

# most promising

It was June 1997 and the song *Jesus I Was Evil*, an ode to hedonism by overnight sensation Darcy Clay, hit No 5 on the singles charts. One year later, Clay was dead. Tim Hume looks at the meteoric rise and tragic fall of a cult phenomenon

"The world of rock 'n' roll: you'll be no one one day, huge the next, and dead the day after that, and Auckland is no exception," says presenter Justin Redding, introducing an up-and-coming musician in a March 1997 interview for now defunct Auckland music channel Max.

He holds up a Nirvana album to illustrate the point, but it's a detail you barely notice if you happen to be watching 11 years after the event, because the young songwriter on the interview couch is Darcy Clay.

Darcy Clay was the outsized alter ego unleashed on the music industry by 24-year-old unknown Daniel Robert Bolton, when he emerged from the bedroom of his Clarence St, Ponsonby flat having home-recorded the Great New Zealand Single.

*Jesus I Was Evil* – a raucous, playful and strikingly original ode to hedonism – was the strongest of a clutch of raw-boned songs he wrote and recorded on a four-track in late 1996. It got in your head like an earworm. It bulged with killer lines. "I used to crash parties and Maseratis and-uh / I was evil," Clay howled. The maverick, transgressive spirit celebrated in the title helped win over many before they had even heard the opening power chords. "Just to write a song called *Jesus I Was Evil* is awesome," says actor Joel Tobeck, who was drafted in as Clay's guitarist for a couple of the few live shows he ever played.

Despite the lo-fi production, the song crossed over from student radio to find mainstream success, reaching number five in the singles charts in June 1997. Clay was as close as you'd find to an overnight hit. He started dating an attractive artist, his first real girlfriend. He bought red patent leather shoes. When letters of interest arrived from American record companies, he joked to his family about how when he touched down at LAX, he wanted a limousine waiting on the tarmac.

Then, on March 15, 1998, a year after the Max interview, Clay's girlfriend returned home from an exhibition in Christchurch and found him dead in her Grey Lynn flat. There was no note, no drugs found in his system. He was 25.

The funeral was a who's who of the Auckland music industry, large numbers of whom were unable to fit in the chapel. "Everybody adored him, as well as respecting his music," says Mitch Harris, a radio executive friend of Clay's who

spoke at the funeral, and whom Clay had wanted as his manager. The mourners listened to *Redemption Song* by Bob Marley, and The Beatles' *Blackbird*. His older brother, artist and cartoonist Stephen Bolton, told them Daniel had found the easy things in life hard, and the hard things easy.

Nobody knew what to make of it. People tried to cope by holding tribute concerts, lamenting on student radio, spray-painting commemorative graffiti ("DARCY CLAY LIVES" read one wall in Hopetoun St). An anti-suicide festival, at which Clay had been scheduled to play, observed a minute's silence. The month following his death – 10 years ago exactly – Darcy Clay was named Most Promising Male Vocalist at the New Zealand Music Awards.

When Darcy Clay walked into bFM and handed over his demo tape, he was presenting a ready-made package: a signature look, sound and persona born of a singular creative vision.

"He certainly drew a crowd," says Tobeck. He recalls their first encounter at a bFM drinks. "He was dressed in this very strange grand prix outfit, and had these big Elvis shades on."

It was the pre-MySpace era and, unsigned, Clay was relying on the most primitive of marketing strategies: winning fans in person. He would hand his demo to strangers on Ponsonby Rd, where he was something of a shabby flâneur, making daily rounds between cafés. The coffees were often on the house.

Clay was 5ft 5in, with an old face, huge, expressive lamps, and great hair. From certain, flattering angles, he bore a passing resemblance to Shayne Carter, although Bill Kerton, the bFM programme director who gave Clay his break by playlisting the demo, also likens him to American character actor Steve Buscemi. "You know how Buscemi always looks quite good as a mechanic, or someone with dirty hands – a nuggety character".

The way he spoke, says Tobeck, was "all very nasally, like [he adopts a slightly boganish drawl], 'Go down the f\*\*\*\*en practice room and just have a f\*\*\*\*en go I reckon.'" He smoked rollies, chewed gum, bit his nails. He wore jumpsuits, and sometimes BMX gloves. The overall effect was, says Tobeck, "kind of like



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1988-2000

Beck, the American artist, with a terrible hangover, or in a street fight". It was striking enough to inspire Flying Nun veteran Chris Knox to write the song I Wanna Look Like Darcy Clay.

