



BOOGIE NIGHTS

CONFESSIONS OF A MISSPENT CLIMBING LIFE WITH CHARLIE CREESE

story | ANDREW MCDOUGALL



I've been wondering about Charlie Creese. I have seen so many routes with his name and heard about what a genius climber he was but I know nothing about him. I've never heard anyone talking about him that actually knew who he was. Who was he? Where was he from? Where is he now?

—Post from www.mojozone.co.nz,
a NZ climbers' web forum

ABOVE Charlie Creese on *Indian Rock* (12) Mt Kau Kau, Wellington. 1977.

ANDREW MCDOUGALL COLLECTION

BACKGROUND The writing's on the wall: graffiti at Onslow College, Wellington, circa 1981. RICHARD THOMSON

LEFT: Charlie Creese (left) and Kid Funkadelic' (Andrew), at the cliff top, Titahi Bay.

Andrew says: 'the photo was taken a few days before we left for our armageddon at Mt Cook (the summer of 1982). The cowboy tie is one of mine that I bought from a country and western store in Petone. The car, an Austin Cambridge, belonged to one of my non-climbing drug dealer friends.'

PHOTOGRAPH BY NZ ALPINE JOURNAL 1982.

IMAGE COURTESY CHARLIE CREESE COLLECTION.

THE RECENT PUBLICATION

of *Wellington Rock* has given Wellington belated recognition as 'The powerhouse of New Zealand climbing.' It was certainly true in the early eighties when Charlie Creese was burning down the house. It may even be true today. I don't know. I do know that *Wellington Rock* roused my fragmented memories of a nascent climbing life like the dead on Judgement day.

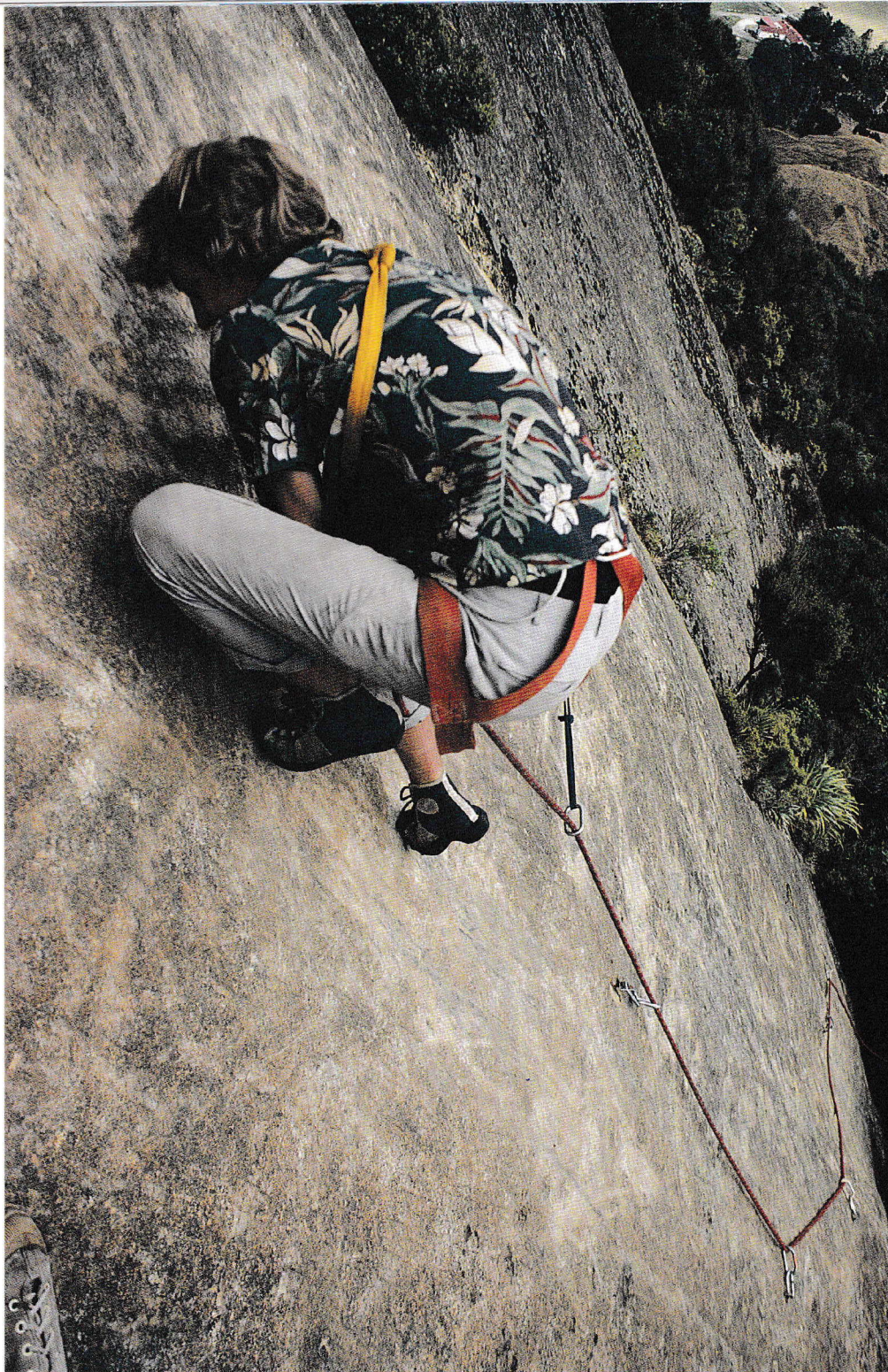
CHARLIE AND I started climbing in 1976 at Titahi Bay as part of the Onslow College elective program. The rock-climbing elective was an alternative to Wednesday afternoon team sports that neither of us excelled at. With both poorly developed social and ball skills, rock climbing was the only viable option for misfits such as us. As Charlie would later say from his premature retirement: 'Climbing is for losers who are too uncoordinated to play ball sports.'

