

The Sand Pebbles combine multi-textured psychedelic rock with accessible songwriting. That's it in a nutshell, but there's also much more to them than that. Chris Hollow (bass), Ben Michael X (guitar/keyboards), and Piet Collins (drums) met in Melbourne, Australia, as scriptwriters working together – wait for it – on the soap opera, 'Neighbours'. No, seriously! After honing their collaborative jamming at rave chill-outs, they recorded a self-released CD called *Shakes*, a mostly instrumental collection of inspired surf-rock explorations. The few vocal songs on the album showed great promise though the band was still in development. Andrew Tanner (vocals, guitar) joined before a self-titled EP (a.k.a. the *Noah's Ark* single) was recorded for the Camera Obscura label. The A-side showcased Tanner's impressive vocal delivery and the growing synergy of the band's playing. Two instrumental tracks followed - each sweeping and melodic, yet completely different in approach. The new Camera Obscura release *Eastern Terrace* displays a variety of musical strengths and shows that The Sand Pebbles are firmly in command of their eclectic vision.

In spite of The Sand Pebbles' commercial day job connections, their music is decidedly independent and experimental. In fact, steady work on the Neighbours show may be part of what gives the band the freedom to play whatever kind of music they like, rather than shooting for an easy formula. The Sand Pebbles' TV industry experience may have contributed to their savvy ability to effectively sequence the songs on an album. *Eastern Terrace* reels the listener in with an array of stunning vocal songs referencing classic soul, Rolling Stones guitars, and their own off-center ballad style. Things get progressively more unusual. The disembodied samples and looping beats of 'Charmed' may move the listener to wonder if this is still the same CD that started out with the Smokey Robinson groove of 'My Sensation' and the lovely harmonies on the cover of Julian Cope's 'Out Of My Mind On Dope And Speed'. The final track 'Moving Too Fast (The Director's Cut)' offers a stately, stripped-down resolution. With *Eastern Terrace*, The Sand Pebbles have come up with a possible new blueprint for modern psychedelic rock.

**PT: Which artists first inspired you to play music?**

Chris: I was Beatles obsessed as a seven-year-old kid. I can remember knocking on the neighbours' doors asking to tape their Beatles records. My aunty bought me drumsticks and a pad because I wanted to be Ringo Starr.

Ben: Dad's friend gave me *Through the Past, Darkly* when I was about ten – 'We Love You', '2000 Light Years', 'Dandelion', etc. I'd been into AC/DC but this was more mysterious. I was pretty much gone from that moment on.

group playing drums a band named Harvest, moving quickly on to guitar because I noticed all the cute girls tended to flock around the guitarists. From there it was one long, slippery slope to rock 'n' roll damnation (I still get a tingle when really good black Gospel comes on - the Devil doesn't have all the good music).

Ben: Picked up guitar at about 15 - synth shortly after. Going to film school saw me give it away for a while. Chris brought me back and we were in a flat out garage rock action band called Kimfeeler (the band that taught me what I really wanted to do) - then the Sand Pebbles.

**PT: When did The Sand Pebbles**

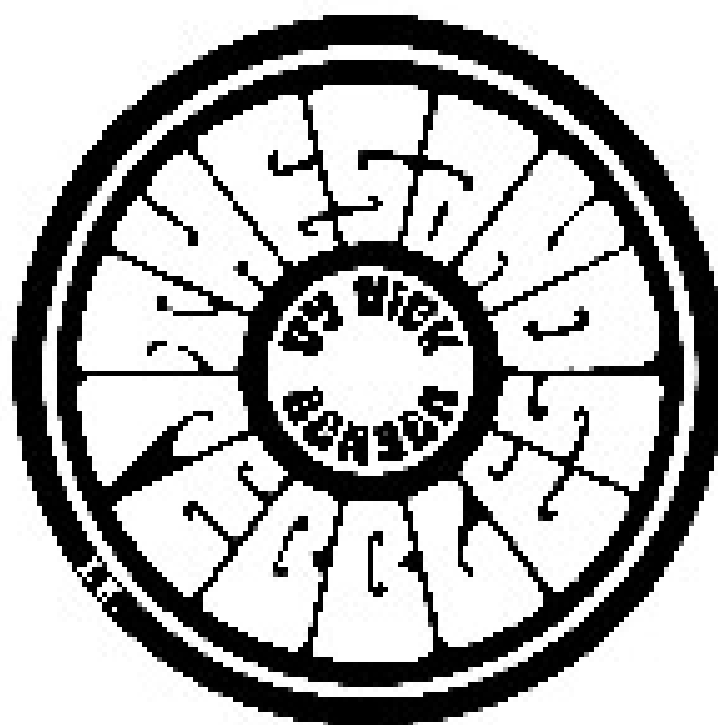
Chris: We've since found out that there was an old soul band called the Sandpebbles and a Korean 70s psych band too.

