

Wild Preatures

Armed with debut LP *Blue Planet Eyes*, the Preatures are ready to prowl the world's stages and stare down the barrel of global success
By **JAMES JENNINGS**





THE PREATURES

THE SUN MAY BE BEATING down on a hot, windy late-September day, but that hasn't deterred three-fifths of Sydney band the Preatures – Isabella “Izzi” Manfredi (vocals and keys), Gideon Bensen (vocals and guitar) and Jack Moffitt (guitar) – from arriving at a local inner-city cafe in the traditional rock & roll uniform of black leather jackets. Although superfluous given the spring weather, it's understandable that the trio come prepared for any conditions after having spent the past 18 months touring the globe, waking each morning who-knows-where needing God-knows-what.

It comes as little surprise to learn the band – rounded out by bassist Tom Champion and drummer Luke Davison – are only a couple of days away from clocking up even more frequent flyer points (“You learn to take less and less with you and give less and less fucks about what to pack,” quips Moffitt). They're also a day or two away from the Australian release of their anticipated debut album *Blue Planet Eyes*, and the mood in the Preatures' camp, according to Manfredi, is ... improving. “I think the mood has gotten a bit better over the last week,” she states diplomatically. “It's just this weird limbo period where you finish a record. We were under so much pressure to get it done by this deadline and then you sit and wait for a few months to stew over what you've done. We didn't want to get excited about it 'cause we didn't really know what we had.”

Recorded in part over three weeks earlier this year with producer and Spoon drummer Jim Eno at his Public Hi-Fi studio in Austin, Texas, and later completed at the Preatures' own Doldrums studio in Surry Hills, *Blue Planet Eyes* arrives after the breakout success of 2013 single “Is This How You Feel?,” a song that exploded both at home (Number Nine on the 2013 Triple J Hottest 100; recipient of a \$50,000 Vanda & Young songwriting prize) and abroad: the buzz took them to global stages and mega-festivals like Coachella, Bonnaroo and Glastonbury, as well as a spot in front of about 2.8 million American TV viewers on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. “The whole experience has been surreal – you can't pinpoint one thing,” says Bensen, still a little punch drunk.

“We were like, ‘What are we doing here?’” says Manfredi of their festival slots. “We had to work extra hard because everyone was just waiting for that one song. So I was like, ‘I'm just gonna work this fuckin' crowd into the ground and make 'em love us by the end of the show.’” Adds Moffitt: “You just have to slay them! You don't have much of a choice.”

Contributor JAMES JENNINGS wrote the cover story on 360 in RS 753.

The guitarist and album co-producer is noticeably less enthused about the band's appearance on Kimmel's late-night talk show: “It was like being dragged over a fucking coal pit. Someone came up and told us it had over two million viewers nationwide. And I was like, ‘Why the fuck did you tell us that? I don't wanna know that, no one in the band wants to know that! You're an idiot!’”

“We were told it would be a studio,” Bensen recalls, “and we get there and it's an auditorium with 4000 people. We were nervous.”

Being thrust upon the world stage in a sink-or-swim situation ultimately molded the Preatures into a far tighter playing unit (“We're fitter as a band – we had to rise to meet the challenge,” says Manfredi), but it also caused the group's frontwoman to confront some uncomfortable personal issues. “I had a lot of self-doubt, like, ‘I'm not ready for this, what the fuck?’ The lifestyle can be a bitch on your body and your mental state and I got to a point where I asked

“All bands fight; otherwise what's the music about?” says Manfredi. “You need tension – that's where you get your energy from.”

myself, ‘Do I really want this?’” The pressure to consistently perform at a high standard night after night, admits Manfredi, takes its toll. “To do that you've either gotta do a hell of a lot of drugs, or you've gotta go in completely the other direction and be completely straight. There's kinda no in-between,” she says. Adds Bensen: “It can also get incredibly lonely. You're just trying to find that balance in your head.”

When the subject of the song that propelled them around the world is brought up, it is spoken of with reverence as an important milestone that galvanised the band: the product of a genuine, unfettered moment of collaboration and creative surrender between the five friends. “Is This How You Feel?” was a really important track in that it was something that had us all working together,” says Bensen. “Previously songs were brought in individually almost completed and we'd work our way through them. ‘Is This How You Feel?’ really opened up the door to how we approached writing the album.”

“It's the first time that everything that previously hadn't worked, worked,” adds

Manfredi. “It's the only song on the album that's all of us just playing together in a room in Surry Hills.”