As we both lived at the foot of Mt Kau Kau, we began exploring the local crags after school. Charlie and I first climbed on Indian Rock, 15 minutes up the main track from the Khandallah swimming pool. We climbed in sandals, with tawser-laid ropes and steel carabiners. Our parents bought us helmets via mail-order from Joe Brown's shop in Llanberis Pass.

With no one to inspire us locally, we spent our Friday nights at the Wellington Public Library reading *Mountain Magazine*. This is where we must have got the address for Joe Brown's shop. Mountain was also where Charlie first got the idea for using chalk.

One afternoon, Charlie's mother reprimanded him for ripping his jeans while running down Mt Kau Kau. He had in fact sustained the damage plunging ten metres unroped into the stream below. Later under interrogation from his father, he blabbed that he had in fact sustained the damage while climbing. Nobody knew what his father did for a living, not even Charlie. There was a rumour at school that he worked for the SIS.

In the seventies long haired climbers named their routes after characters from *Lord of the Rings* and Pink Floyd songs. We'd grown up suffering the shame of our older siblings' hippie music. When we first heard the Sex Pistols in late 1977, we were appalled.



One afternoon while wagging from school, my cousin smashed the vinyl version of *God Save The Queen* over his own head. We grinned at each other and realised nothing would ever be the same. Together with chalk, punk formed the twin axis of Charlie's deconstruction of the existing climbing culture.

