

# ROBERT SCOTT



*THE STAND*

**RDS Gallery  
2025**



# ROBERT SCOTT

## *THE STAND*

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition  
*Robert Scott: The Stand*, at RDS Gallery,  
6 Castle Street, Dunedin,  
14 February–1 April 2025

Occasional Essays Series  
Editors  
Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

RDS GALLERY

Front Cover Image:

*5 in the Stand*, Robert Scott, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 600 x 600 mm

Back Cover Image:

*Where They Played*, Robert Scott, 2021. Wall painting of Dunedin music venues in the 1980s–1990s specially commissioned for the “Kaleidoscope World: 40 Years of Flying Nun in Dunedin” exhibition held at Hocken Collections between December 4, 2021–September 25, 2022. Photographed by Richard Munro. Included here with kind permission from Robert Scott and Hocken Collections.

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Figure 1, *The Last One in the Stand*, Robert Scott, 2025, acrylic on plywood, 468 x 568 mm.

## **Deceptive Surfaces: Robert Scott's *The Stand***

*By Alistair Fox*

Robert Scott is perhaps best known as one of the musicians who was involved in the birth of “Dunedin Sound” in the 1980s. What is less well appreciated is his lifelong practice of art. From his childhood, Scott compulsively sketched, in pencil, pen, and ink, being particularly fond of drawing cartoons of monsters and aliens from outer space. As a young adult he attended the Dunedin School of Art and has maintained his painting ever since, alongside writing music and lyrics and performing his songs.

At first sight, the paintings in this exhibition might appear very simple, even naïve. The colour palette is limited, because Scott creates his hues and tones out of only six basic acrylic colours: olive green, raw umber, yellow ochre, black and white, and cobalt blue, as in *Secret Place* (2025)[see figure 2]. The compositions, too, seem simple, comprising landscapes featuring trees arranged in lines (as in *The Trees I'm Understanding*, 2024) or solitary (*Last One in the Stand*, 2025)[see figure 1], hills that clearly evoke the landscape of Otago (*The Far Dry Hills*, 2024), coastal bays and estuaries (*Somewhere on*



*the Coast, 2025* [see figure 3], and *Inlet, 2025* [see figure 4]), and the occasional dilapidated building (*Creek Country, 2025*).

If one probes a little deeper, however, interesting complexities can be detected. The trees resemble no actual trees in nature. In fact, they are hybrids: while the forking trunks suggest New Zealand kōuka, or cabbage trees, the foliage is reminiscent of Northern hemisphere trees (as in *Somewhere on the Coast, or Secret Place*). Similarly, there is a zigzag motif shaping the composition in many of his paintings (as in *Creek Country* and *Secret Place*), giving the sense of two opposed directions that, as a metaphor, suggests alternate possibilities.

Indeed, underneath their surface simplicity, Scott's paintings embody a latent complexity that relates to the artist's own experience. He recounts how his father "was obsessed with ghost stories and horror writing," and would read him and his brother ghost tales every Sunday night in front of the fire for an hour before bed.<sup>1</sup> "That built up a fervent imagination of slightly spooky stuff," Scott says, and he admits that to this day, he feels the impact of that exposure to the idea that the external world is replete with threats and dangers. This sense of threat lies behind the inclusion of a run-down house in some of his paintings; its presence generates a certain "creepiness," suggesting the existence of a further story that is not being elaborated in the imagery of the rest of the painting. As he puts it, "old buildings have a slightly spooky, slightly

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Scott, interview with artist, 22 January 2025, Port Chalmers. All quotations from this same interview, unless otherwise indicated.



gothic feeling. The building is adding to the story, the unknown ... what could be in that building?" Not coincidentally, he titled his first solo album (released in 2000 on Flying Nun Records) *The Creeping Unknown*, inspired by the poster of a 1955 horror film of the same name.<sup>2</sup>

Negative connotations like this, on the other hand, are countered by Scott's deep love of nature:

I use the landforms in nature as a springboard to go somewhere else. Somewhere in my imagination that I see quite often ... images and pictures in my head and a feeling of being at one with nature and enveloped in the landforms. Feelings I had as a kid roaming about outside. We had a nice big hill, called Saddle Hill, a few hundred metres above where we lived, and me and my brother and friends would go up and spend time on that hill. Our scout den was up there as well, and we'd catch frogs in the pond there.

