

# The Ties

NEIL & LIAM FINN



“Welcome to the family firm, son!”: (left) Liam and Neil Finn in 1995.

# That Bind

As a founding member of Split Enz and Crowded House, Kiwi musical legend **Neil Finn** has always made music with family members. So it was only a matter of time before he recorded an album with his son, the singer-songwriter **Liam**, roping in other members of the Finn clan along the way. **Eve Barlow** sat father and son down at Liam’s dining table in LA to hear about the dynamic. “We’re a kick-arse family band,” they declare.

Photography: [Rachael Wright](#)



The shape of Finns to come: Neil and Liam, Los Angeles, July, 2018.

They come from the land Down Under: father and son in the studio, Auckland, New Zealand, 2018.



Some of Neil Finn's best lines came out of his son Liam's mouth when he was a kid, delirious with fever. The lyric, "here comes Mrs Hairy Legs" from the 1991 Crowded House hit *Chocolate Cake* was one. *Pineapple Head*, another success for the Kiwi indie-pop outfit, was another. "That was a bit more poetic," says Liam, sat round the dining table inside his LA home, his father next to him. "Yeah, he came up with four or five lines on that," concedes Neil. "He was saying all this weird stuff in his sleep so I went downstairs... It's an ongoing copyright battle but it paid for his education, and a few pairs of pants."

The songwriting splits are not as complicated on *Lightsleeper*, the New Zealand duo's first ever collaborative album. Neil, 60, has turned most immediate familial relationships into music-making opportunities. It began with new wave band *Split Enz*, originally founded by Neil's big brother Tim Finn. Neil joined in 1977 until the band broke up in '85, after which he and drummer Paul Hester formed *Crowded House*. Tim soon joined too and, via hits like *Weather With You* and *Don't Dream It's Over*, they enjoyed huge international success before calling it a day in 1996. Since then, Neil's concentrated on solo material. He's also made two albums with Tim as *The Finn Brothers* and embarked on a side-project with wife Sharon called *Pajama Party*, a project designed to ward off empty nest syndrome.

Liam, 34, inherited the musical gene. He dropped out of school early. Unlike Neil, his career placed him out of his home country; he moved to London with alt-rock band *Betchadupa* in his early 20s.

When they imploded, Liam began his solo work, making three albums of melodic singer-songwriter indie-rock, starting with 2007's *I'll Be Lightning*. He's opened for *Eddie Vedder* and played for *The Black Keys*. Growing up on the road gave him a head start. "I grew up with a bunch of big kids," he says. "There were all kinds of weird characters in my childhood."

One such character, the "wonderfully nutty" Pink, used to date *Split Enz* bassist Nigel Griggs. Pink was entrusted as the celebrant for Liam and wife Janina Percival's pagan wedding in Greece in 2015. On the island of Paxos, they let their imaginations run riot, conceiving of a fantastical ceremony featuring Elroy Finn – Liam's big brother, also musical – as a shirtless Poseidon.

"Pink was completely unqualified," explains Neil. As per her instructions, guests leapt into the water and chanted nonsense. Liam's mother gave him away and Janina's brother lifted Liam into the air ("proffering me to the Gods") as "Poseidon" rose out of the lake with a trident. "It was more of a fork really," laughs Neil. The night ended early for Liam, who dislocated his thumb. "The taverna owner gave dad and a friend a shot of hallucinogenic liqueur. My friend went into a frenzy." Said friend picked him up in an awkward fashion. "I landed on my head and was knocked out." When he came to, people were standing over him. "My thumb was sticking out there," says Liam, demonstrating an unsightly angle. "I smacked it back into place instinctively. Which is luckily the right thing to do."

Luckily, Pink had also told Neil to write a musical accompaniment to soundtrack a moment of free expressive dance. That track – *Island Of Peace* – was inspired by the arrhythmic sounds of cicadas outside his hotel room. It was the seed for father and son's collaboration and three summers later it forms the ceremonial opener to the Balearic, jam-driven LP. "Working together was always on the cards," says Liam. "The stars aligned. It was the right time. We've always been close but in the last few years we've been enjoying the importance of family."

