



# NITZER EBB

**WITH THEIR RELEASE OF THEIR NEW ALBUM, 'SHOWTIME', THE CHELMSFORD BEAT BRIGADE HAVE FINALLY PROVED THEY'RE MORE THAN A DILUTED EURO-HARDCORE BAND AND NOW LOOK SET TO FOLLOW LABEL-MATES DEPECHE MODE INTO THE MAINSTREAM. IAN GITTINS REPORTS. PICS: ANDY CATLIN**

**THE AEROPLANE INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE** is not one I'd care to repeat in a hurry. There are too many built-in hazards. It's not just the hassles of routine in-flight business, the grimly smiling hostess asking for the millionth time if you want tea or coffee, the fighting off of plastic trays of goo, the drone of the captain constantly filling you in on unwanted altitude and arrival information, the cabin crew pushing landing cards. No, I can cope with all that. The *real* dangers run deeper.

20,000 feet up on a sunny morning on a flight home from Amsterdam, Nitzer Ebb are looking somewhat the worse for wear. They've been rampaging the night before and feel decidedly fragile as they bravely mutter into my tape recorder and field off questions from over-attentive stewardesses. Douglas is pale behind dark glasses, Bon quiet and subdued. It's touch and go, but it looks like they *might* make it until the descent starts into Heathrow and we hit a pocket of turbulence. Suddenly, as we drop through the skies into Middlesex, all I get to see are the backs of two shaven necks. I'm sitting trapped between the two members of Nitzer Ebb, and they're both barfing *voluminously* into their British Airways sickness bags.

BLEEEEEAAAAAUUGH!!

**NITZER Ebb** have often seemed too *lightweight*. Perhaps it's because they come from Chelmsford. For all their power and muscle-work, they've always appeared poor relations with their hoarse chants, pumping electro-beats and workouts to the likes of Front 242 or Laibach, an English version of Euro-hardcore diluted for home tastes. Their obsessive power beat, once it's hit a groove, has never seemed to go anywhere. Nitzer Ebb have never been quite sure what they're doing.

Signs are, this is changing. This week sees the release of "Showtime", Nitzer Ebb's third LP. It's by far their strongest body of work yet. Where they used to be content to ride a clipped, staccato beat indefinitely, now they're harnessing it to intriguing effect. They're making the iron-grip rhythms bite deeper. And Nitzer Ebb, Heaven help us, have even finally started writing songs and intimidation is no longer the only weapon in their sonic arsenal.

"The Lightning Man", a sensual electro-rage awarded Single Of The Week in these pages, implies the changes in the Nitzer camp, yet it's only the start. Where Nitzer Ebb used to merely shout at us and bore us rigid, now they're discovering new modes and

methods of twisting the taut, punishing beat that remains their core. Chelmsford's finest are becoming listener-friendly. Among the uncompromised rock-hard beats and granite grooves, "Showtime" is packed with infant, linear pop songs. They've taken a timid, yet determined, step forward.

Douglas: "The band is our whole life, and to that extent it *is* life and death. It is a consuming kind of passion once we've got into it. We work hard and we'll go to real lengths if the band's threatened in any way. From the industry side, it can be shit, some of the things you've got to endure. But the intensity of the music pretty much portrays the part of our personality that overcomes that."

**'I do think we are unusually intense. When we first started, it was all really taut anger . . . now we try and consider a lot more' — Bon**

**NITZER Ebb** are full of surprises. Where I expect to meet sombre zealots, physical jerks as distant and foreboding as their hammerhead musical throb, they're actually funny and clued-in jokers, always with an eye for the main chance. They're *almost* Essex wide-boys. The genial Douglas, with his cartoon-character haircut, and his laughing sidekick Bon, who does a *great* psycho-skinhead impersonation, take off with mad dog Catlin and myself on a rampage round Amsterdam over which I fear it's best we draw a discreet veil.

Nitzer Ebb get serious only when we talk about their music.

Bon: "I think up to now Nitzer Ebb has been very defensive and very aggressive, because we started so young. That's how people *are* when they're young. Now we can relax, we're a bit more sure about *how we are*, we can be a bit more varied. The only thing left out of this album is a swooning love ballad!"