Painting these landscapes, he admits, is comforting: "When I think about it, it's almost about trying to recapture childhood. It very much comes from my unconscious. It captures the feeling of a safe time, because I find that in these times, things are quite scary to me." The trees in Scott's paintings, together with the hills and coastal scenes, thus recall happy times spent as a child in East Taieri and holidays with his family in the Catlins.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Scott, conversation with Hilary Radner, 29 January 2025, RDS Gallery, Dunedin.

The function of the paintings for the artist, therefore, is to counterpose images associated with comfort against images that suggest the darker realities of life. In calling this exhibition “The Stand,” Scott has chosen a word that, like his painted compositions, contains a range of latent meanings. As he puts it, “I like double meanings. ‘Stand’ is a word that encompasses a few things.” Indeed, “stand” can refer to a stand of trees; it can evoke the idea of stadium that allows spectators to watch a spectacle; and it can suggest the moral stance of the artist as a commentator on life. Viewed in this way, the paintings in this exhibition present Scott’s vision of the world in a number of contraries and multiple possibilities.

The apparent simplicity of Scott’s images masks a complexity that emerges largely unconsciously through the process of painting. The precision and discipline with which these works are executed has a ritualistic accuracy, while the restricted yet colourful palette, with which the artist works, evokes a melody that is repeated with infinite and subtle variations. These landscapes are marked by tropes and iconography easily recognized by South Islanders, yet incorporate phantasmic details, figures emerging out of his imagination—trees that are strange yet somehow familiar—the very essence of the *unheimlich*—the uncanny.

The imagery conveys both a sense of comfort—a safe place—and a creeping anxiety—suggesting the state of malaise that increasingly characterises twenty-first century culture. We long for

a haven from the trials and tribulations of a world that seems to be slipping away from us into an incomprehensible chaos. Viewers are invited to enter with the painter into this magical land. But we hesitate—we know that danger may lurk, its possibility behind each stand of trees.

## 2

### **Robert Scott: An Appreciation**

*by Sam Valentine*

I'd say I've spent dozens and dozens of hours of my life pretending to be Robert Scott. Jumping around my childhood home, wildly flailing at an air guitar when I was a kid mostly—I was raised by a Dunedin music-loving father who always loved to blast the stereo. But even now, sometimes, when I'm walking home after a few too many sports drinks at the pub with my headphones on.

Playing bass like him, I mean. On stage in the Clean specifically, though that's no slight to any of the more than a dozen bands and solo incarnations the multi-instrumentalist and songwriter has had, and the many great albums he's been part of. The Magick Heads, Electric Blood, Kilmog, the Weeds, just plain old Robert Scott, the list goes Onanon (although I don't think he ever played with them ... ) And, of course, the Bats! 'Cmon, this guy is a certified Aotearoa music legend. I've been on this man's Discogs page probably two dozen times. That in itself feels weirdly intimate.

The closest I ever got to turning this musical daydream into a pseudo reality was when a recording engineer I was lucky enough to work with, strongly suggested I borrow Scott's bass rig to track an

album. Scott was a friend of his, you see, and my cheap and thin Japanese Diplomat bass guitar just wasn't cutting it. I more than enthusiastically agreed. I had to fight the urge to play one long mashup of the basslines for "At the Bottom" or "Point That Thing Somewhere Else" in every single in-between moment of the session. He was a musical hero and here I was playing *his* guitar. It felt like touching hallowed ground or something. Opening up the well-worn bass case with "The Clean" written on it caused a golden glow on my face like Vincent Vega peeking inside the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994).

"We happy?"... "Yeah, we happy"<sup>1</sup>

But just as importantly he's also a visual artist. Like his bandmates—the brothers Kilgour—in the Clean, Scott picked up art early and has never stopped creating it. (The Clean somehow doing the impossible and going 3/3: great band, three great solo careers, and three great and interesting visual artists.)

Sometimes he paints pastoral little landscapes dotted with tiny ramshackle houses, sometimes moody Central Otago sheds or cribs, sometimes psychedelic sci-fi jet planes speeding through the dark and cloudy sky. There's a little naïve art stylistics, a little Maurice Sendak (the cover of 2014's *The Deep Set* in particular) and a lot of DIY vibe. I'm often most drawn to his works on rounded or oval

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<sup>1</sup> "Pulp Fiction – We happy?", YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY2Vx8-yOsQ>, consulted 6 February 2025.

hardwood. Often literally rough around the edges, they're folksy, not perfect, nor meant to be.

The two disciplines seem to have much in common for Scott, his music and art both empowering each other "always hand in hand" as Scott told Damaged Goods Zine.<sup>2</sup> You could think of them as two trees huddled together to form part of the oeuvre of a wider creative life if you will, similar in both their composition and construction. The subjects of his paintings are often also the subjects of his songs: water, particularly the sea, the wind, the sky, and the stars and the moon, and it's basically impossible to find a Scott album that doesn't touch on these in some way.

