

# STREET BEATS

## Beat of Celtic songs holds Yuppies at bay

By Barbara Ziemba  
special writer

It's the weekend, and downtown Detroit's trendier night spots are jammed with dressed-to-excess Yuppies eager to dance the night away.

But at a popular Irish pub in Greektown, old Celtic songs with a smattering of oldies and Motown tunes are in demand when the four-man group Blackthorn takes the second-floor stage.

Richard McMullan, Bob Phillips and Dan Taggart have performed at the Old Shillelagh since September 1984 ("The weekend the Tigers won the World Series," recalls the Belfast-born McMullan).

NEWCOMER FRED Klein came aboard in February when he was brought in to perform on a recording of the group previously cut.

Blackthorn's genesis took root when teachers Phillips and McMullan met while both worked at Warren De La Salle High School.

For almost two years, McMullan and Phillips were almost unaware of each other's existence, let alone that they were both musicians.

"I was playing solo at folk clubs on the east side," said Phillips, who teaches at Birmingham Brother Rice High School. "When we finally met, we started hanging out in empty classrooms after school and played guitar."

PHILLIPS was also playing at Union Street, a popular Wayne State University student hangout, and oc-

asionally McMullan would sit in with him. Taggart, a manufacturer's representative with Automotive Industries, was involved with Celtic (pronounced KEL-TIC) music since 1976.

"I played all over New England, then came back to Detroit in 1981," Taggart said. "When I got together with Bob, and then we got together with Richard, and the rest is history."

When the Shillelagh (pronounced SHIL-LAY-LEE) hired the three musicians, they chose an appropriate name for their group that tied in neatly with their downtown digs. The shillelagh, a wooden club, is traditionally cut from a blackthorn tree, explained McMullan.

The Shillelagh's patrons are predominantly college-aged, although not exclusively so. There are drawn to the pub's relaxed, non-singles bar atmosphere and the easy rapport with Blackthorn.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATORY endeavors (translation: sing-alongs) are mandatory, and newcomers quickly catch on to the chorus of the ever-popular "Wild and Black Velvet Band."

Playing a pub setting means that Blackthorn's repertoire must stretch beyond authentic Celtic fare to include mainstream selections. "But that's also another reason why we've been so successful," McMullan said. "Our stuff runs the gamut from Irish music to '60s material."

Audience musical sophistication is increasing. While a medley of stan-

dard Irish tunes is always in demand, Shillelagh customers are receptive to genuine Irish folk music. "During the first two sets, they're very aware, really listening," Phillips said. "By the third and fourth sets, it changes to the old parish hall atmosphere and they want to participate more in what's going on."

COLLEGE STUDENTS from as far away as Ann Arbor and Lansing come to Detroit to catch Blackthorn's act, and McMullan and Phillips often recognize past students dropping in to catch their former teachers performing.

One Saturday last June, members of Brother Rice's Jazz Band, who had since graduated, showed up at the Shillelagh to jam with the group, and the crowd roared its collective approval.

Music from today's Ireland, particularly the "Six Counties"—Northern Ireland—is difficult to include in their act.

"Some of the more recent songs are pretty bitter, and we try to stay away from the more political aspects of the music that don't really fit into this type of atmosphere," McMullan said.

One song the group does perform that's been well received by Shillelagh audiences tells the true story of two friends, one a Protestant and the other Catholic, who are both killed in a car crash. It's a part of life in Northern Ireland since the 1960s. Bittersweet rather than angry, McMullan brought the song



Irish group Black Thorn changes the beat for Greektown Yuppies.

with him from a recent visit to his homeland.

IT'S THE KIND of song that can quiet a crowd that's a little out of hand, and the four musicians rely on their humor and a ballad or two to settle things down.

On the flip side, sometimes an audience can become so attentive to what Blackthorn is performing that the pub takes on a concert-like mood. While it's not an unwelcome reaction, the group admits it's a little odd considering the surroundings.