The recording industry in 1997 was still heavily circumscribed by the plodding earnestness of grunge's long tail; in contrast, Darcy Clay sounded like a party. He loved Motley Crue and Prince, influences he wore on his sleeve along with other kitsch enthusiasms: Princess Di, talkback radio, Elvis and the American South. "He knew he could say he loved things like that and get away with it, because it was a point of difference," says Trevor Reekie, head of Pagan/Antenna Records. Reekie immediately signed Clay after hearing his music on bFM, releasing a mastered but essentially unchanged version of the demo recordings as an EP.

If not ahead of his time, Clay seemed to be channelling the zeitgeist, anticipating swells in popular culture, be it the rise of the trash-pop aesthetic, or of alt-country (his bizarre, swirling, gender-confused take on Dolly Parton's Jolene was recorded seven years before The White Stripes would release theirs). Says Reekie: "He definitely locked into something – whether he did it consciously or stumbled on it – that was becoming youth culture at that time."

The music – power chords, complex funk riffs, and lyrics often delivered in a cornpone Southern accent – has barely dated during the past decade.

Jesus I Was Evil was a phrase Clay dreamt up, the cadence and implications of which gave him such a kick that he built a song around it.

"It intimates the person has reformed – but not really," laughs Mitch Harris. "I think he was almost imagining himself as a rock star post-decadence."

This is borne out in the song's video, made for only a few hundred dollars, in which images of clichéd rock excess (Clay hoovering a small anaconda of white powder up his nose; pulling Elvis-style karate moves) are juxtaposed against the realities of life as an idling Auckland musician (driving around in a shit car; playing Street Fighter II).

Helped by the video, the song reached gold status (selling more than 7500 copies) and swiftly won a place in the New Zealand rock canon, being

voted at number 15 on an APRA list of great New Zealand songs in 2001. "You feel some sort of kinship with the guy: his sense of humour, musical sensibilities, the fact it's not polished," says music journalist Grant Smithies, one of the judges. "It's a more potent song for me than anything produced by Split Enz or some other bands held up as indicative of what it means to be a New Zealander."

Darcy Clay was just one of the many personas that Bolton, a constant and indefatigable piss-taker, invented for himself. He did voices, played characters, pulled pranks; his interviews often seemed like Back of the Y out-takes. In one, with TV3's late, long-haired gonzo Dylan Taite, he wears a succession of ridiculous hair metal wigs; in another, he is interviewed in Auckland bar SPQR as Darcy's 'manager', Wad Channing, a cocky, vaguely American media douchebag who professes to have killed a man. He never seemed to take anything too seriously.

Clay loved crank-calling talkback radio, pretending to be a bigoted old jerk. John Banks was another favourite impression. For some reason, recalls Harris, a 'Banks-firing-Barry-Soper-on-live-radio' routine was one of Clay's favourite bits: "You're fired, Mr Soper." When an organisation asked him

for the sheet music to Jesus I Was Evil, to provide to high school musicians, he gave them made-up chords.

Perhaps his most audacious act of clowning came when he opened for Blur in October 1997, the biggest show he ever played. Disregarding the set list his band had rehearsed all week, Clay began with a solo rendition of Candle in

the Wind which, weeks earlier, had been revisited upon the public by Elton John at Princess Diana's funeral. Introducing the song as one he had written recently, he launched into an excruciating three minutes of plinking, misplayed keyboard chords, and a strangled, insistent vocal that butchered the lyric and often seemed unsure of which note it even hoped to alight on.

"It's the mankiest thing you've ever heard," says Harris, "but it strangely grows on you." This crazed, wilfully eccentric performance has come to be regarded as one of Clay's most memorable.

Reekie says Bolton wasn't naturally an extrovert,

Clay smoked rollies, chewed gum, bit his nails. He wore jumpsuits. The effect, says actor Joel Tobeck, was "kind of like Beck, the American artist, with a bad hangover"

which is why he devised the Clay persona, an amplification of the more outgoing aspects of his own personality. He got a huge kick out of playing the showman, even if it was “something that didn’t come naturally to him”. “It’s kind of like David Bowie hiding behind Ziggy Stardust,” says Reekie.

Everyone who knew Clay was blindsided by his death. Then again, few people, other than his girlfriend, seemed to know him all that well, at least on an emotional level. Says Tobeck: “He wasn’t one to let his guard down much. As with a lot of guys in bands, it was all sort of macho teasing stuff.” Like many others, he knew him as Darcy, not Daniel: “I’m not even sure I knew he was Daniel Bolton until the funeral.” Reekie also called him Darcy. “A lot of people knew Darcy Clay. Not so many knew Daniel Bolton.”

Daniel Bolton was born on December 5, 1972, the youngest of three sons born to Bob Bolton, owner of an advertising company, and his wife Jo. Growing up in several middle-class neighbourhoods on Auckland’s North Shore, he was a happy, well-adjusted, funny child – “the pet of the family”, says his father – who loved soccer and cricket.