There's something very natural and organic in the direct way Scott writes about these subjects, like he wrote every lyric after taking a long, solitary walk along the Aramoana mole, even though that sounds completely ridiculous. The work comes across as real and authentic, very *lived in*, although I know how pretentious that can sound when describing indie rock especially. Scott often sings about arriving, departing, stopping, going but you get the sense he's more interested in the journey than the destination.

Live, the Clean would ebb and flow like a rapidly changing tide. Stumbling into their songs and falling out of them, not quite sure how to get going or the shape each song would take a given night,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Scott in Pat O'Neill, "Hamish Kilgour, Interviews and Short Films: The Bats and Good Company," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6kuDFxVrR4>, consulted 6 February 2025.

communing with each other and the audience as they went, with Scott—“the boss man” as David Kilgour called him one of the last times I saw the Clean perform at Camp a Low Hum in 2014—standing steadfast in the middle of a whirling, quickly disintegrating hurricane of the speed freak sound. Even at their more motorik like the glorious *Tensile* from last studio album *Mister Pop* the wheels sound like they might just fall off at any moment.

The Bats have a slightly more purposeful, perhaps more structured tempo, and he’s a damn solid rhythm guitarist too. It makes me wonder if Scott often had to play the straight man foil to the more “go with the flow” Kilgour brothers, gluing it all together. Then there’s his voice. Affable too, like the man himself. I must admit as a teen my friends and I used to maybe less-than-favourably compare it to a foghorn. But we still loved it. Calling out across a windy Port Chalmers with a deep resonance that’s instantly recognizable.

“Dunes rolling in from the sea” indeed.

Sounds just like the title of a Robert Scott work, doesn’t it.

Now please don’t get me started on how many times I’ve pretended to drum like Hamish Kilgour.





Figure 2, *Secret Place*, Robert Scott, 2025, acrylic on plywood, 557 x 255 mm.



Figure 3, *Somewhere on the Coast*, Robert Scott, 2025, acrylic on plywood, 557 x 255 mm.



Figure 4, *The Inlet*, Robert Scott, 2025, acrylic on plywood, 557 x 255 mm.

### 3

## Robert Scott

*By Amanda Mills*

It is hard to know a time when Robert Scott was not creating music or art. As a musician, Scott is mostly known as bassist/songwriter in The Clean, and guitarist/songwriter/vocalist in The Bats (often concurrently), but these are only two of the bands he is a member of—in 2010, he estimated that he had been in 40 bands (and likely a lot more since then), including Magick Heads, Pink Plastic Gods, The Raith Rovers, Electric Blood, and The Weeds.<sup>1</sup> Scott estimated to *Alley Oop* in 1989 that he had written over 1,200 songs,<sup>2</sup> and has created mesmeric visual art to stand with them.

Robert Scott was born and raised on the Taieri attending Taieri High School. Music was central to his psyche—not only did he learn piano and violin, but he jammed with both his brother and his high school friends. Scott formed his first band, Electric Blood, in 1978 with his brother Andrew and various friends and neighbours, capturing the songs on cassette. In 2023, Third Man Records (the US record label established by Jack White) released a compilation of Electric Blood tracks from across the band's timespan, complete with cover

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<sup>1</sup> <https://robertscottnz.bandcamp.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Rustin, ed., "Bob Scott", *Alley Oop*, 8 (1988): 9.

art by Scott. It's a testament to that early work, and a reminder of the artistic and thematic threads which have extended through his career. After The Clean disbanded (for seven years) in 1982, Scott formed The Bats, and at the same time established *EST* (Every Secret Thing), a fanzine that also became a made-to-order cassette-only label. *EST* gathered recordings and performances by Scott in all his various musical guises and showcased his work as a writer of comics and as a visual artist.

In terms of Scott's music, the sound of the punk-influenced Clean is different to that of the more jangle folk-pop Bats, and, as Scott told the *Listener* in 2020, is more in-line with The Magick Heads and Scott's solo work.<sup>3</sup> The Bats have the distinctive sound of vocal harmonies, jangling guitars, rumbling bass and galloping drums, but the underlying melodies lie within a tradition of acoustic-guitar-based songwriting. However, Scott also continues to have a strong vein of the experimental running through his music, and a recent release with Takumi Motokawa underscored this. Scott's work with The Bats continued this marriage of music and visual art as he created the cover art for the band's recordings and his own solo work. Alternative art for the digital versions of some of Scott's solo and band recordings can be found on his Bandcamp page, which ranges from simple abstract works to more detailed figures and scenes with careful attention to form and colour.

