Will Wet Wet Wet win the race to be crowned pop princelings of 1986? Mike Gardner observes the Scottish soulsters in training. Photography: Simon Fowler/Still Rock

The runners and riders are in the saddling enclosure for the richest race in the world — the 1986 Pop King Novice Stakes. This celebrated contest takes place every year, the week after Christmas, when record companies unveil their challengers for chart glory.

It's a sparkling affair where musical talent is sometimes overshadowed by the brawn of muscular marketing and huge budget accounts. But it's what's in those black vinyl grooves that counts in the end.

Already heavy betting is going on Sigue Sigue Sputnik. Rumoured to have signed a deal that would make the dosh accrued from Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' look like pin money, they have already been criticised for taking their image from the Tubes' notorious comedy rock star creation Quay Lewd and only having one riff — but that never hurt Frankie Goes To Hollywood or Status Quo; as long as the song's a good 'un.

The smart money — the place where the John Oakseys and Brough Scotts of the musical world operate — is going on Scottish soulsters Wet Wet Wet. And with good reason. Already their stage show has had almost as much lavish praise heaped on it as Bob Geldof's Live Aid efforts. Songs such as 'I Remember', 'Temptation', 'The Moment You Left Me' and 'East Of The River' show them to be songsmiths along classical lines but imbued with a refreshing intelligence and a deep emotional content.

Although the four-piece band are all under 21, they've played together for over eight years. They met at Clydebank High School and cemented their friendship in the "smokers" — the playtime hangout for those addicted to nicotine and being "lad-ish". Bassist Graeme Clark, keyboardist Neil Mitchell and drummer Tom Cunningham decided to form a band.

Tom says: "Graeme was the punk of the school — the one we all watched. We knew he was into music, so we got together just to learn and copy things. We did mainly Clash covers. We played the school a couple of times and got booed off. We were terrible. We realised that since we couldn't do covers so well we'd better write our own material."

The boys conscripted vocalist Marti Pellow — already the musical focal point with his soul-soaked larynx — into the band.

Marti says: "I always used to sing all the time — even in the "smokers" just for kicks. My mother was a very good singer in clubs. She did it professionally for a couple of years before she met my father."

He managed to bring influences such as his mother's Sixties soul and Burt Bacharach/Dionne Warwick collections, as well as his own Scritti Politti records into the group's make-up.

Tom adds: "When Marti joined we sounded like early Squeeze or Costello. We used to rehearse at Graeme's house. Because we were so loud, we had to set up in one room and have Marti singing in the kitchen. For his first year in the band he sang to a gas cooker."

Living in Clydebank (pronounced 'Cleed — baank' by their thick Scottish brogues) they've managed to stop themselves following in the well-trodden footsteps of the rest of the Glasgow set.

"Glasgow's very cliquey," continues Tom. "We've never been part of it and we've kept well away from it. I only ever go there to buy books or whatever, rather than mix with other bands. That's helped us a lot in getting our sound. Glasgow's associated with those jangly guitars, so we're not very representative of the Glasgow sound."

A bigger influence was meeting Scottish music scene lynch-pin Elliot Davis early last year. He invited them to join his fledgling Precious Organisation — a record label aged 18 months that's still to release its first disc.

The band freely admit their debt to Davis. Tom says: "Until we met Elliot, we were pissing in the wind. It was then we became aware of the possibilities. That's when we put our heads down and developed our sound. The good thing about the Precious Organisation is that we've had time to mature instead of going straight to a major label.

"We were very rough and raw when we joined the Precious Organisation. We used to write our songs as we played them. We had a great live set but when we came to recording we weren't very tight. Our arrangements were erratic and undisciplined. Now we have a lot more space in our sound.

"It's very close at Precious. There's only a handful of people there, so we can talk things through with everybody and suggestions come through."

Marti adds: "We used to call it a mini-Motown as a joke at the beginning, but its aims are the same which is to get the best out of everybody."

The label has signed the band to Phonogram and hope to release their debut single in January. Phonogram had to beat off the serious attentions of at least seven other major labels to land Wet Wet Wet, and are hoping the band will make the bigger splash when they're launched into the 1986 Pop King Novice Stakes.

They seem to have their feet on the ground already.

"At one point we played six showcases, one after another. One company even hired a plane to see us. Afterwards it was all 'you're great, you're wonderful'. But you eventually come to your senses. You know you're not that great. You know how much work has to be covered and when you're ready. You're only kidding yourself at the end of the day," says Tom.

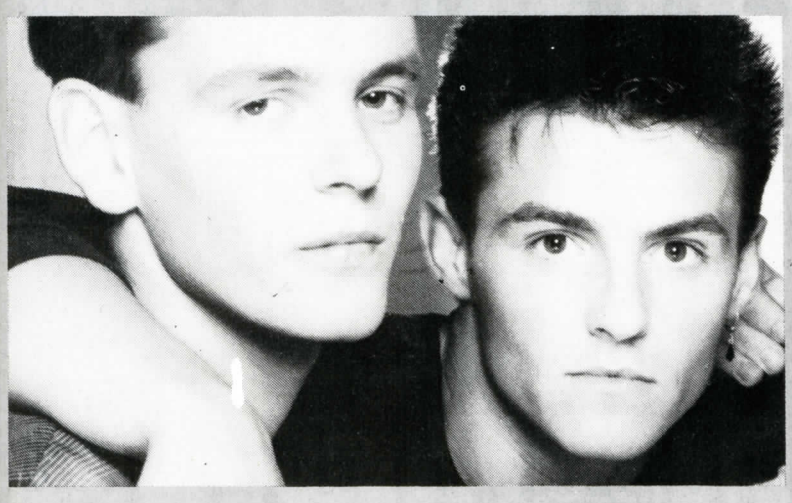
The intriguing name adopted by the band comes from a Scritti Politti lyric for 'Getting, Having And Holding' where the line goes "my face wet wet, with tears". It's no surprise that they number Green Gartside as an influence.