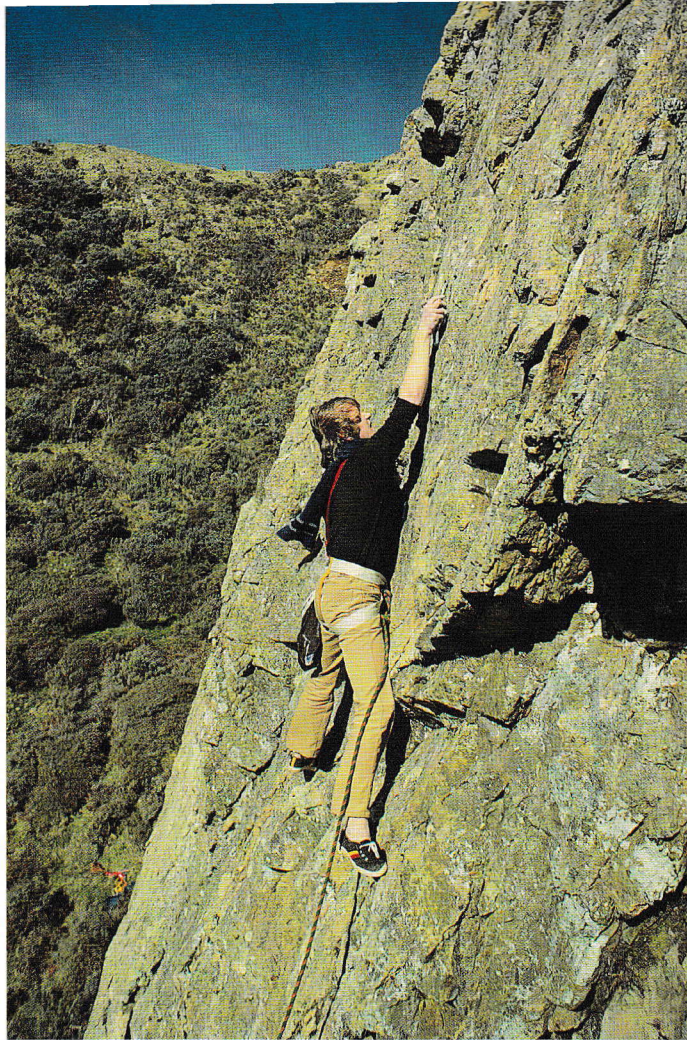
Punk Rock on Mt Kau Kau became the laboratory in which Charlie could experiment with the new climbing ethic. Using chalk, he refined his face climbing moves on climbs like *Farce* (17) and *Blasphemy* (22). At Punk Rock, we were safe from the all-seeing eyes of the Establishment—the NZAC.

I can still see the horror on the Aucklanders' faces when Charlie and I first rocked up to the Quarry. Not only did we use chalk, but we also had short hair, straight jeans and we were from Wellington. Charlie then proceeded to send all their test pieces and this only added to the shock value.

I can't recall if I was at Baring Head on the afternoon when Charlie climbed *A Show of Strength* (V8). I do remember a macabre fascination for the pet cemetery on the road to Baring Head from Wainuiomata. As for *Pet Cemetery* (27), all I can say is that it was incredibly tedious holding the rope. The boredom relieved only by a spiff I bludged off the Auckland Grammar groundsman.

ABOVE Charlie in EBs and Whillans harness leading *A Little Bolder*, an extension to *Brave New World* Tinui, in the Wairarapa. 1981. The climb is called *Charlie's Route* in *Wellington Rock*.

CHRIS MORRIS



LEFT Charlie Creese picking his way up Punk Rock in scarf and sneakers. 1980.

BELOW Mt Kau Kau's mighty Punk Rock. Charlie warming up on the left. 1980.

CHRIS MORRIS (BOTH)



BY 1982, PUNK WAS DEAD and New Romantics wore their big sister's frilly blouses. Up until that time, we'd managed to spend our post-school years climbing courtesy of the government's leisure fund. The ease of access to the dole made climbing full time a smart career move. You could sign on in Turangi and be registered in Wellington.

We spent the night before our first visit to Tinui at The Perfumed Garden, a notorious club on Vivian Street. My private school educated girl-friend decided that Charlie needed corrupting. Although The Perfumed Garden has long since fallen under the wrecker's ball, its legacy is enshrined at Tinui.

Even a counter-culture will return to the primal stuff it oozed from—all great cultures end in decadence. The original Tinui team included the late Noel Sissons, Stu Allan, Chris Morriss, Neil Parker, and Charlie Creese. This unlikely group of old farts, head bashers, old hippies, and New Romantics formed the nucleus of the Funkadelic Climbing Squad.

The Funkadelic Climbing Squad was a loose collection of leading NZ climbers and non-climbers nominated by Charlie. The only qualification required for membership was the ability to listen to Parliament's

Flashlight without flinching. Even Nick Banks, conqueror of Everest, became a member of the Squad. It was the beginning of the end. We might still have been social misfits, too uncoordinated to play ball sports, but somehow we'd become the new Establishment.

We became life members of the Squad when we went to Mt Cook later that summer and did absolutely nothing. The idea for climbing Mt Hicks was Noel Sisson's after Charlie admitted how bored he was with rock climbing. Noel and Charlie press-ganged me in to the ill-fated adventure at a screening of *Eraserhead*.

Charlie and I vowed never to set foot on Mt Hicks after one glimpse of the gloom-laden Hooker Valley. Back in Wellington, we learnt that lightning had struck Noel and Mary while retreating from the South Face. In response, Charlie left for Melbourne on a mission to sort out Kim Carrigan as the king of Australasian climbing. I went skiing.