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<sup>3</sup> Russell Baillie, "Taking Flight", *NZ Listener* 273, no. 4173 (5 December 2020): 64.

Although Scott has been called a figurative artist as his work is representational, and based on tangible things, he considers his style “Southern Gothic Modernism with a touch of Surrealism”. Scott’s art practice started with pen and paper, drawing daily from his surroundings and finding inspiration from the things his imagination would conjure up. As a teen he moved into different media of pen-and-ink, colour washes and watercolours, and worked with these for another decade before he started, as he terms it, “painting properly”. Scott attended Art School at Otago Polytechnic in 1979–1980, before he left to join The Clean, and Flying Nun. The rest, as they say, is history.

Scott’s music and art practices have always been combined—one never superseded the other. Scott had a typical music upbringing: he learnt piano and trumpet and taught himself guitar from listening to his sister’s records. The thread of the DIY, self-taught artist and musician runs through Scott’s work, and that of other Dunedin Flying Nun musicians who made music and visual including his bandmates Hamish and David Kilgour, as well as Martin Phillipps and Chris Knox.

An overlap of influence exists within Scott’s work: often the visual art influences the song, and sometimes the song lyrics influence the artworks. However it works, Scott is attuned to its power. Inspiration for painting can come from playing music and writing a song can find something in his art that can help him “get into a relaxed mind state that can open up the writing process a bit ... it can be a fine line between the two.” While Scott enjoys all aspects of painting, he finds the challenges of posters and album art exciting, as the

“parameters are a bit tighter and more defined, the subject matter is already there so you are working from that standpoint.”

As with his music, Scott's visual art shows a playfulness alongside a sense of the Southern Gothic—note the cover of his 2014 solo album *The Green House*: a photograph of a goat with glowing eyes. At once, curious, purposeful, and otherworldly it speaks to the music within. Both showcase nature in different forms. Nature and the land play a pivotal role, and he says it's “the ultimate source of inspiration ... the subject matter is already there so you are working from that standpoint.” He tries to capture the mood and feeling of a scene rather than render an exact copy of what he sees, observing what is in front of him, and using artistic license to change things to get a “better picture ... you have to please yourself first and then just hope that others can get something from your work.”

Scott's work has also taken on a historical aspect, as exemplified in his 2021 wall painting at Hocken Collections, *Where They Played*. Created for the Hocken's 2021 exhibition *Kaleidoscope World: 40 Years of Flying Nun in Dunedin*, *Where They Played* was a map of gig venues in Ōtepoti Dunedin in the 1980s and 1990s, most of which Scott has performed in. Designed to be ephemeral, the work was painted over when the exhibition ended but captured digitally before this occurred (see back cover).

Scott's work as a visual artist was recognised in 2024 with an exhibition, “Recover the Land”, at The Forrester Gallery in Ōamaru. This new exhibition at RDS, “The Stand”, continues the themes he

examined previously in “Recover the Land”. Here he is further refining his work, going deeper into an examination of the spaces that trees occupy. As he explains, “I wanted to revisit the cosy yet slightly spooking settings that the trees define and inhabit. Finding shelter in the trees and the familiar landscape is a feeling I am trying to capture and convey.” This connection to place and to nature is just one of the defining qualities of his work regardless of medium.

## Contributors

**Robert Scott** is best known for his contributions to what is known as the “Dunedin Sound.” Over the past few years, he has developed a growing reputation as a visual artist and gallerist. His recent exhibitions include “Recover the Land” at the Forrester Gallery, Oamaru, 13 April–30 June 2024. He is a long-time resident of Port Chalmers, where he and his partner Dallas Henley run Pea Sea Art Gallery.

**Alistair Fox**, Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, began his career as a university lecturer, moving to Dunedin in 1974. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts eight single-authored and two co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and four volumes translated from French into English. Alistair Fox owns RDS Gallery, where he also serves as the lead editor of the gallery’s Occasional Essays Series.

**Sam Valentine** is a retired music fan, raised in Ōtepoti.

**Amanda Mills** holds the position of Liaison Librarian and Curator, Music and AV Collections at the University of Otago's Hocken Collections. In addition, she writes regularly for *NZ Musician* and *Audioculture* and has published and presented work on the Hocken’s music collections, Kate Bush, Britpop and glam rock, and the “Dunedin Sound” scene and artists.