TOMO BLAKE/GETTY

When his kids were little, Neil had an open door policy. "Everyone could be anywhere when I was working," he says. "The upshot is that we can now play music really well together. We're a kick-arse family band." In this morning's light, Neil and Liam are unmistakable relatives, Neil's blue eyes slightly duller than Liam's. Despite the age gap their reverence is as mutual as that of peers, not kin. Offering dad a cup of coffee, Liam adds, "I have goat's milk, it's good." Neil contemplates it. "I'll take your word for it," he responds.

Neil and Liam learned to trust each other's instinct while making the record. Most of their ideas came to fruition back in Auckland in December 2015. Reunited at Christmas, they got to work, riffing in the clan's studio ("the Finn compound") below the house. Liam stayed through the spring. "The room we wrote in holds a lot of history for us," says Liam. With mum, dad, and Elroy in tow, the Finns turned their conversations into songs while mucking around with synths and drum machines. "We had no preconception of what we would sound like," says Liam. We call our genre 'sultry lounge' music."

The duo wanted the whole LP to feel indulgent and long-form; *Meet Me In The Air* is a dreamlike wooze, *Where's My Room* is a spacious opus with strings, *Hiding Place* contains orchestral swathes and talk of UFOs. That's Liam's doing. Once back in LA, he was drunk during the wee hours in his studio. "It was stream-of-consciousness," he says. "Half of it made sense, half didn't." The line, "A woman from Iceland/Handsome by accent" was gibberish to him, but not to Neil. "When I was at school I sat behind a girl from Iceland," he says. "She had the most extraordinary calf muscles. I had to look at them all day."

These conversations echo the album's making, one they came to as equals. It took some tolerance but as two worldly men, there was a respect for each other that helped them outmanoeuvre any kinks. Music is their unifier. "It's natural as hell for us," gasps Neil. What did they nurture in each other? "Well, we're both pedantic and obsessive," he says. "I have a fascination with songs fitting together like clockwork. Liam has a fascination with things being blurry. We held a mirror up to each other's compulsions. I was able to point out to Liam where I really liked his voice." He turns to his son. "You've got a strong falsetto. It made me realise that I'm not thrilled with my falsetto." Liam shakes his head. "That's your own thing," says Liam. "No," barks Neil. "I'm being objective about that."

Neil's objectiveness is tantamount and obsessive. He doesn't like to get sentimental. Q offers that one of the most gorgeous lines on the album is in *We Know What It Means*: "more than anyone alive, you know that I'm alive". "That was an accident," says Neil. "Dad was chucking words. He wanted to change it," adds Liam. Neil pauses. "When you quote that back to me, I'm proud of it. You shouldn't intellectualise the gifts you get. Stick with them." You could say Neil is more of a purist; stricter, studied, survivalist. There were no musicians in his house growing up, but music became a member of the family. Gatherings always involved a sing-song. "Karaoke feels like it's exercising that same nerve in modern times," he suggests.

Liam's youth involved being on tour with his dad, raised seeing music as a marker of success. Why would he do karaoke? "Maybe it's the New Zealander in me," he says, recoiling at the thought. Whenever he gets asked to entertain friends at a house party with a guitar he grows shy. "But then you do it and it's sheer joy," he exclaims. "I've made a point of knowing more covers now. It's good if you can pull out *Total Eclipse Of The Heart*." Neil interjects. "Ashes To Ashes is a real ripper. Nobody expects to hear that." Neither react well >>

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Neil Finn

## FINNS: 10 OF FATHER-AND-SON'S BEST

### Message To My Girl Split Enz

New wave disco meets Balearic piano and Neil's boyish pleads.

### Don't Dream It's Over Crowded House

An everlasting, acoustic-based, hairs-on-neck, hands-in-air anthem.

### Weather With You Crowded House

One of Neil's biggest hits. "Julius Caesar and the Roman Empire couldn't conquer the blue sky." There's a line.

### Won't Give In The Finn Brothers

Reunited with brother Tim for a soft-rocking promise to never give up.