THE NEXT TIME I CAUGHT UP WITH CHARLIE was at Mt Arapiles in the autumn of 1986. Although he was officially retired, he never quit completely. His arthritic fingers may have prevented any strenuous climbing, but his failure to dethrone Kim Carrigan burned deeper.

Charlie continued to carve out esoteric boulder problems in obscure Sydney urban wastelands. He climbed new routes on the Sydney Sea Cliffs with Mike 'The Claw' Law, a leader of the climbing avant-garde. Unlike the staid, sexless, ascetic New Zealand climbing scene, the scene in Australia was a lot of fun. It was funky, sexy, and arty.

That Easter, Charlie I climbed together for the first time in four years. It was like two old guys turning up to unload tomatoes from a truck. Neither of us were climbing anything hard, just the classics, although we did put up a new route. Charlie named it, *Was It Good For You, Louise?* (16).

This worthless climb summed up Charlie's new climbing philosophy. He was happy to climb the classics and crank the occasional visionary boulder problem in some urban wasteland. Even happier to climb some obscure new route for the sake of the name.

It was another eight years before we climbed together again. By now we were both well into our thirties. I can't remember anything about the climbing. But I do remember the car accident.

On New Years Eve 1995, I broke out a bottle of Glendfiddich just after midnight. Having consumed the entire bottle, all the young guns were asleep, we headed up to the Arapiles lookout in Charlie's car. I should have heeded the portents of doom when Charlie cranked up *Whole Lotta of Love*, on the car stereo.

After rolling the car, uninjured but still drunk, we stumbled back to the Pines. The following day we towed the wreck to the Natimuk dump. We laid the car to rest beside several others written off at Arapiles over the last twenty years. Charlie could recount the name of the driver and the circumstance of the demise of every vehicle.

In December 1997, I returned to Tinui for the first time since the last days of the Funkadelic Climbing Squad. For fifteen years, Tinui drifted into obscurity like a forgotten disco diva. I had no intention of coming out of retirement either.

Like a punch-drunk prize-fighter, I figured I'd dipped into my chalk bag for the last time. But I did have an urge to show my youthful companions how we used to do it in the fabulous seventies. We repeated all the old routes including my alma mater *A Real Mutha For Ya* (20)

In the New Year, I returned prepared to go the distance. I had a percussion drill, stainless steel bolt plates, and the kind of grim determination that only sets in at middle age. We cleaned, bolted, and climbed *I'm The Baby* (12) and *You're The Money* (15).

It was hardly the stuff to rehabilitate an already discredited climbing career—mere cannon fodder for an aging pugilist like myself. But with

RIGHT **Andrew McDougall on *Parc Lane* (18), Mangatepopo Valley. 1981.**

CHRIS MORRIS

the technology refined and a few of the old moves back, Vegas yielded *Swingers* (21), and *Solway Park* (19). For some that would have been enough, but like the sinner I'd always been I needed more.

I wanted to test the possibilities of climbing the pocketed walls and my ability to overcome gravity. I had a receding hairline and a paunch to match. Some called it middle age, I liked to call it prosperity. The venture on to steeper rock resulted in *Two Turntables and A Microphone* (16), *Where It's At* (17) and the short but sweet *Cowboys* (15). On the weekend George Michael was arrested for lewd conduct, I climbed *Careless Whispers* (17) from a hanging belay.

While all this was going on, I decided to keep the development of the crag under wraps. I claimed the veil of secrecy was necessary, to guarantee access to the crag with the farmers. But the real reason I swore my partners to secrecy was fear. A horror that the great unwashed, rock starved masses of Wellington would descend on the crag: younger, fitter, meaner. They would steal all the best lines. Paranoia had set in.

Ironically, the last great line of that season almost finished off my climbing partner. At over 50m, *Lost Highway* (22) is the super-route on Vegas. The Highway bisects the slab in a continuous wave of cruxes and bolts like road-markers on a moonless night. After two hours on the first attempt, I decided to abandon the climb in the fading light and growing chill. When I reached the ground, Adrian exhibited all the early symptoms of hypothermia.

After an epic descent, I learnt that Adrian had been canoeing on the Otaki River the day before. It was fortunate that Adrian revealed this wretched fact to me only later over a beer at the Tinui Hotel. The only emotion I cannot sympathise with is the self-inflicted suffering of canoeing.

