

HOUSE OF LOVE

BUILT TO LAST?

After a year of relative inactivity, **HOUSE OF LOVE** returned to live action last week with the extraordinary strategy of playing three shows in one evening. **IAN GITTINS** grabbed his notebook and chronicled **Guy Chadwick's** hard day's night.
Pics: TOM SHEEHAN

FIVE YEARS IN A STRIPY BRETON SHIRT; or whatever happened to The House That Guy Built?

No, I mustn't be flippant—that's the last thing we need. Tonight we are gathered to examine the new foundations of The House Of Love—and it's a serious business. This balmy late summer Saturday evening, on which Guy Chadwick has decided to put his men on show three times, is a large test: The House Of Love have to prove themselves all over again. Are they up to it?

The House Of Love's tale, after all is a cautionary one. Four years ago, when they burst from Alan McGee's Creation stable teeming with snowblasted anthems like "Christine" and "Shine On", they could do no wrong. But then press adulation followed, and the band imploded under the pressure. Maverick guitarist and space cadet Terry Bickers left to form Levitation. The band's eponymous major-label debut was relatively poorly received. And then, well, then all went ominously quiet in the troubled Guy Chadwick camp. Silence.

To some eyes—mine included—The House Of Love are still among The Bands Most Likely To... do whatever. But it's been this way for far too long—and they know it. House Of Love are getting twitchy at critics implying new material is hard to come by. Last week, Guy Chadwick snubbed this writer—an acquaintance of four years standing—after I implied in a casual Singles Column aside that maybe Bickers was the more fertile half of the House Of Love songwriting partnership. House Of Love are sick and tired of being written off. Tonight they're hellbent on bouncing back with a vengeance.

Can they do it? Read on.

"ROAD" kicks off The House Of Love's first set, crammed into the early evening sweatbox that is the University Of London's main hall. It sounds great. It's easy to forget what a turbulent band The House Of Love were back in the glory-glorious Creation days when Alan McGee appointed himself keeper of the minimalist angst-rock flame first lit by the Velvet Underground. It's also worth remembering that The House Of Love initially wanted no more than to ape the Velvets. Guy told me so a long time ago. He's always been honest.

"Plastic" is also up early. Indeed, this first set reminds me why I love(d) The House Of Love so much. It's the gauche but committed way in which they casually hurl Big Questions into their songs. Typical early The House Of Love song topics are: what is love? Pain? Sex? Death? Critics often said Chadwick did little more than shuffling a lexicon of big-sounding words—love, sky, time, Jesus—but I never went for this cynicism. For me, Guy Chadwick and The House Of Love were posing questions because they craved answers.

Guy's had a few critical kickings lately. Maybe his genuinely fragile ego needs a boost, which it gets tonight—this first crowd is adulatory. Between-song calls for "Christine" or "Destroy The Heart" change to whoops and whistles as soon as the band lash into a different songstorm. "Never" unfolds leisurely under Guy's dark velvet growl, his peculiarly careworn vocal. His voice has never sounded so world-weary. It sounds like it's lived a lot.

"Shine On" still sounds extraordinary, an incendiary speech of the heart, but tonight it's surpassed by the underrated "Blind", a litany of existential woe, Chadwick staring out from his deep-set eyes and finding new ways to ask, "Yeah, but what's it all about?"

What am I doing here?" Such twisted bafflement welded to fiery guitars always was The House Of Love's forte.

So to the encores. The hall is tumescent and throbbing for "Christine", but instead prick-teaser Guy gives us "Flow" and a raging "Real Animal", the protest song that acknowledges there's a bit of right-wing thuggery in all of us. It's so good that an asthmatic runs up and bundles me from where I'm standing, on his bag, to grab his inhaler. End of Greatest Hits Show. First leg to The House Of Love, hands down.

SO why did The House Of Love decide to revisit past glories? Was it for nostalgia, or an exorcism before moving on? Either way, the second show, at the Town & Country Club, was planned as a showcase for material written since the band signed to Fontana. And the opener, "Marble", is tremendous. "I think you should know the sky is a liar!" Guy howls, as a spectacular strobe show cuts the air above the stage to ribbons. It's a ferocious moment.

But "Christine" is next up, and while this lonely love-sigh will raise goose-mountains on my arms till I topple into the grave, why is it here? Is Guy afraid he can't carry the show's momentum purely on recent material? If so, he's right. The T&C show soon settles down into a mid-set stupor. Nothing's really happening—songs come from the dead '89 spell when The House Of Love decided to reiterate their formula and wait for ideas to arrive. The ideas never came.