**"SHOWTIME"** sees Nitzer Ebb make a small jump, though hardly a quantum leap, towards the mainstream. While they're still pinned tight round that pressing, compressed beat, they've made themselves room to breathe. The new single, "The Lightning Man" is a provocative, *funky* affair packed with dance explosions.

Was the move deliberate?

Douglas: "Yeah, this was the first time we'd seriously sat down and purposely written *songs*. In the past we'd always just start with a sample or synth sound and elaborate on that. We never had any fixed idea or focus on what we were trying to say or do within the song, really. We did things, then thought about them afterwards."

Are you ever trying to "say" anything? It strikes me Nitzer Ebb words are mostly evocative slogans. Is there ever a message there?

"It varies. Sometimes we really do want to say

something. It's not often specific, cos I find it tedious how you're always being *told* things in music, it's all laid out very clearly and obviously. Most songs are just a mood, trying to create in music something we've felt. We've done a lot of experimentation. We often say the complete opposite to what we mean."

For instance?  
"The song 'One Man's Burden' is basically about misogyny, and the only way we could talk about it was to *show* the process, the way people don't particularly mind that men beat up their wives. So the way for us to express it is to sound as if we *do* beat up our wives, get inside it. I can't explain *why* we have to put it round that way, but to focus people's attention on how bad misogyny is, we personify it to show how revolting it can be. It gets the message across much more effectively than singing, 'Ooh baby, misogyny is real bad/Don't hit that woman . . .'"

The song also gains from the fact that Nitzer Ebb *always* sound as if they're in the throes of some act of violence. But were they never tempted to go the other way, away from this song-based route and become more of a noise unit like Front 242 and other Euro-mavericks? Douglas laughs. He knows his thoughts on this one.

"It's boring really, innit? It just doesn't excite us. There must be people who enjoy that snuff, sure. But it's not us . . ."

**THE** band used to be unbearable to work with, they tell me, men obsessed with the need to not concede an *inch* to the music industry. Now, they've mellowed out without losing the edge of dissatisfaction which makes them strive for more.

Bon: "Our label boss, Daniel Miller, did a remix of our single without telling us, called it 'The Industry Vs, The Ebb' and printed the labels, cos we used to go mad about things like that. Then he told us so that we'd start arguing. He was devastated when we told him we couldn't give a shit!"

How much is Nitzer Ebb an outlet for you? It can sound like a pressure valve.

Douglas: "Yeah, it does become something that we rely on. You can't stand out in the street shouting your head off; you'd get put away. But we're allowed to go onstage and do just that. I think we're egotistical people and we need to swell our egos! We get doubts, of course, but our way to combat that is to pile it on, pile on more pressure, turn it all up to 10, when the going gets tough!"

You've never thought you're just *too* intense?

Bon: "I do think we're unusually intense, yeah. When we first started, it was all really taut anger. We used to express it in all sorts of ways. We weren't psychopaths, because we never really wanted to hurt or damage anyone; it was completely self-destructive really, in the name of enjoyment and fun and to be carefree. Now we try and consider a lot more, give vent to a more reflective and considered side where before we'd have exploded."

Is Nitzer Ebb an assertion of *spirit*?

Doug: "We rely on our inner strength, and it could

be called spirit. All we need is ourselves. Our self-confidence is based round the utter belief that if we thought of something, it *must* be a good idea. That's all the songs are saying; we don't want our fans to rely on other people. We want them all to be individuals. No, I *know* it sounds a bit crap, a load of bullshit, but it's not a phony thing even if it sounds it. People should believe in themselves."

**NITZER Ebb** aren't in pop for any altruistic or charity instincts. They're here for themselves. "Showtime" is the sound of a self-confessed "selfish, egotistical" band flaunting those very qualities and learning to follow their instincts just a little further. Commercial success eludes them, but the physical je continue to work out and this year they tag after the labelmates Depeche Mode on a tour right across the world.

Douglas: "We never treat anything in a casual way. Even when we're enjoying ourselves, we're obsessive about it. I went to see Red Hot Chili Peppers the other day with this guy who's a real *cool* person, and he stood at the back tapping his foot, and after two songs I couldn't endure it! I had to pile down the front and dance, I couldn't resist it. And that's Nitzer Ebb; we can't just stand by. When we want to do something, we have to do it all the way."