Then, when he was 10, his mother died after a short battle with an aggressive cancer. As the youngest, it affected him particularly badly. A speaker at his funeral recalled how, after his father remarried and the family moved to a new house, Daniel would return to his old family home after school, sitting on the step and gazing into space. (Bolton’s ashes were buried with his mother’s.)

When Daniel was 15, the family moved to Atlanta, Georgia for six months for Bob’s work. Daniel loved it. He got a duty-free ghetto blaster and indulged his predilection for hair metal; he played bass drum in the school marching band.

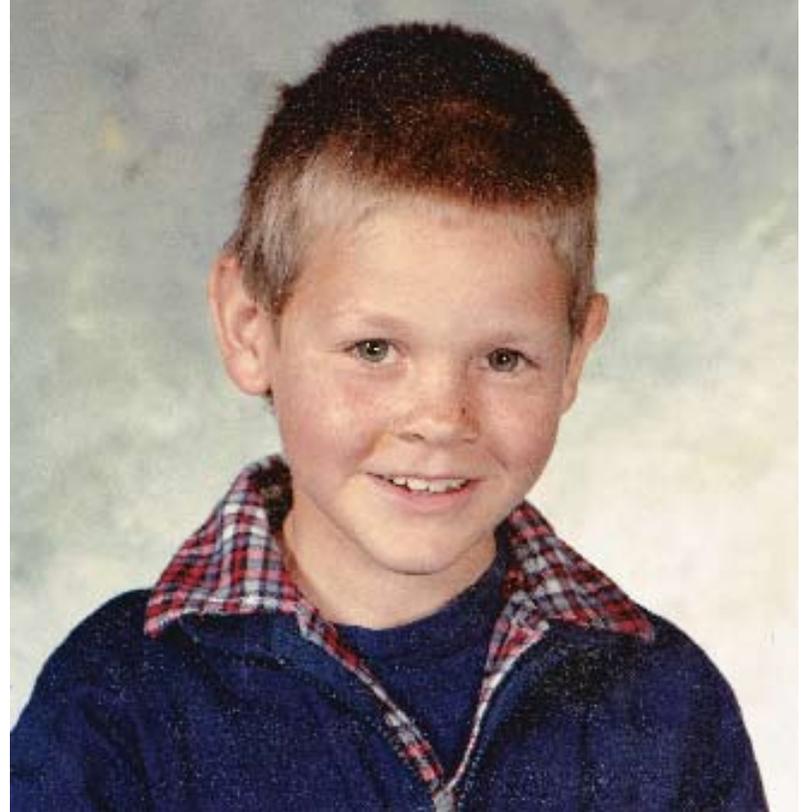
When the family returned to New Zealand, he bought a drum kit and started a band with friends. Lacking motivation at school, he dropped out of Northcote College without qualifications, going on to work a string of short-lived blue collar jobs: in a plastic bag factory, a Warehouse bicycle assembly shop, something down manholes.

“He just bummed around really,” recalls Bob, a diminutive, snow-bearded man, who resembles his late son in his features and stature. “I remember he got a job at the BP service station once... the guy told him he had to wear a tie and Daniel told him to get stuffed.”

When Daniel was 18, Bob and his wife Kath went to Europe to work. Too young to stay behind by himself, he went to live with his aunt and uncle in the small town of Blackheath in New South Wales’ Blue Mountains, where he helped them paint the house. Although he spent a lot of time on his own, playing guitar and Sega, he lost some of his shyness. He fell in with some of the local eccentrics, started busking, developed his version of Jolene in front of the fireplace. “He loved the idea of a man singing it, it really tickled his sense of humour,” says his aunt, Anne August. After his death, graffiti would appear in Blackheath which unconsciously echoed the tribute in Auckland: “DANIEL LIVES”.

After about two years in Australia, Daniel returned to Auckland, went flatting and launched himself into his music. Bob, a classical purist with no interest in pop, was wowed by the demo tapes that his son (who shared his appreciation of classical music) played him. Nevertheless he remembers this time as “the beginning of the problems”.

**His mother’s death affected Daniel badly. When the family moved to a new house he would return to his old family home after school, sitting on the step and gazing into space**



Daniel Bolton, aka Darcy Clay, was a happy, well-adjusted, funny child

It was hard to know what to make of Daniel’s unsettled behaviour. He was, after all, an artist, someone who thought nothing of strolling into the foyer of Auckland’s Aotea Centre and playing Beethoven sonatas on the grand piano. He had always been a non-conformist, and something of a wind-up merchant. “We would just think, ‘Bloody Daniel!’” says Bob.

But he also said he heard voices. Although he was never diagnosed with a particular condition, Bob now believes he was “probably mildly mentally ill”.