**PT: Your first self-released CD *Shakes* is surprisingly well done, in spite of the fact that the band was still in transition and you didn't yet have a permanent lead vocalist. What were your goals for that album and how did the recording process go?**

Chris: Ben had just bought a portable 8-track digital recorder and the aim was to start recording our own stuff, in our own time, our own way. At one point we realised we had enough material for an album and flung it together. So that disc represents a lot of experiments and us being excited about playing and recording together.

Ben: I actually wanted to just put it in random letterboxes and be done with it. Luckily some good people heard it and were very supportive - Dave Graney and Clare Moore (Australian pop identities) being the main ones. It gave us heart that something thrown together with love and spirit but with no real aims other than to do it could actually interest people. I still love that record - filled with mistakes, but a stack of enthusiasm.

Piet: The goal was to record an album that was diverse and included all the styles we were getting into. The process was get it down quick, if it had a vibe keep it, if not move on.



**AT: I think The Band was my first real musical 'crush'. I also remember digging the slinky Brazilian stylings of Jose Feliciano (who my older sister Susan was desperately in love with...)**

**PT: When did each of you begin playing music and which instruments did you start with? Were you in other bands prior to The Sand Pebbles?**

Chris: I started in a high school band called Stumpy Muther on drums. But I wanted to get up front and jump around so I took up bass. I also played in the original alt. country concept band. We did country versions of Smiths tunes and were called Smiths and Wesson.

**AT: I started at church youth**

**start playing?**

Chris: Sometime during 1999. Our first gig was as 3-piece playing instrumentals in a chill out room at a big rave here in Melbourne. Needless to say we freaked out a lot of out-of-their-skull ravers.

Ben: A funny gig, wild. We were doing ten-minute drones, tripping, as the sun came up. At one point I looked up in a daze and two giant naked men trying to look like spiders (you know, street theatre type vibe) where dancing in front of us - good fun.

**PT: Did you get the name from the old film "The Sand Pebbles"?**

Ben: Yes. My girlfriend is Steve McQueen obsessed. That helped!

**PT: I know Phil's particularly keen for me to explore the angle that Piet, Chris and Ben all met as writers for the soap opera 'Neighbours'. Quite apart from him apparently being a fan of the series, I think it's the irony of you guys, an "underground" band as it were, scriptwriting for it that he finds so amusing. Can you provide people unfamiliar with the series a quick idea of what Neighbours is about?**

Piet: It's a soap. Idyllic families in idyllic surroundings working out their day to day dramas.

Ben: It's part of my extreme yin yang existence - commercial work during the day to free me up to freak out on music at night. One of the true joys of not having to rely on



music to pay the rent is that it means your music can be 100% percent what you want it to be with no grubby financial considerations.

**PT: Are any of you still working on the show?**

Chris: Ben, Piet and myself all still write for it.

**PT: Come on, you must have some funny Neighbours experiences to recount or insider dirt to dish?!**

Chris: Ben can tell the story how Natalie Imbruglia hit on him once after showing him her crystal collection and he was so nervous he knocked her back. Actually our funniest experience so far with the Neighbours connection is meeting up with Mogwai. They were the biggest fans in the world and bailed us up for hours talking about it. They went out played a great gig and when Ben & I tried to talk music they went on at a million miles an hour about Neighbours again. A classic evening.