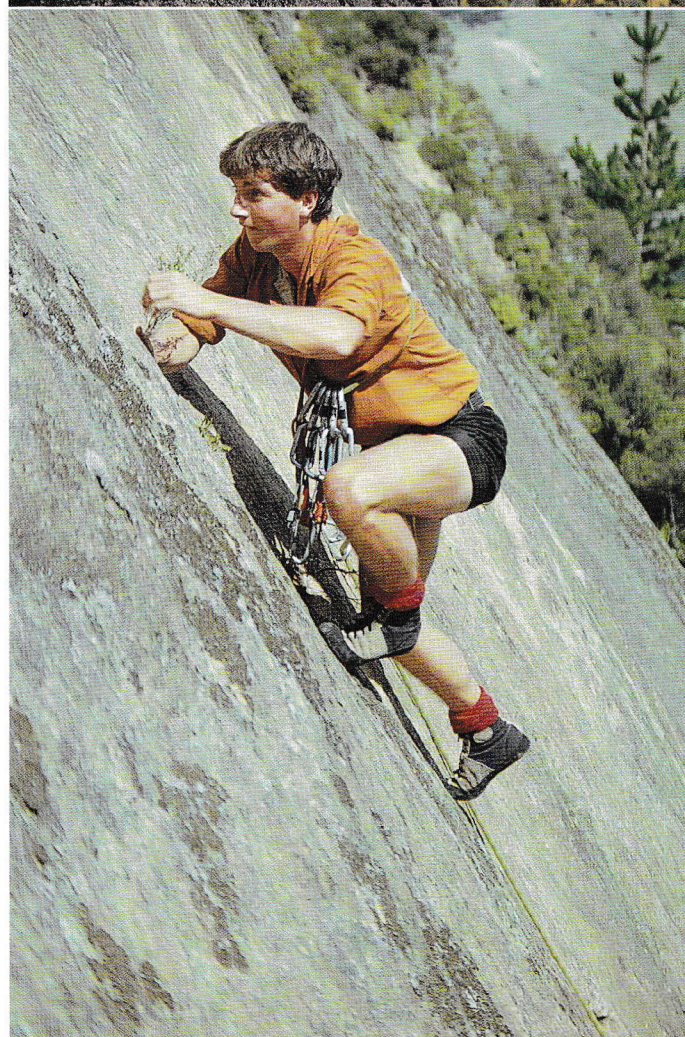
The following summer, bored with the slab routes I decided to explore the longer and steeper faces of Tinui. In reality, these faces were beyond my aging and rapidly declining abilities. Instead of adding any new routes that summer, I came close to losing my life on three separate occasions.

The first time, I failed to clip on to a fixed rope on the Vegas ridge in a southerly gale. I grabbed the rope with both hands, skooting down the closing moves of *Lost Highway* like a drunken line dancer. While abseiling over the Castlepoint face of *The Perfumed Garden*, I dislodged a boulder that narrowly missed my unprotected head. On the pocketed wall facing Tinui, I abseiled off the end of the rope. The Tinui dreaming was over.

I've lived in Melbourne now for six years. I've seen Charlie once, at the end of the century. I think he took one look at my libertine living arrangements, sighed, and vowed never to return. I've climbed at *Arapiles* once—I struggled on *Tip Toe Ridge* (4).

The other day I googled the phrase: 'Charlie Creese'. The search returned hits for two climbing forums, some obscure crag in Wyoming, and Melbourne University. It seems Charlie completed his MA in Cultural Studies in 2002. The subject of his thesis was the counter-culture. The search engine also returned two hits for a rugby player and a canoeist named Charlie Creese.

Vegas was just up ahead. I could see the slab through the sun-streaked haze: *Solway Park*, *Swingers*, and the ominous *Lost Highway*—a cluster of brushed streaks in the distance, rising out of the manuka. The Kid looked at me, but said nothing. By this time, I was laughing crazily. But it made no difference. I was just another fucked-up consultant with a drug-induced psychosis. Shit they'll love me down at Brava. I dipped into my chalk bag, and by the time I got on *Lost Highway* my heart was full of joy. I felt like a monster reincarnation of Charlie Creese — a Man on the Move, and just wired enough to be totally fearless. ■



ABOVE **A determined Andrew leading the first ascent of *A Real Mutha For Ya* (20) Tinui, 1981.**

CHRIS MORRIS