly. And Ron just has an office job. Ron's got a son now, too, a boy about three years old. The mother and he have separated for a little while, but it's also pretty friendly, so he spends half his time going down to Melbourne to stay with them, and half his time up here.

Steve: A lot of people I know in bands are having kids now, and they all seem to be kind of wondering how they got here.

Brett: (laughs) Yeah, you turn around one day and go shit! How did all this happen?

Steve: Looking back over what you've done, you've been playing for close to 20 years now...

Brett: Pretty frightening!

Steve: I look at the set of records you've put out, and they're pretty varied and have lots of great songs, and I'm wondering if you feel a special sense of pride in what you've accomplished? Can you feel the kind of magic in them that other people do?

Brett: Um, yeah, I do get a sense of pride. It's really nice to have this back catalog or whatever. There were special times around every one of those records and there were great things and not so great things that happened during the making of them. But overall, yeah. I mean I would hate being some sort of crap 80s band and when everyone pulled out a copy of a record I'd made I'd just sort of cringe in embarrassment. But there's nothing like that with any of the records we've made. I'm really proud and happy to stand by any

of the stuff we made at any stage of our career, basically. It's a good thing.

Steve: I asked Damien Lovelock this same question when I interviewed him a couple weeks ago: In the late 80s in Australia it seemed like it was a period in music that was as good as it's ever been anywhere in the world. A huge number of bands with all kinds of different styles of music in one fairly small area. And I wanted to get your sense of that.

Brett: Yeah, it was. There was lots happening. I don't have any idea why. I don't know the analysis of it. I think it was a little bit to do with the isolation. All those people that you talked about grew up independent of major music trends, and I think that was a good thing. When we first started out in 1983 or 1984, we sounded nothing like what you would term an 80s band. We were looking to other areas than what was fashionable at the time. The Celibate Rifles, too, I guess.

There was also a really healthy, thriving live scene, which is no more. I guess at the end of the day it was just easier. There was lots of places to play, there was lots of audience that wanted to go see you play. There were hundreds of little independent labels. If you had a record out, if one label wouldn't take it, another one would. There was lots of fanzines and magazines and whatever. It was just a healthy scene.

Steve: What are some of your best memories? Anything in particular that stands out?

Brett: Yeah, I think when we toured Italy for the first time...we'd played a couple of dates in Germany on our first tour overseas, which was sort of OK, but when we went to Italy, it was really weird. We just walked on stage and I plugged my guitar in and played two chords and there was about a thousand people there, which was a shock to start with, and I played the first two chords to see if the guitar was working and they all started singing along to the song! (laughs) And I'm just thinking "shit, what's going on here?" It was just great, we got huge crowds everywhere we went and it was really exciting. At the time everyone hated us in Sydney. We had a really bad reputation and we were lucky if we could get like 200 people to a show. So it was quite gratifying going to Europe and being appreciated.

Steve: When was this?

Brett: 1986?

Steve: I saw you in Sydney in 1987 and the crowd seemed to really like you then.

Brett: Well, after the first European tour, we got a little bit more respect, but definitely when we went in the middle of 1986, they didn't like us much here. 1987 is when it started to change a little there.

Steve: Last thing I want to say was that a friend sent me this recent article about Died Pretty in *Drum* magazine that sort of sounds like a retirement send off. Although you're telling the guy that you're not talking about quitting, he's asking you nothing but questions about quitting. But these days there's no reason that people can't make good music well past their 40s, and so the question is, what are your plans for the second half of your career?

Brett: (laughs) Well, I have to say that we are already well into the second half of our career. But we'll probably keep doing what we've done in the first half...making music that still interests us. And if it doesn't, we'll just stop. If we start playing crap, I'm sure we'll just stop. But basically, it's for our own enjoyment, and if anyone else gets off on it, great.