



LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

*What Is This members, from left, Alain Johannes, Jack Irons, Chris Hutchinson and Hillel Slovak.*

**L.A. BEAT**

## SLAP IN THE EAR BY WHAT IS THIS

By JEFF SPURRIER

People sometimes need a slap in the ear," declares Alain Johannes, lead vocalist for What Is This. "It's so easy to listen to music now. You can talk over it, ignore it. I prefer music that grabs you aggressively. It doesn't have to be overbearing or heavy metal to still have some presence, some authority."

*Presence and authority* pretty much describe the music of What Is This, a quartet that, as the name suggests is not that easy to pigeonhole. In fact, just keeping the roster sorted out can be a chore.

Until recently, guitarist Hillel Slovak and drummer Jack Irons also were playing in another local psychedelic-funk group, the Red Hot Chili Peppers. When What Is This began working on a deal with MCA Records last fall, Irons and Slovak dropped out of the Chili Peppers, recruited bassist Chris Hutchinson, and concentrated on their first love.

Says Irons, "The Chili Peppers was something that started to take off and was always a lot of fun, but What Is This was always the main group for us."

Like the Chili Peppers, What Is This has worked a

new wrinkle into familiar musical fabrics, but there the similarities end. In place of the slap-happy chaos of the Chili Peppers, What Is This offers a more emotional, though no less infectious, brew.

"Psychedelic, funk and blues are some of the elements that are there," suggests Slovak, whose raw, chain-saw guitar combines well with Johannes' bluesy tenor. The songs, despite their hypnotically funky beat, possess a disturbing quality that's hard to pin down but impossible to ignore. While the rhythm is accessible, the music is not always easy. And according to Slovak, it used to be downright difficult.

"When people used to come see us in clubs, sometimes they would like us and sometimes they wouldn't know where the band was coming from. They'd be confused."

In some ways, the confusion in the audience was matched by the band's own questions about its future after three years of gigging locally.

Says Johannes, "The whole time you're struggling to get signed you're wondering, 'Are we going to make it? Are we going to have to do this forever?'"

What Is This might still be wondering that if Johannes hadn't met up with a fledgling video company that needed a band to star in a video.

"It was the company's first statement as video makers," Johannes says. "They needed a band and they liked us a lot already so we just went out and shot the whole thing in two days." And so while the band was shopping its demo record around local labels last year, the video was making its way onto such outlets as MTV, "MV3" and "Goodnight L.A." Ultimately, Johannes says, the video played a significant role in landing the

contract with MCA.

"I'm certain that having the video along helped us," he says, "and it's such a boost to get signed finally, such a load off our minds. Now we can just concentrate on the music."

Helping in the concentration is producer Dave Jerden, who engineered Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" and David Byrne and Brian Eno's "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts." Despite his credentials, the band was initially nervous about having an outsider offering advice.

"It's a little scary when you get a producer," Irons says. "We thought that he might want to change things that we didn't want to change, ask us to alter the beat or play a different way. But right from the start the chemistry was really good."

That chemistry is evident in the band's striking debut offering, a six-song mini-LP called "Squeezed." The record will be released in late April on MCA's new "alternative music" label, San Andreas Records, and should put to rest any questions about just what this What Is This is.

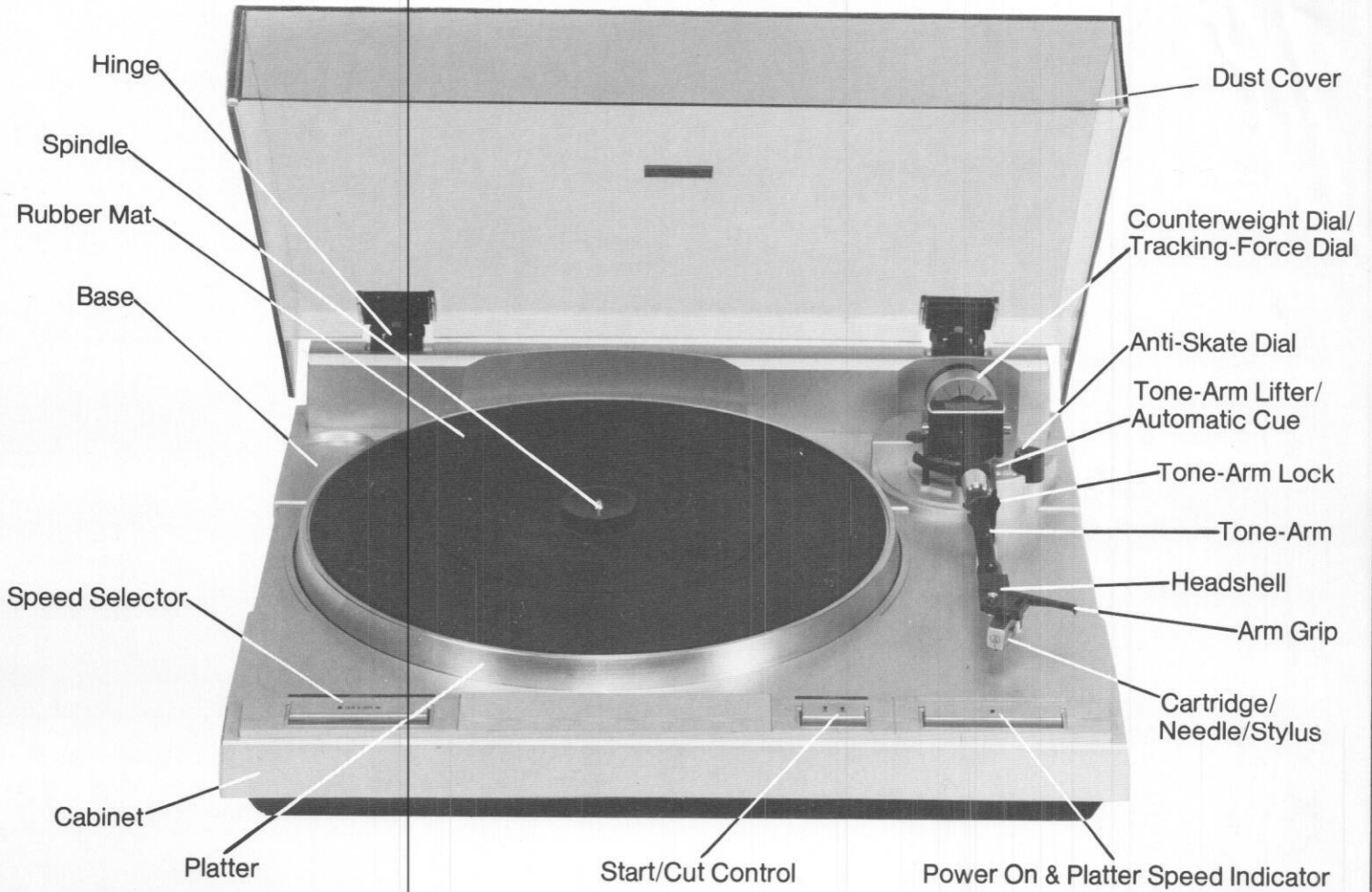
The band's main concern throughout has been to produce "sincere" music, Slovak says.

"You hear some songs on the radio, and you can tell that they were just set up with a formula to bring in certain sounds, things that work," he says. "It's strange when you hear something really cliched done by somebody who has already made it and has all the power and money he'd ever want."

Adds Johannes, "Music is such a powerful thing that I feel it's like blasphemy when I hear something that's just tossed out."

# What is This

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