Ben: Natalie did show me her collection on her bed and my stoned mind freaked out wondering if there was another agenda. But to be honest I think she was actually just showing me her crystals. She was good fun.

**PT: Andrew What was it like signing on as the main voice of an already established band? Do you still feel like the new guy?**

AT: Chris asked me to sit in and sing for a gig because their old vocalist had just quit. From that show, a few more were booked – and suddenly I was the new singer! Like most things with the Pebbles, it just sort of transpired. I don't feel like the 'new guy' anymore - although it would be interesting to talk to a disgruntled old Pebbles fan who thinks the 'new direction' sucks!

**PT: Would the other members of the band care to comment on how things changed in the group dynamic when Andrew joined?**

Chris: I worked with Andrew at a commercial radio station in Melbourne and he was like a jewel in a junk heap. When he took up the offer to jump on board it was a huge bonus and took the band to another level. The way he plays is exactly the style I love – like Steve Cropper, Sterling Morrison. Rhythm guitar but with melody. I also think we've stretched him in different directions to what he'd done previously with his music. He'd never sung in falsetto or played lead guitar. Both of which he's brilliant at.

Ben: Chris and I really wish we could sing - but we're shocking. Andy has a beautiful voice and a wonderful sense of melody. The great thing is he's a cool Crazy Horse-esque guitar wailer. It really freed us up to have another musician who wants to get loose live and go for it.

**PT: Are there great differences**

**in each band member's musical tastes? How does that affect the collective songwriting and arranging?**

Piet: Differences broaden the general palate of the band - it can only be good. Ben and Chris are much more informed in the obscure areas of music than me. But it's an interesting journey finding all this stuff out.

AT: In terms of musical 'referencing', Ben and Chris are the Great Musical Trainspotterers - they're the kind of guys who saw "High Fidelity" and said 'rank amateurs'. Piet and I tend to be more instinctive - although when it comes to actually jamming up a song, everyone pretty much just puts their head down and works off the collective vibe.

Ben: Most bands seem made up of people with the same taste and it shows. They end up sounding like their heroes whereas if we do a song that's got a Velvets drone going Piet would never play in a Moe Tucker way. It saves the song from just being a tribute to something else. Commercial suicide, but it makes us happy.

Chris: There are other factors at work too – Ben's passions change almost weekly. He'll be super full-on about something one week then never mention it again. Piet's very particular about his drum work while Andrew never remembers anything he plays. We feel like we have to follow him around with a tape recorder.

**PT: How did you end up recording your excellent self-titled EP for Tony Dale's Camera Obscura label?**

Chris: I met Tony through another a friend of his Greg Martens, who had turned me onto some unbelievable, wall-melting psychedelia. They came to see a gig and we played a 25-minute show that consisted of three songs. I can remember Tony coming up to us afterwards, quite excited, saying we sounded like Hawkwind. We nodded enthusiastically and said, "We love Hawkwind". But we'd never heard any of their music. But I love how Tony took that leap of faith.

Ben: Tony got *Shakes* and then saw us live and the rest is the beautiful love story that is the Sand Pebbles/Camera Obscura. I love the label – its ideals and the other bands on it.

Basically we're the Backstreet Boys of the label.

**PT: Although there is some common ground between your songs (the updated surf guitar twang is fairly consistent), each song has its own distinctive style. Is there a conscious effort to keep The Sand Pebbles' music as eclectic as possible?**

Piet: Yes. There is certainly no formula. Basically we'll tackle whatever we have to, to bring out the unique elements of each song.

AT: Chris is good at the "could we play that a different way?" question. Essentially, I think the eclecticism of the Pebbles stems from the eclecticism of the personalities. We're not sophisticated enough to blend it into a seamless style, so we don't try.

**PT: Some songs are referenced more than once on your releases or they pop up in reworked arrangements from release to release (for instance, the 'Sundowner' theme appears twice on *Eastern Terrace* in addition to the EP). Do you use different versions of the same songs with the intention of unifying the diverse tracks on your latest CD?**

Piet: If we do different versions of songs it's usually just because we're still excited about a particular song and wanted to find other ways of exploring it.

