

At first blush Peter Garrett, the gaunt, cueball-skulled lead singer for Australia's hard-stomping, outspoken band Midnight Oil, resembles the long-lost brother of Michael Berryman, top geek in Wes Craven's horror film *The Hills Have Eyes*. After some questioning, however, the true origins of the vocalist's chrome-domed tonsorial style become more obvious; a style sported by a small army of Southern California beach punks. Garrett is a surfer.

"I'm just a body surfer now—I don't ride a board anymore," Garrett says, a little apologetically, in his metallic Oz accent. Clad in a bright, aborigine print shirt, his long legs dangling off an in-

"We've tried lots of singers since you've been away, but do you want to come back?" I said, "Why not, I've got nothing else to do."

With Garrett's almost off-handed re-en-



MIDNIGHT OIL'S GUT RESPONSE

by Chris Morris

strument case, Garrett is lounging in a back room of Hollywood Studio Instrument Rentals, anticipating his band's first American concert and musing about Midnight Oil's remarkable rise.

It's the beginning of an odd scenario: the story of a band that exploded out of Sydney's surf community in the late '70s to become the most musically potent, politically committed group Down Under, later rising to popularity in the U.S. with their critically praised album *10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1* and their kinetic performances on an 11-city American tour this spring.

The seven-year saga of "the Oils" began when Garrett was an unemployed law student visiting his parents in Sydney. "I went looking for a job and couldn't get one, and I saw an ad in the paper: 'Band wants singer to tour around the coast,'" he recalls.

Garrett left the band, which included drummer Rob Hirst and guitarist-keyboardist Jim Moginie, to return to school in the fall, but he returned to Sydney the following year to find the group still together, now writing songs. "They said,

try into the group, Midnight Oil began their conquest of the surfing community along Australia's north beach. "The Antler Hotel at Narabeen, which is like surf headquarters of Australia, just happened to be the place where we started, and we drew that kind of audience, who responded to our no-nonsense approach to the way we played," Garrett recalls. "We had songs about surfing—we were sort of the new wave hard rock Beach Boys for a period of time."

The band's popularity grew nationwide, and Midnight Oil embarked on a recording career with their own label. The group's eponymous first album, which featured the curl-riding anthem "Surfing with a Spoon" and the anti-uranium mining tract "Powderworks" side by side, flew directly in the face of prevailing musical trends, Garrett notes: "At the height of punk, when we were considered a punk band by the Australian press because we played very fast and hard, we included a seven-minute song full of guitar solos." The record's successors, *Head Injuries* and *Places on a Postcard*, further honed the group's

pungency and forceful social consciousness.

Last year, after five years of spectacular success on their home turf, Midnight Oil finally pacted with CBS and released their first U.S. album, *10, 9, 8 . . .*. For American audiences totally unfamiliar with the group, the record came as a pleasant shock. It showcased a devilish hard rock sound, kicked along by the feverish rhythm section of Hirst (who beats his drum kit into submission with a Keith Moon-like intensity) and bassist Peter Gifford, the twin-guitar heat of Moginie and Martin Rotsey, and the gale-force howl of Garrett's vocals. Even more dazzling than the fury and fluid ensemble dynamics of the playing was the songwriting, which took on imperialism ("U.S. Forces"), personal political commitment ("Power and the Passion"), and the lessons of history ("Short Memory") with deft, painterly strokes.

The mention of such "political" songs as "Power and the Passion" causes Garrett to tense noticeably. The singer is aware, more than anyone, of the pitfalls of being branded a "political band."

"We don't seek to preach to anyone particularly," Garrett says. "I don't see the stage as a soapbox to say my own personal ideas, although I'm willing to express them if I'm asked. The thing that I think we're most concerned about is that we don't get labeled by the press as being, uh. . . ." Garrett pauses.

A political band?

"Yeah, in the sense of like a Clash or a Crass or something like that. If you want labels, it's humanistic ecology or whatever word you want to use for it. It's instinctively based. A lot of our stuff has come about from a concern about what we've seen and thought to be very wrong, that we've written songs about just as a gut response."

So where do the members of Midnight Oil see themselves standing in the rock political spectrum, with the issue-oriented Clash at one end and the hazily idealistic Alarm at the other.

"I suppose in the middle, but . . . not really in the middle, no," Garrett says with a quiet laugh. "We don't see ourselves primarily as a political band—we see ourselves as a band."