### Song Of The Lonely Mountain Neil Finn

Who do you think the New Zealand-based makers of *The Hobbit* came to when they needed a theme song?

### Aiming For Your Head Betchadupa

Liam's old band are indebted to Britpop's cheek and cocksure spirit.



Band of the rising son: Betchadupa, with Liam (second right).

### Burn Up The Road Liam Finn

A sprawling rhythmic journey, featuring young Finn's fantastic growl.

### I'll Be Lightning Liam Finn

The title track of Liam's debut is classic Beatles blue-eyed psychedelia.

### Divebomber Neil Finn

Bizarre rumination that contemplates a plane crash. Contains whistling.

### Second Nature Neil Finn

From 2017's solo effort, a gorgeous strings-featuring inquisitive jive.



Dad rock: Neil (centre) with Crowded House, 1987.

to the idea of interpreting a Drake song the Finn way. "I'd have to know one first!" cries Neil. "Drake's obviously missing something. He hasn't got us as an audience."

**F**ather and son are reticent for the father-son thing to define them. "It's cringing," says Liam, who'd rather spend 10 minutes explaining how he acquired a field recording down in a tunnel late one night with his pal Connan Mockasin. But that bond is hard to ignore, particularly given the fact that while they made it, Liam became a dad himself. Buddy – his son – is almost two. Child-sized guitars decorate the living room.

He loves Queen. "He hasn't responded to The Beatles but he constantly sings We Will Rock You because he thinks it's about him," laughs Liam, singing back the intro.

Fatherhood has meant little kip for both men, hence the title *Lightsleeper*. It's not all navel-gazing though. There's a cultural restlessness they wanted to counteract too. "The whole world feels like it's unable to sleep at the moment," says Neil. "There's this hard-edged dread. We just need to chill the fuck out." The pair share views on most matters, including their roles as musicians. "The only positive effect we have is when we play shows together," says Liam. "We're not being blasé about what's going on, we're offering respite."

Neil feels that music is incredibly valuable still. "It's so powerful as a positive influence in shaping people's thoughts. It lays a foundation for a shift in consciousness. We need that," he says. Last year, when Ariana Grande organised the One Love Manchester concert at Old Trafford in the wake of the Manchester Arena terrorist attacks, she invited Miley Cyrus onstage to perform Don't Dream It's Over. "It's a mystery the way songs travel," says Neil, reminded of the enduring

resonance of that tune's optimism. "People have the strangest uses for songs. They'll use the same song at a wedding as they'll use at a funeral. [*Ariana*] did a really good job. They nailed it."

Neil is in LA for three months, here for rehearsals with "the other band I'm in." In May this year, Neil became a member of Fleetwood Mac, replacing the outgoing Lindsey Buckingham. "I don't know what it's like to be in Fleetwood Mac," he says. "So far I've done enough to know that it's not a dream."

The connection came via drummer Mick Fleetwood, who is featured on *Lightsleeper*, alongside the rest of the Finns, Mockasin and a couple of Greeks from the Paxos taverna. Neil and Fleetwood met some years ago. "He's eloquent and good company. He likes people." Neil asked Fleetwood to drum on the album on a whim. "I didn't expect him to say yes. People say yes to things!" he laughs. Decamping to the Finn compound too, Fleetwood stayed for 10 days and drums on four tracks. They got along so well that Liam and Janina went to stay with Fleetwood in Hawaii after Buddy was born.

It's all strangely kismet, though the fact hasn't occurred to either man till now. When Liam first met Janina they drove across New Zealand to see Fleetwood Mac play. Liam wasn't much of a fan, but became diehard instantaneously. "It's funny," says Neil. "Fleetwood Mac were the background to you two falling in love." Now with Buddy in the picture, there seems to be no end to the Finn's unfolding catalogue. "Liam will be ripping him off the way I ripped off Liam," laughs Neil. "He's doomed." There are worse traits to inherit. **Q**

It's all relative: the Finns' *Lightsleeper*.



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**Liam Finn**



Slightly crowded house: Neil and Liam Finn, LA, 2018.