For the most part, though, it's a fun-loving crowd that fills the old downtown landmark that at the turn of the century was a Greek men's

club. Visitors from as far away as Australia are not uncommon, and the band tries to oblige long-distance patrons with a song or two from their homeland.

On the drawing board for Blackthorn is another recording session tentatively set for next February. The selections for this cassette, like the first, will be material the group plays during the early part of their performances—nostalgic ballads, whimsical tunes and rousing, hand-clapping songs. Also, a live broadcast from the Old Shillelagh is in the talking stages now, and for the third year in a row, the band has been invited to play on J.P. McCarthy's St. Patrick's Day show. The band will

also perform at Somerset Mall in Troy on March 6 from 2-4 p.m. as part of its St. Patrick's Day celebration.

BARS IN places like Toronto, Boston and Chicago have inquired about Blackthorn's availability to perform in their cities, and while no one in the group is prepared to throw everything over and go into show business full time, it's still an inviting prospect.

"If we do decide to start moving around, it's going to feel odd having to cajole audiences all over again because we've been spoiled by our regulars at the Shillelagh," McMullan said.

## IN CONCERT

● **MITCH RYDER**  
Mitch Ryder will perform at 10 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 23, at Alvin's, 5755 Cass, Detroit. Tickets are \$10. For more information, call 632-2355.

● **ROBB ROY**  
Robb Roy will perform Saturday, Dec. 26, at the Hamtramck Pub, Caniff, off I-75.

● **CARUSO**  
Caruso will perform Monday through Saturday, Dec. 28, at Jagers, 301 Elizabeth, in the Ford Waterford Township. For more information, call 681-1700.

● **SECOND SELF**  
Second Self will perform Thursday, Dec. 31, at St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit. For more information, call 287-8950.

● **TED NUGENT**  
Ted Nugent will perform Thursday, Dec. 31, at Cobo Arena in Detroit.

● **ECHO & BUNNYMEN**  
Echo & the Bunnymen will perform Friday, Jan. 29, at Hill Auditorium in Ann Arbor. Tickets are \$16.50 and \$15 and available at TicketMaster Outlets. To charge tickets by phone, call 423-6666.

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● **WHITESNAKE**  
Whitesnake will perform Saturday, Feb. 13, at the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit. Tickets are \$17.50 and available at TicketMaster Outlets. To charge tickets by phone, call 423-6666.

● **STING**  
Sting will perform Friday, Feb. 19, at the Masonic Temple Theater in Detroit. Tickets are available at all TicketMaster Outlets. To charge tickets by phone, call 423-6666.

## COLLEGE

Here are the top-10 songs being played on WORB-FM, the campus radio station at Oakland Community College.

1. "Head Gone Astray," Soup Dragons.
2. "Jesus on TV," Cellibate Rifles.
3. "Like at the Gates of Hell," The Pogues.
4. "Look Away," Game Theory.
5. "Jerusalem," Sinead O'Connor.
6. "Lights Out," Easter 17.
7. "Rockets," This White Rape.
8. "Sloppy Heart," Frasier Chorus.
9. "People Who Grinned Themselves to Death," The Housemartins.
10. "No Bunny," Pailhead.

The address is: Hippodrome, 20824 Whitcomb, Livonia 48154.

And while we're on the subject of addresses, here's ours: Music News, c/o Larry O'Connor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 3225 Woodward, Livonia 48150. Let us know what's happening with your band.

## COUNTRY

Here are the top-10 songs being played on WWWW-FM, a country and western station in Detroit.

1. "The Last One To Know," Reba McEntire.
2. "Love Me Like You Used To," Tanya Tucker.
3. "Crazy From the Heart," The Bellamy Brothers.
4. "Somebody Lied," Ricky Van Shelton.
5. "Lynda," Steve Wariner.
6. "I Can't Get Close Enough," Exile.
7. "Heaven Can't Be Found," Hank Williams, Jr.
8. "You Haven't Heard the Last of Me," Mae Bandy.
9. "These Memories of You," The Trio.
10. "Maybe Your Baby's Got the Blues," The Judds.