"The new album 'Cupid And Psyche 85' is fantastic," says Marti. "He's not the best chanter but his arrangements and lyrical content are brilliant. He writes excellent pop songs — he takes his time and thinks about it.

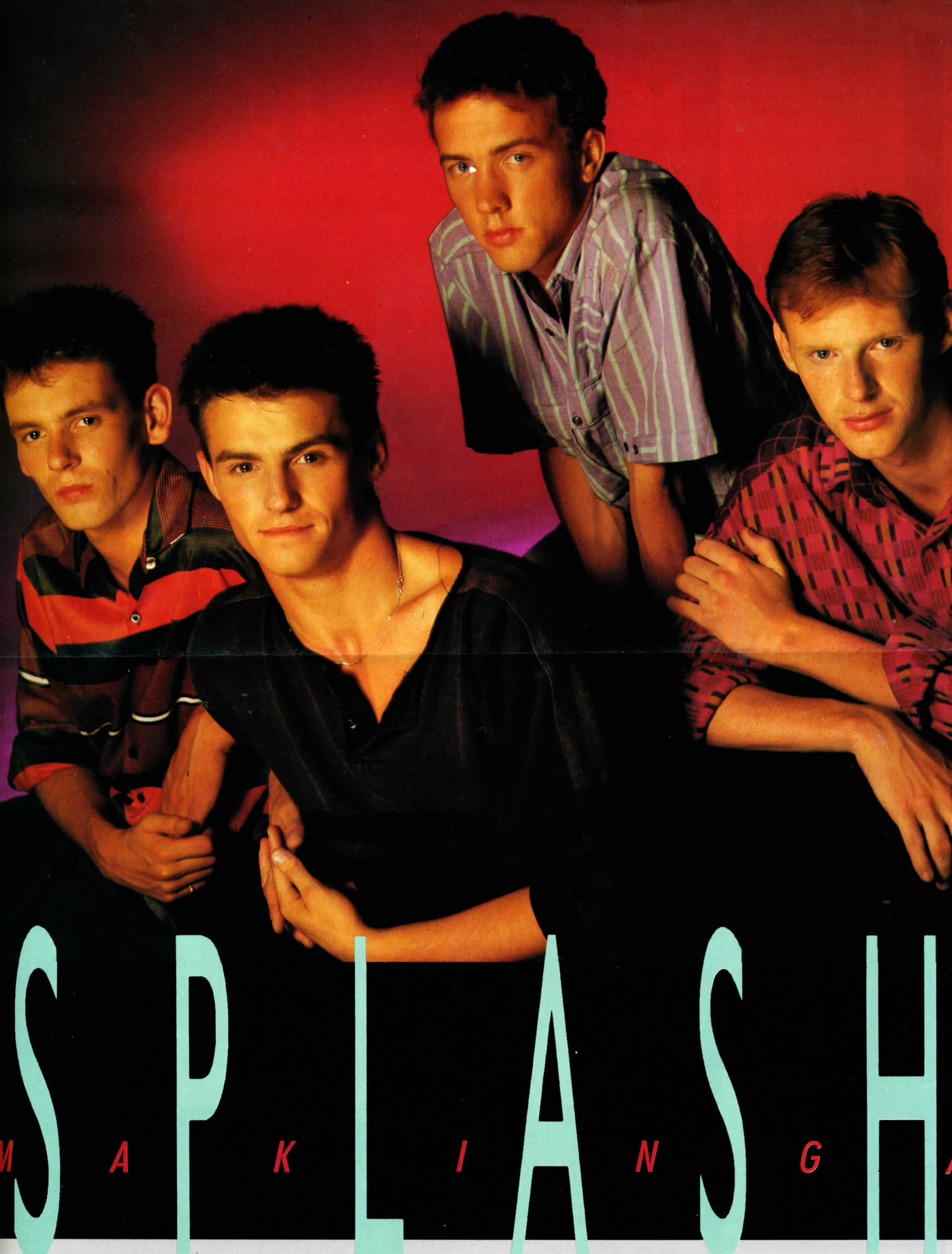
"Costello's the same. He's a freak. I'm sure he writes songs in his sleep. I bet he wakes up in the morning and thinks 'I'll bang out an album this morning.' I've got so much respect for that man. His lyrical content is unbelieveable.

"Those people inspire us but so does Al Green for his vocal qualities. Although he uses the same backing track all the time, it's still great. 'The Belle Album' is still the one for me. Hall And Oates are also brilliant from both a vocal and songwriting point of view."

Wet Wet Wet seem to have had the right training and diet. While I can't guarantee that they'll be the first to show out of the starting gate, they should prove to be stayers. They'll last the course. You can put your money on it.






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