Beneath the staircase of the Boltons’ Greenlane townhouse are boxes full of curios from the career of Darcy Clay. Lyrics of unfinished songs (“I knew a guy called Jason / he kinda smashed my face in”). An Air New Zealand boarding pass for a Mr Darcy Clay. An illustrated Princess Di almanac (“He loved the pageantry,” explains Kath). There’s a compilation CD on which his hit featured, released as part of an anti-GE campaign several years after his death. (“I don’t know that Daniel would have approved of that,” says Kath. “They were all just w\*\*\*ers to him,” Bob confirms.)

Along with the memorabilia, Bob has inherited the rights to his son’s work. While Clay earned very little during his career, advertisers are now prepared to pay substantial sums to license his hit. None of their offers has been accepted.

“Sometimes you think he’d enjoy the joke of having it used that way, and other times he’d say that’s beneath him,” says Kath. “His standards were very high, but they were his; you couldn’t always predict them.”

Clay’s story has also been of interest to film-makers. “We’ve had lots of people wanting to make movies and docos, wanting to sensationalise all the music and the glamour,” says Bob, who has rebuffed them all; he has no interest in anything which gives credence to the empty conceit of the tragic rock ‘n’ roll casualty, taken before his time.

The loss of his son sent him into eight years of severe depression. “It’s only in the last couple of years I’ve come right,” he says. “It just completely changes you – you’re damaged forever.”

Clay’s former girlfriend initially does not want to speak. “It’s a little bit too close to the bone,” she says. “He wasn’t my flesh and blood, he was

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# THE PAINTED VEIL

SOMETIMES THE GREATEST JOURNEY  
IS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE



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## music

just a chapter in my book, and an incredibly traumatic one."

But eventually we meet, and she agrees to an interview, on the condition that her name not be used. She now has a profile as an artist, has worked hard to put the trauma of Clay's death behind her. It took her two years. The last thing she wants is people talking to her about it.

So, let's call her Jane. Jane – attractive, tattooed – met Clay, who was six years younger than her, when he approached her at the K Rd flea markets with his CD. She thought he was "a brilliant person, that goes without saying", but his problems in coping with what was his first relationship soon became an issue. His sensitivity gradually deteriorated into paranoia. His dope smoking didn't help.

"I know he lost his mother, and he had a fear of being left or being hurt," she says. "If I was talking to another male it was quite threatening to him; he was almost ill. I suppose he was nurturing these fears I was going to leave him." (The coroner would later note he had seen many similar cases of young men being unable to cope in their first serious relationship.)

Clay was also struggling to deal with the high expectations – both his own and those of the public – that came with success. He was frustrated that he had had a hit single but was still "living on the bones of his arse", and, most acutely, that writing follow-up material was proving so difficult.

"He recorded one song. It was terrible," she says. "You're exposing yourself to the ridicule of being a one-hit wonder; he had huge issues with that."

Clay spent his last day catching up with friends, then went to Jane's flat, and ended his life in the small hours of the morning. When Jane arrived, about 12 hours later, she thought: "You little pr\*\*k. That's what I thought. You little pr\*\*k. You just did it. You didn't even try to get help."

Ultimately, she says, "too much happened too fast for him. He was really young, became this iconic figure, was sort of catapulted into it and he didn't have the life experience to cope with it."

His death "was a shock, but it wasn't a surprise". "I think [the idea of dying] was something that he lived with for a long time."

If Darcy Clay was, as Mitch Harris has it, "a sort of living artwork" – an extended riff on those clichés of coke-snorting, leopard-skinned, stadium rock excess – it's plausible the rock 'n' roll casualty was another concept he toyed with. You only have to look as far as Redding's throwaway, prophetic introduction to Clay on Max TV to see how ingrained a part of rock mythology the concept is; Bolton had, after all, come of age in the era of Kurt Cobain's beatification. Harris wonders if perhaps, along with the other pressures Bolton had been experiencing, "he had been playing with the idea of the musician dying young and being a legend forever... maybe he pushed himself too far. I don't know".

Jane has her own idea of what may have driven him. "Fear," she says. "Just a young boy, not having the skills to deal with life and what came at him very fast."

Bolton left no note, and took his reasons with him. His death is, of course, a tragedy for his friends, his fans, but most of all, his family, for a hundred different reasons, only one amongst them being that, if wanting a sliver of artistic immortality was among his motivations, he had already earned it through his rambunctious, spirited songs.

"I don't know if the average man on the street has any idea who Darcy Clay was," says Harris. "It's a bit more of a cult thing. But it's amazing what's happened with that song. It's taken on a life of its own. I hear it in odd places, at odd times, and it always surprises me. I think it's just because it's good."