But has this inertia been laid to rest? "The Girl With The Loneliest Eyes" is the next single and it's a delicious, lazy swoon—one of the night's genuine highlights. The House Of Love are still edgily tentative rather than motoring with the sublime ease that was once their hallmark, but the song's an acute evocation of those first few rapt, enthralled moments in love. Maybe Guy's writing for himself again, rather than critics like me. I hope so. He sure needs to.

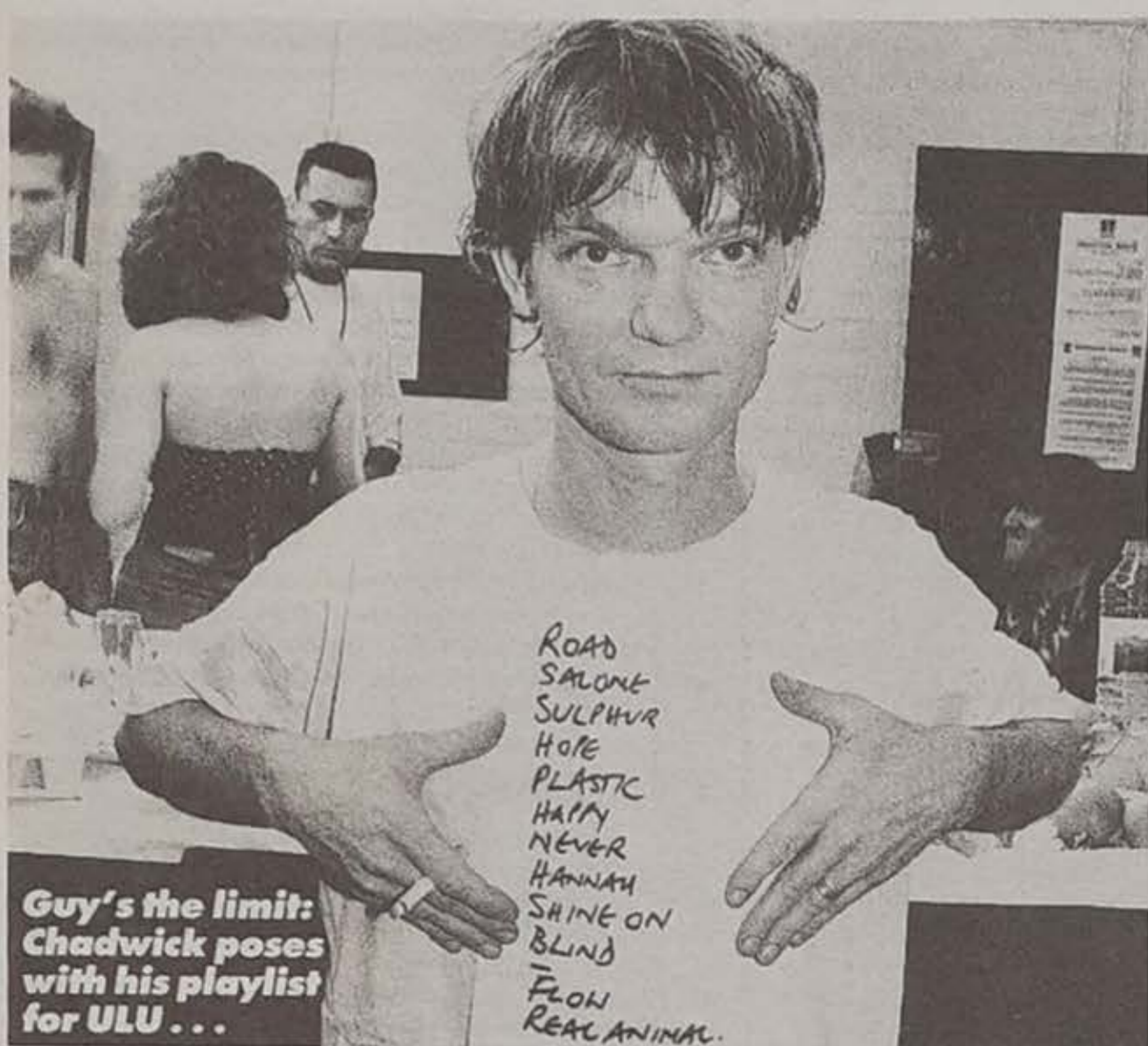
And yet The House Of Love end their second set, the supposed inventory of imminent glories, with "I Don't Know Why I Love You", "The Beatles And The Stones" and "Love In A Car". All are classic; all date to Creation days. This is a party, sure, and everyone needs crowd-pleasers. It's just a pity that so many of The House Of Love's date from the same era.