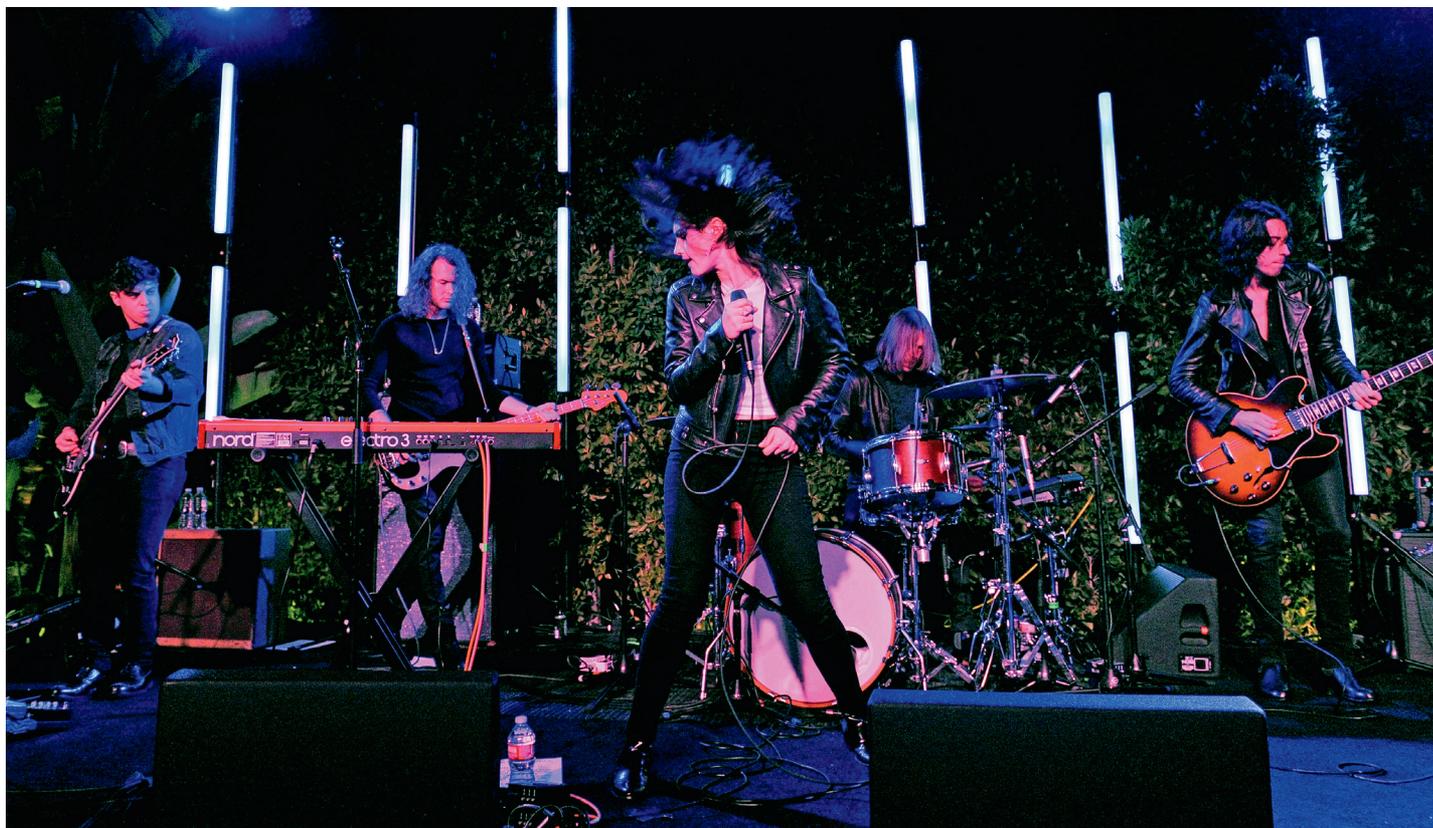
A suggestion that the public may perceive a band with only two EPs rising to fame on the strength of one song as something of an overnight success ruffles Manfredi, who comes out swinging in defence. “We formed in 2010 and played gig after gig after gig and we were shit, but we just kept hitting it and hitting it and kept writing,” she says. “We all worked our own jobs, supported ourselves, supported the band. It hasn't come out of nowhere. If people think that, that's fine. It's about the songs, anyway. If the songs are good they'll endure, and if they're not they won't.”

As co-producer Moffitt tells it, the recording of their debut LP over seven “non-ideal weeks” in the wake of a hit single was no easy task. “We had three weeks in Austin, then went away on tour for another two and a half weeks, then we stepped back into the studio to finish it, followed by mixing,” he says. “We were so exhausted. I saw a video of myself from then and I look like a ghost. Whatever it was – a fear of death that was driving us to the end of recording – it became, ‘For fuck's sake, we're gonna finish this thing!’ It got really tense.”

Manfredi shifts in her seat. “You need that otherwise you're not a band,” she protests. “All bands fight, that's what we do. Otherwise what's the music about? You need tension – that's where you get your energy from. If you go into a studio and it's, ‘That's great, everything's great’ – my God. You might end up making a Donovan record, and that's not the record we wanna make.” Moffitt takes a slug of coffee. “No one wants to admit that it's temporary, but bands aren't supposed to last forever,” he muses. “They're just not.”

