

DEAD CAN DANCE
 dodge the questions as
ADRIAN THRILLS notes
 the birth of an Anglo-
 Australian rock enigma.
 Dead good photographs:
KERSTIN RODGERS.



Dead Can Dance in the shadows
 (left to right) Lisa, Scott, James,
 Brendan and Peter.



SAVE FOR a few inspired activists blessed with a purist's vision and genuine originality, most rock music still splutters and shines only briefly before lapsing into formula and cliché. Even unconventionality can become studied, predictable and often pompous after a while.

Take the spirit of invention that flicked at the turn of the decade, fanned by the adventure and style of the better post-punk independent labels. All the talk was of breaking down the conventional rockist structures, instrumental roles and accepted codes of musical behaviour. But, for all their initial nobility, the likes of the Bunnymen, Banshees, PIL and Gang Of Four soon fell back into older, more familiar habits.

It would be easy to view Anglo-Australian quintet Dead Can Dance as the natural heirs to the lost vitality of those bands – as 1984's answer to 1980 – but that would be unfair on a group that has so far shown little sign of straying from a path of fragile individualism.

On their eponymous debut album, released in February through 4AD, and also on a forthcoming four-track EP entitled 'Garden Of The Arcane Delights', they successfully harness a bewitching barrage of sounds, layering grinding guitars and even a dulcimer-like yang chin over a taut wash of percussion.

If the range of the group is staggering, then so too is their disciplined economy, no song lasting more than four minutes or degenerating into formless cacophony.

DEAD CAN Dance are a rock band in the same way that The Cure or Cocteau Twins are rock bands, though they have none of the pretension of the former or the gnawing preciousness of the latter. With the five group members continually interchanging instruments, and the sound and feel of the songs shifting accordingly, only the vocals of Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry remain as a constant focus.

In their preference for acoustic and electric rather than synthetic instrumentation, the group reinforce their essentially human qualities. They can sway from frenetic claustrophobia to tranquil release, often in the course of the same song, the overall mood being more important than any specific message. They are hard to pin down and don't ask the listener to try, the worth of the pounding, surging whole being far greater than any of its parts.

A certain evasiveness – wilful or not – also raises itself in conversation with the group in the confines of their south London rehearsal studio. Lisa and Brendan – the two surviving founder members – are easily the most vocal, the three non-singing members – Peter



Ulrich, Scott Rodger and James Pinker – saying little and further reinforcing the vague fragility that seems to surround the group.

"The songs," says Lisa, "are not messages in the usual sense, but they are influenced by what we see around us. They are about balance and imbalance in our everyday lives. They still make a lot of sense. But you need the music alongside them. The words are often inspired by a mood that already exists in the music."

So is their music essentially a private matter, its undoubted purity coming through its selfishness?

"I don't think you can make music for yourself," says Brendan. "You make music to share with people. I think it is possible to do that without making concessions to marketing plans. But the music is very personal. Sometimes it's almost painful to play because you get so worried about how people are going to feel about it."

"Our music used to be more aggressive. It's become more soothing since we came over here. You need something that soothes you, something that gives you warmth and makes you feel a bit better. If it makes us feel like that, then maybe it can make other people feel good too."

For all the power in the awesome crescendos and haunting lulls of a Dead Can Dance song, the group talk about their music as if it were an electric blanket or a mug of Ovaltine. They see their music as a panacea to the pressures of an urban existence, but the line between such a stance and one of pure escapism is surely a thin one.

"But when you talk of escapism, it all depends on your definition of reality," continues Brendan. "I think the music that directly reflects the political mood of the country is the stuff that is in the pop charts. I'd like to think our music has more of a

timeless, almost classical quality . . ."

"And it does have a bearing on people's lives," says Lisa, warning to her topic as the band are put on the defensive. "The things in our music are there in our everyday lives. Things like walking down the street and hearing the cars and watching the lights changing colour are all in there. There's a beautiful and simple rhythm to that. That's music and that is what we do."

DEAD CAN Dance formed in Melbourne, Australia in August 1981, making a handful of live appearances before Lisa and Brendan decided to move to London in May 1982. They felt that the group had gone as far as it could on the Australian underground scene, recording a single that they were unable to release through lack of cash.

London at least offered them the chance to release the music they were making, which they did almost immediately in the shape of a cassette single, 'The Fatal Impact'. But, even with the recruitment of the three new British members, the group met with almost two years of indifference before the impact they have begun making only recently.

"We thought the move to London would be an easy transition to make," proffers Brendan. "But we got the fright of our lives when we came over. The conditions seemed so oppressive at first. The picture we'd been given of the English music scene had been secondhand, largely via the NME, which you can get pretty readily in Australia. We'd got the air of excitement from the fact that there were bands playing, being written about and photographed. It seemed like pure theatre and we were inspired by that."

"What we found when we got here was very different. People behind the scenes were very rude. At gigs we were denied soundchecks and called unprofessional. The other thing we couldn't believe was the sheer brutality of the business side. The people in record companies were telling us what to do as if they were some sort of authority. The Australian music scene had its drawbacks, but at least there is a real enthusiasm over there for the music rather than just the product."

The bigotry they encountered in Britain initially forced them back to the bedroom. A year was spent rehearsing in an East London flat, broken only by the cassette release through Fast Forward, before the group summoned up enough confidence to approach six independent record labels, having already ruled out the majors after their initial rebuffs.

The only label to show any interest were 4AD, who gave them the chance to record an LP and also put them on tour with The Cocteau Twins in Holland. And those dates were followed by a prestigious London concert at the Victoria Palace.

Happy as they are with the sympathetic set-up at 4AD, the group were less than pleased with the finished LP.

"We had to work very hard on the record," says Lisa. "At first the sounds weren't there at all. The studio we were using was designed primarily for electronic bands and we use acoustic instruments. It was a nightmare trying to record real drums in that studio. We prefer to record live, but we were unable to do so there because the instruments kept on bleeding into other mikes. So in the end we had to record everything separately, which detracted slightly from the performance."

The most striking sound they produce is probably that of the yang chin, a 58-stringed wonder that is played – strummed or hit – by both Brendan and Lisa.

"We use the instruments just because they are there. And we're always on the lookout for new things. The yang chin was a gift in Australia. The only problem was that I was unable to get replacement parts out there and by the time we arrived in England, it had only six strings. Getting it re-stringed is one of the advantages of living in London."

"We have made a conscious effort to use instruments other than the conventional rock ones," adds Brendan. "There are so many instruments around that it seems silly to restrict yourself to just three. People know that we use a few unusual instruments, so they tend to give us more. We seem to collect things."

FOR A group that don't deal on a strictly literal level, one point does deserve specific explanation, namely the name. It was inspired by an aborigine mask, a motif that the group use on all handbills, posters and even the sleeve of their LP.

"The cover is really important to us. We've been using that logo since we started and we chose it because the people who originally wore those masks believed that they could put a life force into the inanimate wood when they wore them."

"We were attracted to it because what we do is similar. The name of the group is simply an allegory to describe that bringing of a dead object to life. Hitting a drum brings it to life in some ways, so the name just describes the process of creativity."

"We bring instruments and ideas to life."

And dead can dance.

ABOUT MASCULATION AND GARS