## JAZZ

Here are the top-10 jazz numbers being played on WJZZ-FM, a jazz station in Detroit.

1. "Still Life Talking," Pat Metheny Group.
2. "Heat of Heat," Kevin Eubanks.
3. "Just Between Us," Gerald Albright.
4. "Short Stories," Bob Berg.
5. "Gift of Time," Jean Luc Ponty.
6. "Zoe's Song," Peter Dinklage.
7. "Brazil," Manhattan Transfer.
8. "Nothing Like the Sun," Sting.
9. "Mind Train," Dave Valentin.
10. "Love is a Rush," Wilton Felder.

## MUSICAL VIEWS

### Holiday CD is packed with collection of platter classics

Whoa, whoa. The vinyl and the discs are flying in from all directions.

FIRST, WCSX-FM has a compact disc out for the holiday season, "Classics Volume 1." This moderately priced CD (\$12.50) features an all-star collection of classic rock numbers only Bruce Willis wishes he could sing.

"Layla" by Derek & the Dominos, "Gimme Some Lovin'" by Spencer Davis Group, "Magic Carpet Ride," by Steppenwolf, and "Dirty Water" by The Standells are only a few of the nuggets on the disc.

To top it off, \$5 from the sale of each CD will be donated to the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit to help feed the hungry. "Classics Volume 1" is available at all Harmony House record stores.

Plus the Pealman (a.k.a. Wayne Peal, Observer & Eccentric staff writer and musical aficionado) digs it. Which is all the more reason to buy it.

Also due out in a couple of weeks is a compilation compact disc, "Digital Detroit." The CD will feature some of the top names in the area's rock circuit, including Last Cavalry.

Last Cavalry has taken the month off while guitarist Mike LaBrie is recovering from eye surgery. The band will be back in action Saturday, Jan. 2, for a benefit show at St. Andrew's

Hall in Detroit. Appearing with Last Cavalry will be Second Self and Robb Roy.

"We've been rehearsing like crazy," said David Youngquist, drummer for Last Cavalry. "We have 15 to 16 new songs for our comeback."

THE JUNK MONKEYS and Vole Beats were recently hauled into the studio to record some new material for a fifth Tremor Records release expected out sometime in February. Also on the compilation album will be an eclectic collection of some of the area's top bands, including the Orange Roughies, Sleaz, Vertical Pillows, Boosley X, Shooting Club, Clancy, Hysterie Narcotics, and 3-D Invisibles.

"It's like a circus," said Gary Reichel, who is coordinating the project. "But it's fun."

The yet-to-be named album should be quite a compilation. The Orange Roughies feature the most inventory, if not the best, guitarist in the area in Dave Feeny of Livonia.

Speaking of the Orange Roughies, the group is going to lead up the van and head to Grand Rapids for a show Saturday, Dec. 26, at the NuBeat Club. Opening for the Roughies will be Under Water Rain, featuring Joe Gains of Southfield.

Returning from a rather brief road trip was the Vertical Pillows, who played in Toronto during the weekend.

The female rockers seem to do well in the great white north, eh? Last year the Vertical Pillows played gigs in Hamilton, Toronto and Montreal where their van broke down and they ate smoked oysters and wine jelly with cheese (And who said rock 'n' roll travel isn't glamorous?).

"They're really open to new things," said Patia Boufford about the Canadian audiences, "especially a band from the States."

Hippodrome, a relatively new band on the scene, has a new thing going themselves. Send a blank cassette, and they'll return it with some of their latest material. "Send me a 90-minute tape, and we'll fill it out on both sides," said Chris Richards of Livonia, Hippodrome lead guitarist and singer.

The address is: Hippodrome, 20824 Whitcomb, Livonia 48154.

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## REVIEWS

### A VERY SPECIAL CHRISTMAS — various artists

This is a holiday fund-raiser, with profits directed toward Special Olympics. It's also a pretty terrific pop album.

Almost everybody's favorite star is here and highlights abound.

