

The atmospheric music of Underground Lovers

By Jason Nichols
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One of the more thoughtful contemporary music bands to emerge in Australia in the last decade is Underground Lovers. *Cold Feeling*, the group's latest CD, combines guitar rhythms and taped music sequences with introspective lyrics to produce unusual songs and atmospheric dance music.

Cold Feeling takes its listeners on a journey, a common feature of Underground Lovers' music, with the title track making a number of musical references to the heat of a desert expedition. Although the mirages encountered are not created by the desert but by the conditions of everyday life.

Excerpt from "A Winters Day" reconstructs the mood of sad resignation that arises when one recognises that a loving relationship is coming to an end. *Infinite Finite*, which begins as a soft, simple tune, evolves into an extended burst of soaring musical activity. The song ends where it began, only more attractively, with a touch of poignant slide guitar. Another standout track on the latest CD is *Feels so good to be free*, an infectious dance tune, which, although not celebratory, agitates for freedom. The song is in contrast to the dreamlike, almost lonely, character of the album.

Underground Lovers was formed in the late 1980s in Melbourne. This was a time when so-called alternative music (pop/rock music generally confined to airplay on smaller independent radio stations) started to achieve commercial success. Major record labels, particularly in the US, signed up little-known bands, propelling some of them into overnight fame and fortune. Nirvana, although the most notable, was only one of many that rose from obscurity to overnight stardom. Today, Top 40 charts are dominated by music from this genre, more generally known as grunge, or by banal and soulless dance music manufactured ad nauseam by the transnational record companies. Underground

Lovers cannot be pigeon holed into either of these commonly used pop music categories.

Leaves Me Blind, the band's first CD produced in 1992, was without doubt one of the unique records produced by popular musicians in Australia that year and won *Rolling Stone's* award for Best Australian Record. The album seemed to capture the frustration and pressures of city life and the search for more idyllic surroundings with loud and repetitive guitar rhythms evolving into soft and more meditative musical forms. This was followed by *Dream It Down* in 1994. Dream atmospherics dominated this album with acoustic guitar arrangements layered over electronic sounds. The album was the last made with Phillipa Nihill, a singer/keyboardist, whose vocals provided a haunting dimension to the band's music.

Dream It Down includes one of their best songs, *Beautiful World*, which marked Vincent Giarusso as a genuine songwriting talent. The song, which has a strange hypnotic quality, opens with a chime-like sound overlaid with what could be the humming of a powerful electric engine, a sound similar to that produced by a train departing a station. *Beautiful World* captures those moments of intense concentration where immediate surroundings fade into the background and melancholic moods and lyrical beauty merge to produce a dream-like state of mind.

Rushall Station (1996), the group's next CD, is a minimalist work with softer arrangements and a more lyrical feel. *Tabloid or Bust*, the last song on the album, takes a swipe at the music industry: *Fear the fear that goes with lies / When you damn the lot and then despise / Well, hey hey yeah there he is / Mr Vacuous Angst and Mrs Showbiz*. The band's most experimental album, *Ways T'Burn*, was released the following year.

Underground Lovers' current four-piece lineup

includes Giarusso and guitarist Glenn Bennie, core members of the original band. Bennie and Giarusso, both in their mid-thirties, studied visual and performing arts at university while experimenting with music recordings in their homes. Like many pop/rock music musicians, they have had no formal musical training. Their musical influences range from Britain's New Order; Talking Heads and Devo from the US; and Australia's Go-Betweens.

In a recent interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* Glen Bennie commented on the contemporary music scene in Australia: "I think that there are a lot of alternative or independent bands that are really only masquerading. It's really just pop music and not terribly experimental, or challenging."

Bennie recounted problems the group encountered with Polydor and their eventual split from the recording company: "In this case the artist always comes last. You're always the last to see any money and it's always your fault if something doesn't work. We just wanted to be responsible for ourselves and not have to feel [monetarily] responsible for what we created. [Polydor] saw potential in what we did, but commercial potential.

"I guess they thought we were too weird and they wanted to make us more commercially accessible. They wanted to put Vince [Giarusso] up the front and make him the spokesperson and front man appearing in 90 percent of the videos. They had the conception that people relate to a front person.

"We laughed about it, but this sort of control became more obvious and in the end they started to question our songwriting decisions and wanted us to have a producer. Whatever producing is, we had always done it ourselves, but they wanted another name involved and began suggesting angles on selling the record."

Bennie said Underground Lovers aimed at creating an atmosphere of alienation in their music: "Rather than the audience being immersed in and believing everything," he said, "we want them to sit back and critically assess what is going on. That's what we set out to do."

"I don't know how many people approach it that way," he added, "but probably that's why we don't fit into the local scene. It's more like 'Get out there and rock and have a good time'."

Underground Lovers have produced some beautiful and imaginative music. Without sliding into pessimism,

or the crude "angry" posturing of many pop groups, their music captures the anxiety and disquiet felt by many young people. They are one of the few Australian bands capable of providing an alluring musical form to many troubling questions.

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