Ben: The short version of 'The Sundowner' is a thing we did for a film festival. The long version is us two hours later, smoked up and freaking out. I guess we thought it might be interesting to show people how a song can develop and expand.

**PT: "Dirty" is a song that has grown dramatically from *Shakes* to *Eastern Terrace*. The live version on the *Eastern Terrace* bonus disc takes yet another approach. Is 'Dirty' an especially meaningful song to the band? Where were you thinking of when you wrote the beautifully serene lyric "On a good day, I could stay forever"?**

Chris: 'Dirty' was something I co-wrote with Tor Fredheim (the original Sand Pebbles singer) back in '99. He was very homesick for Hobart, Tasmania. So I wrote the lyrics about his love/hate relationship

with Melbourne. On a good day he could've stayed forever. Ben later pointed out that he thought that line was about a relationship I was in at the time. That wasn't my intention but it was definitely true.

**PT:** *Eastern Terrace* strikes a healthy balance between vocal songs and instrumental tangents. How did you choose the tracks for the album and were the recording methods different from those used on your earlier songs? I know you use a Roland 8-track recorder (the same one I have). Do you find that you learn more about recording with each song?

**Piet:** The same rules applied to the first album. If it makes us excited it stays, if not it goes back into the work file. We're getting better at recording but basically the same methods were used this time around as in the first album.

**Chris:** On *Shakes* we weren't very discerning about what went on. Some things weren't played or recorded too well but the attitude was "you'll find something to love in there". With *Eastern Terrace* we were a lot stricter on what made the final cut.

**Ben:** I really hope we keep an instrumental vibe going in the future. Sometimes not having words is a real asset. The main thing we've learned about recording is to spend more time on mixing and mastering.

**PT:** The intro to the radio version of your cover of Julian Cope's 'Out Of My Mind On Dope And Speed' (on the *Eastern Terrace* bonus disc) alludes to a car accident just before the show. What happened and how was the situation resolved?

**Piet:** This shit really happened to Chris and Ben. Talking about it on radio, and naming the other party was genius.

**Chris:** A girl backed into the front of my car outside the radio station. The situation remains unresolved.

**AT:** I did have the thought as Chris recounted the event live on radio "Hmm, wonder if this is legally dubious territory?" - but hey, he's a rebel, that Chris...

**Ben:** It was just before we were to go on air on Melbourne's biggest indie radio station. The crash didn't help

although it did give us something to take our minds off playing. I actually thought Chris would end up marrying this girl - the ultimate Billy Wilder "cute meet".

**PT:** Melbourne has quite a rich musical history. Can you fill us in on some of the local luminaries? Who are your own Melbourne heroes?

**AT:** My own particular musical hero is the homeless guy who plays his empty plastic bin drumkit outside the National Bank every afternoon. He's so into his thing, it's inspirational.

**Ben:** So many - we're very lucky to be a part of such a rich underground music scene. To this day I'll see Rowland S. Howard (Birthday Party guitar player) walking down the street and get star struck - what an incredible guitar player.

**PT:** Are you working on new recordings? If so, what kind of directions are the new songs taking?

**Piet:** As we speak. Many, varied and wonderful.

**Chris:** Rock. You can file it in two sections - stoner rock and raga rock.

**AT:** Crazy Horse meet Skip Spence at a party and end up doing psychotropics at Andy Warhol's place.

**Ben:** I want the next record to be more live, longer jams. Our live shows have become very intense - you have a real crack or you don't bother showing up. I'd like the new record to reflect that attitude.

**PT:** Why do so many Australian films from the '70s and '80s end with the world exploding?

**Ben:** As Ava Gardner said about doing "On The Beach" in the 50's - "what a great place for a movie about the end of the world". We're in the middle of nowhere. Great for the end of the world, great to make rock music, great to get to places where no one else is (ocean, desert, etc.). Bad if you want to pop over to Europe.

*The Sandpebbles were interviewed by Nick Bensen, © Ptolemaic*