LATER IN THE EVENING AT the tropically themed Cliff Dive in Darlinghurst – one of Sydney's new breed of hip inner-city bars that deign it unnecessary to mark their location with obnoxious signage – an assortment of industry folk and friends of the band gather to watch the Preatures play *Blue Planet Eyes* from start to finish – the first time they've attempted to do so in front of a crowd. The attendance tonight of both Channel Nine entertainment mainstay Richard Wilkins and representatives from indie tastemakers FBi Radio is testament to the band's broad appeal: pop music so purely aimed at the brain's pleasure centres that it transcends any notions of “cool” to be embraced by all and sundry.

With no assigned backstage area, each member of the band can be seen weaving in and out among the free-booze-swilling crowd. Bensen – moments away from taking to the stage in the packed club – still has the impending trip overseas on



his mind, the thought casting him in a slightly downcast mood. "I've got to mentally prepare myself for that," he admits. "But tonight's gonna be good, I'm excited to play. It's been a long time coming."

Soon all five members of the Preatures take their place on the dancefloor-cum-stage, the assembled through warmly greeting mood-setting album opener and title track "Blue Planet Eyes". Then comes "Somebody's Talking", and something strange happens to Manfredi: enlivened by the faster tempo, she begins jogging on the spot, followed by a series of gravity-defying handstands. By the time she rapturously received "Is This How You Feel?" hits, she's pouring bottles of water over her head and prowling the makeshift stage like a panther, seeking out individual members of the crowd for moments of intense eye contact. By the time album closer "Business, Yeah" rolls around, the magnetic frontwoman has the captive audience in the palm of her hand.

"It was ambitious playing the record from start to finish, because the energy that works on an album doesn't necessarily work live," says a still-buzzing Manfredi in a private booth post-show. "But we wanted to do it, and we did it." Amazingly, Moffitt claims Manfredi's performance tonight was "more subdued" than usual; Manfredi herself says she was operating at "maybe 70 per cent". A natural on stage, the singer reveals her desire for an audience was born as a drama-loving teen. "I started acting when I was in high school and just fell in love with it, it was

PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED

The Preatures performing at the 12th Annual Teen Vogue Young Hollywood Party in Beverly Hills in September.

like a drug," she says. "I always wanted to do something that required an audience, even though weirdly I was always really awkward at school and I didn't have a lot of friends. Back then I was a total loner."

After a succession of well-wishers stops by the booth to offer their congratulations to Manfredi and Moffitt – "Monte" Tramonte from the Delta Riggs; former Divinyl and current Hoodoo Guru Rick Grossman; the band's manager Andrew Cassell and A&R Peter Karpin (joined by his friend Andrew, a car salesman with a renowned "good ear" who urged Karpin to sign the band) – the pair play coy about the nature of their close relationship both on-stage and off. When flat-out asked if they're a couple, they first offer faux-confusion (Manfredi: "Are we? I don't know!"), then a quick brush-off ("It's not news," says Moffitt, who's mocked by Manfredi: "It's not news' – so romantic"). After further jokes about their status ("Sometimes we're a couple, sometimes we're not – it depends on the day"), Manfredi recalls a recent public display of affection between the two that sent a pretty clear signal to those gathered: "There was this great moment at CMJ where I just licked Jack's face – he was soloing and I went [mimes licking face]. Someone got a photo of us." She pauses. "I dunno, the singer going out with the guitarist is such

a cliché, and all the old rockers who speak to me say, 'Oh, you're not dating the guitarist, are you? Oh no, gawd ...'"

Moffitt smiles. "What's funny is that we've been together six years – our relationship outdates the band. I don't think a lot of people know that. We just don't share those things."

Although there are much larger concerns at play – Moffitt reveals the band have signed a five-album deal, something he describes as "a lot of pressure, but also a great deal of confidence" – Manfredi's current focus is to make a genuine connection with whatever audience is placed in front of her. When quizzed about her habit of instigating intense eye contact with members of the crowd, she's quick to cop to getting off on the experience. "I like to look at people. I like freaking them out," she admits with a playful grin. "They get embarrassed. Sometimes they get excited. They whisper to the person next to them, 'Is she looking at me?' Sometimes I feel my eyes glaze over when I look into the crowd, and I like to see individuals. It can make me upset when I look for people and they're busy or on the phone and are not really there. I try and stare at them for a long time to get them to look at me, and if they don't I give up and move on to somebody else."

Manfredi looks deflated for a brief beat before a mischievous twinkle returns to her eye. "It's all about putting on a good show at the end of the day. I want people walking away feeling like they haven't seen just another band." ❧