Bruce Springsteen steals the show, though, with a four-alarm reading of "Merry Christmas Baby." The rhythm and blues war horse has long been a staple of his live holiday shows.

At the other end, Madonna turns in a show-stopping version of the obscure "Santa Baby." It's hard to tell whether Madonna's witty, nasal vocal pokes fun at old material (Girl Image — or at Cyndi Lauper — but it sure does liven up the proceedings).

The album's heaviest moment belongs to Sting (surprise, surprise). Nonetheless, his "Gabriel's Message" creatively blends synthesizer and multitracked vocals into a heavy new wave choir.

Easily voiced Annie Lennox is a solid choice to update "Winter Wonderland," while fellow Eurythmic



Dave Stewart has a ball playing around with the high-tech background.

TOUGH GIRL Christie Hynde of the Pretenders shows her tender side with a sensitive version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Band mate Malcolm Foster's tasteful guitar work also greases the track.

Whitney Houston coos "Do You Hear What I Hear," while local hero Bob Seger lends his considerable vocal chops to "Little Drummer Boy."

All told, rock and Christmas have hit it off this well since Phil Spector's Christmas Album way back in 1963.

A new Christmas classic is born. And you can dance to it.

— Wayne Peal

### THE NEW POSSIBILITY — John Fahey.

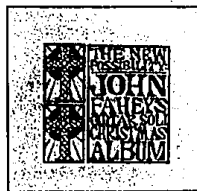
This is a different kind of Christmas album. The provocative title is first indication; the music inside is proof.

It's an instrumental album, just Fahey and his unaccompanied guitar. Together, they deliver two sides of traditional Christmas hymns in untraditional ways.

Fahey's inventive guitar work can be as slinging as an arctic wind, or as gentle as a lullaby. Throughout, it lends a strange sense of majesty to the sparse production.

Fahey's playing samples many styles. There are traces of delta blues, touches of folk, hints of wandering minstrel. Yet Fahey remains his own artist — difficult to pigeon hole but easy to appreciate.

Clearly, his is the definitive version of "What Child Is This?" Since there are no lyrics, it's the definitive "Greensleeves" as well. The too-brief version of "Silent Night" harkens back to that venerable tune's first playing — legend suggests com-



poser Franz Gruber was torced to perform his work on guitar because the church organ was broken.

"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and "Auld Lang Syne" also stand out.

This isn't a new album. Rather, it's an under-appreciated one. It won't be played over the p.a. at Hudson's or K mart. It won't be put up on any of the big Christmas eve radio shows, either.

Put it in the turntable some softly snowing winter night and enjoy.

— Wayne Peal

### A MOTOWN CHRISTMAS — various artists.

Though this album's been out awhile, the recent Motown Christmas television special probably boosted interest in it on the part of last-minute shoppers. Like the show, it's a mixed bag.

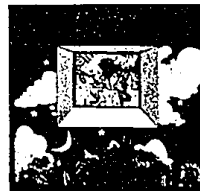
Let anyone forget, Motown didn't exclusively turn out bouncy pop hits. Those were just its well-known and justifiably praised cream.

The other half of its 1960s product, now almost completely forgotten, was limp, supper club soul. This double album, a compilation of the company's yule releases, contains too little of the former and a bit too much of the latter.

Still, each artist turns in a highlight or two.

Having the 12-year-old Michael Jackson toss off "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" and "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" is a can't-miss proposition. The company-written "Give Love on Christmas Day" provides another Jackson showcase.

Diana Ross and the Supremes con-



tribute a smooth "Silver Bells," while the Temptations' "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" is as cool and crisp as the winter air.

Among the lesser-known songs, Stevie Wonder's "That's What Christmas Means to Me" is one of the few that adopts the brash, driving approach most commonly associated with Motown. Smokey Robinson's "The Miracles deliver a jazzy, free-form "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen."

To its credit, the album contains little of the maudlin sentimentality that mars many pop-oriented Christmas albums. To its detriment, it contains too little of the inspiration that marks the best pop music, Motown included.

— Wayne Peal