A **HARDCORE** of fans have paid £20 to see tonight's three gigs. Free coach transport is thrown in. As we board the bus outside the T&C to head for the third gig's secret location, speculation is rife. A large number of young men in stripy tee-shirts don't know where they're going. "Do we need our passports?" one wag wonders. Five minutes later the bus pulls up alongside The Boston Arms. Oh, well. Inside, the venue is basically like The Black Hole Of Calcutta—but with fewer bar staff. To make matters worse, having dispatched the serious section of their night, The House Of Love shamle through a lazy set. They had planned to play in drag but bottled out at the last minute. Two roadies, however, hang around at the side of the stage, incongruously clad in frocks and bodices. It's not a pretty sight.

The set is patchy. The House Of Love are too deeply into party mode by now for any serious assessment of the set's worth. "Loneliness Is A Gun", though, survives technical hitches; "Safe" is an outpouring of bile; "Man To Child" is sunk by Guy's curious delivery and crooked grin; and for "Destroy The Heart" they go out as they came in—drawing upon fabulous, but historic, past deposits.

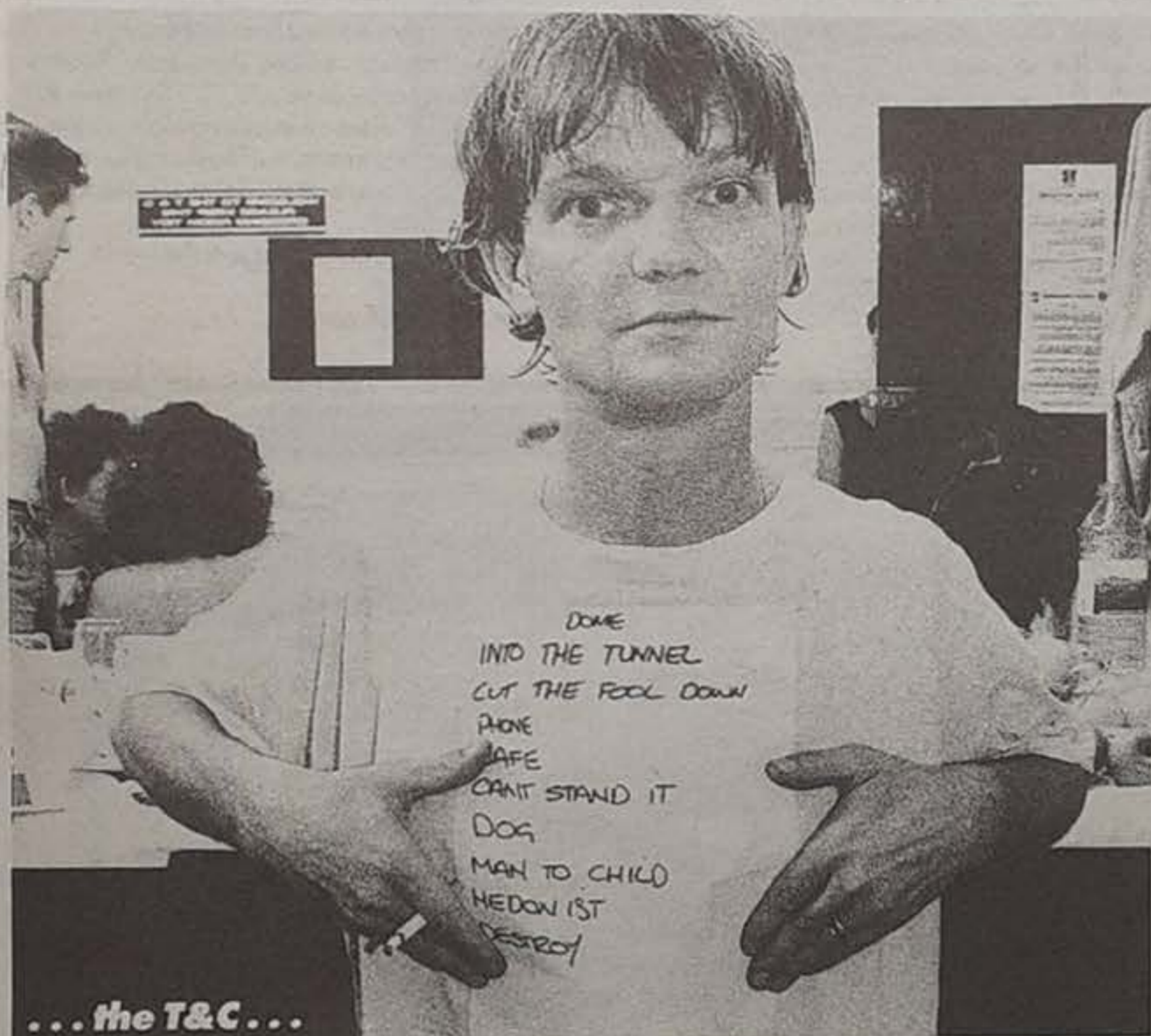
So what does tonight's publicity stunt prove? Do The House Of Love still matter? Yeah, they could do. From the sidelines, I'd say Chadwick has shaken his head clear of the doubts that racked him last year. The loss of Bickers may have even been finally overcome. Maybe The House Of Love can strafe the rock firmament once more. Maybe. If they do, we'll welcome them back with open arms.

