

Hinkley—out with the low profile

IT COULD'VE taken photos and bloodhounds to track down and identify the shadowy character. It could've. But the rarely seen, often-heard-from session spectre, Tim Hinkley, was voluntarily going public. A trial of album credits, totaling 25 for last year alone, led to the discrete hideout of Goodear Records. There, after 15 years of faceless rock and rollin' Hinkley unveiled a plan to dump his low profile.

"At this stage," he announced determinedly, "I want to become more than just somebody's keyboard player, an unseen face. And the only way to do that is to get your mouse out."

Previously confined to the anonymity of the session world, he's readying himself for his first solo album to be recorded in a sort of drifting manner over the next few months at varied American sites, New York, Memphis and Nashville. He's spending a couple of weeks in London plotting strategems for the album and recording a single, Keith Richards's "You Got The Silver".

Session players over the last several years have grabbed a major role in LP-making, and if Hinkley's course was inevitable, as he believes it was, then we could very well expect a wave of veteran sessioneers heading into the spotlight. Some members of the session force like Jim Gordon, Russ Kunkel, Chris Ethridge, and Sneaky Pete Kleinow, have

attracted some glamour, and even cult followings.

A growing breed of record buyers make purchases only after scouring LP sleeves in search of reputed session players.

The demise in the importance of "the group" helped boost session men into prominence and Hinkley's all for it. Small, with fine black hair and the ruddy self-assuredness of someone who's been banging pianos for a while, Hinkley and his pet theories run non-stop.

Professionals

"It used to be when somebody left a group it was a big occasion," he says. "I don't think it is anymore. In America it doesn't matter who's in a group. I could join an established band there, become part of the band for a year, and then leave, and nobody knocks you for it or thinks bad things."

"We're all professional

musicians now. Rock and roll is 30-years-old and is becoming a profession which is a much nicer way of looking at it."

Hinkley can't be in a bind for work. There's been no shortage for him recently. Among the acts he worked with last year were Humble Pie, Mike Heron, Henry McCullough and Alvin Lee. One of the advantages of this line of work is that since there are no road expenses, session money goes right into the pocket. Hinkley himself was making over £200 a day during recent sessions in Memphis with French bigwig Johnny Hallyday.

"The upkeep of a group costs a lot," he maintains. "Compared to that sessions are pretty easy. You turn up at a session, work six hours, and get paid £40 and you don't spend a penny. You go to Manchester one day, Leeds the next, Stratford, Bristol, and Southampton and you've spent £50."



• HINKLEY: "I want to become more than just somebody's keyboard player"

Because they're supposed to be the instrumental kingpins of the music biz, getting to be a session player ain't that easy. "It's very hard," agrees Hinkley. "Once you've done it for a long time you know how to get back in. People know of you. You're not famous, but people know what you're capable of doing. And once you get started it goes on and on."

Though it can be a thrifty, comfortable way to pass the time, session playing can't beat live work for Tim, and like anything else, it can get a bit too familiar. Tired of session work, he wants to get in some live gigging; a six week tour with a band in the States would suit him fine. He's also branching out into production. With engineer Bob Potter, he's formed Inkpot Productions which recently produced an American band, Target.

When Tim began session work in 1965, backing soul heavies (excuse the name-dropping) like Gena Washington and the Ramets, the Coloured Raisins, and Joey Young and the Tonies, he had to play as he was told. But no more.

Acoustic

"I've been very lucky with the sessions I do now. People want me to do what I play anyway. If it got to the point where I couldn't go on simply because I didn't play the way I wanted, then I'd say no. If you want a Herbie Hancock thing you get Herbie Hancock."

Hinkley was not, as some have the impression, a card carrying member of Humble Pie last year. Technically speaking, he was in the group for a period of three months, but to him "I just did an album with them, that's the way I look at it."

He played some dates with Pie in Europe and found that while his keyboard fitted in the studio it was ill-suited for stage purposes. "I'm an acoustic piano player, and at the intensity they play live it's very hard to get a keyboard to come over without just filling in the sound."

Rather than tamper with any abrupt changes in the Pie format (image), Hinkley slipped out of the project. He recalls, "They were having a hard time when I joined them, and I'm not sure why they asked me to join, but I think

they were looking for someone to offset Steve's power. But I was drawing on that before I joined the band. I think it turned out they got two Steve Marriott's instead of one in the end."

Pie had been teetering on edge of a split for quite some time and when it came Hinkley was not surprised. "They were all looking for something else." Despite current rumours, he doesn't see free agent Marriott a Stone contender. "Steve is a very sentimental person which a lot of people don't think he is. He said Humble Pie is his last band and I quite believe that. He is Humble Pie."

FEATURE BY JOE ROBINSON

"I learned a helluva lot from him on studio techniques which led me to think about not just being a session musician but working more in producing."

Hinkley elected to take the brief turn in Humble Pie over an offer to join Alvin Lee and Co. He worked for a time at Alvin's Space Studios and was part of Lee's cast at the Rainbow 'In Flight' concert.

"I can still go down and play with Alvin because I haven't done a tour with him," he says. "If I'd done that tour probably I'd have gotten to the point where I'd have said 'I don't want to work with you anymore.' Alvin's a rock and roller at heart and so am I. That's probably why we get on so well."

Though session work has been his mainstay he's been in several bands over the years. At a time when he was "well into Jimmy Smith and Booker T" he had a three piece, Jody Grind, with Joe Cocker's drummer Pete Gavin and Georgie Fame's guitarist Bernie Holland. He played organ, bass pedal, and sang with them for three and a half years and two albums. He later spent time with Vinegar Joe and Alexis Korner.

Hinkley's current solo run follows a long period of foot-dragging. "I've been talking about doing it for years," he says, "and everytime I hear a good song I write it down. I've been storing up songs and have written a few, some with Marriott."

I haven't just been playing other people's music. I always try to put my own music into it. When I was working with Alvin I put a lot of work into it, my own changes, feels, and arrangements. My sort of thing won't be a lot different from that."

He's not worried about the prospect of going out on his own. But would it be another rerun of the solo album caper? "It will be different. I want to get away from that concept of 'alright, we've got two weeks in the studio, we're gonna use these musicians and these songs.'"

Therefore, he'll record in New York, in Memphis with Steve Cropper ("Cropper and Keith Richards are the only original rhythm guitarists"), and in Nashville with Ken Buttrey and Dan Penn.

"I've seen a lot of people do their own albums and they just slip under the door. Frankie Miller's for instance. That can confuse people. It confused me. But again I've learned a lot about the record business. If a record's not there, not in the shops, if it's not being heard on the radio, who's gonna hear it?"

Survival

"Half the game is being good at business now. You've got to adapt to it and survive. Ten years ago you spent four days of the week playing and two days of the week on the phone talking to a manager. Nowadays you spend two days playing and five days of the week getting the business together."

His scene will now shift to New York, a place that seems to hold his musical ancestry. He plans to set up camp there for about a year. "New York is where my music is at," he explains. "Plus I need a change. In a way it's a musical change because what I'm playing is the kind of music that's based on what many New York musicians are doing."

"You can see so many good bands in New York. You can listen to their records forever but if you're going to make records like that you have to go over and work with them."

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