The House That Guy Built? It's still standing. Just.



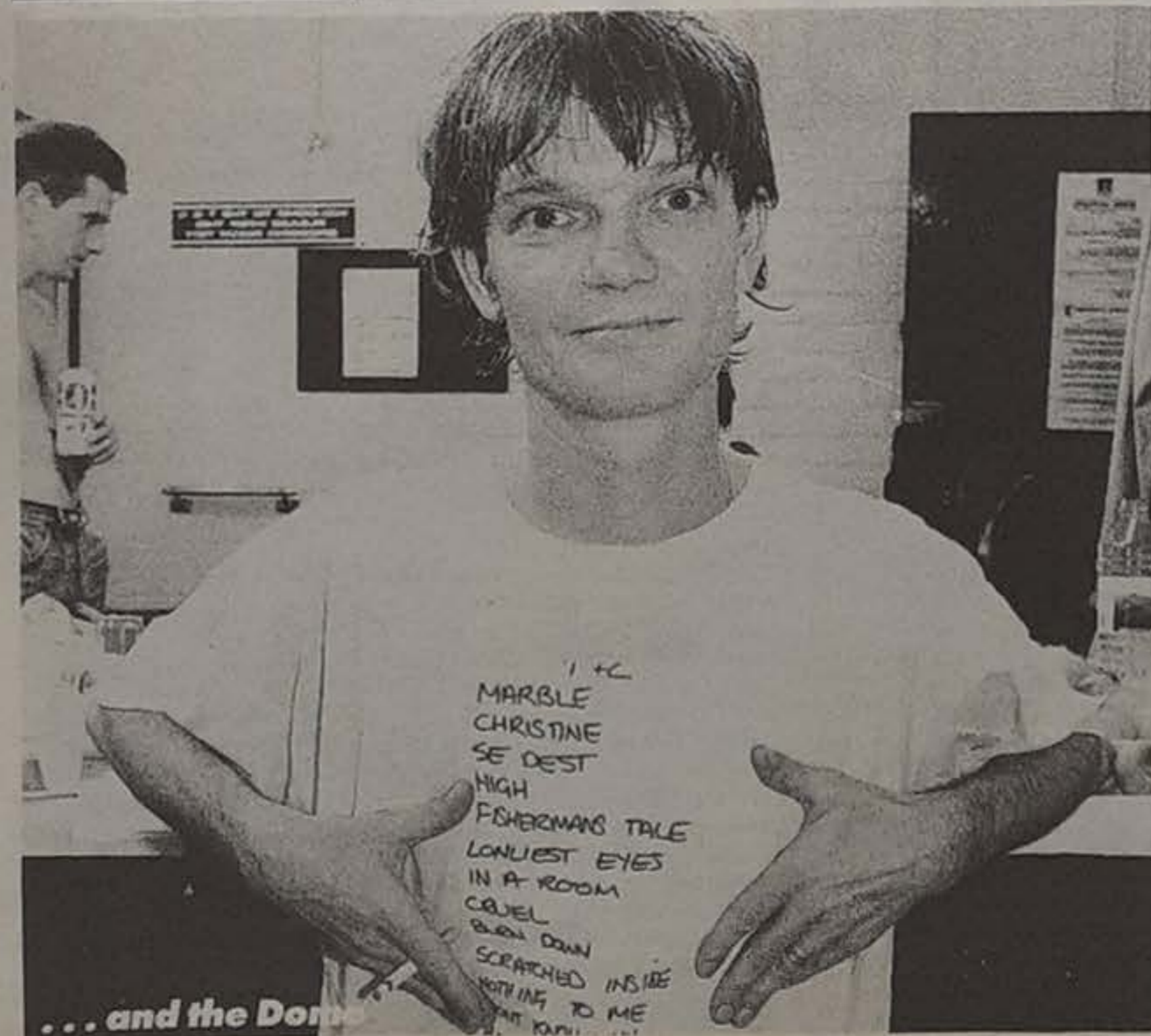
Guy's the limit: Chadwick poses with his playlist for ULU...

ROAD
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SULPHUR
HOLE
PLASTIC
HAPPY
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... the T&C ...

COME
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CUT THE FOOL DOWN
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DOG
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HEDONIST
DESTROY



... and the Dome

MARBLE
CHRISTINE
SE DEST
HIGH
FISHERMAN'S TALE
LONLIEST EYES
IN A ROOM
CAMEL
BLIND DOWN
SCRATCHED INSIDE
NOTHING TO ME
WHAT YOU...