

STREET BEATS

He injects life into his words

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Chris Smither's craft has always been known among his songwriting peers. But a billboard with neon lights is needed to trumpet his talents to the general public.

His voice is resonant, conveying a variety of blues-inspired emotion and reflective timbre. Smither's genius, though, lies in the seemingly effortless finger-picking style of guitar.

His lyrics are injected with life amid the jaunty inflections supplied by guitar. The words to his songs almost seem to bounce when Smither performs.

"I do like to think the two (guitar and lyrics) are well mixed," said Smither, who performs Saturday, Oct. 12, at Birmingham Unitarian Church as part of the La Casa Folk Music Series. "Guitar comes easier to me. I usually have the guitar orchestration down well before the lyrics. . . I agonize over the lyrics for the most part."

"In a way, the guitar is a smooth way to lure you into that, sort of a way to slip you into the song. In a way, the songs sound similar in the beginning. . . It's a seduction."

IN ADDITION to folk audiences around the country, Smither's music has seduced people like Bonnie Raitt who recorded both "Love You Like a

Man" and "I Feel the Same." He's garnered respect mainly through the grassroots efforts of live performances and from his peers.

The arduous songwriting process Smither endures could help explain a recording career that has only included five albums since 1970. He also did an album that was never released.

His latest LP, "Another Way to Find You" (Flying Fish) was recorded in the studio with a live audience.

The 18-song effort reveals all the hallmarks of Smither's ability to convey contradiction and desolation so eloquently. "A Song for Susan" is one of the most wrought with emotion, dedicated to his common-law wife Susan Metzger who died two years ago.

Smither pours out his soul in the tender acoustic number, chronicling all of its confusion and disillusionment. The first few verses of the number were written when he first met her. The latter part was penned six months after her death.

The concluding lyrics leave a lump in a person's throat. "I believe in plenty of nothing/ Nothing is always in this room, but I don't need nothing/I've got nothing here without you."

Many of Smither's numbers are from personal experiences. Early in his career, he moved from New Orleans to the brimming folk scene on the East Coast.

The transplanted Southern singer stayed in touch with his roots, even if he didn't realize it.

"IT'S ONLY recently that I became aware of how much New Orleans has affected me," he said. "I always had people tell me before they could hear it in my work."

"I think it's been in the last four or five years. New Orleans music and musicians have received so much attention recently. I listen to the music . . . like the Subdudes and say, 'Yeah, that's the way to do it.'"

On his next album, Smither said he'd like to work with rhythm section in order to develop a bigger sound. "I would like to do an acoustic album that will make me sound 10 feet tall."

Also, like many singer/songwriters, Smither wouldn't mind a little more in the way of commercial success. A major label deal would help in that pursuit, but he's very realistic.

"They tend to shy away from solo guitarists for some reasons," he said. "I know the reason: Radio won't play them."

Chris Smither will perform 8:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 12, at Birmingham Unitarian Church, 651 N. Woodward. Tickets are \$10. For information, call 540-9031.



Chris Smither's latest LP, "Another Way to Find You," reveals all the hallmarks of his

ability to convey contradiction and desolation so eloquently.

House of Freaks add 2 occupants

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Then there were four.

Of course, this tried-and-true formula is hardly a milestone in the annals of rock'n'roll. But this is the House of Freaks we're talking about here.

The Richmond, Va., outfit made a symphony of racket with just a guitarist and a drummer and gathered a legion of followers along the way.

Those familiar with the band know guitarist/vocalist Bryan Harvey and percussionist Johnny Hott have never been too content with anything for any extended period of time.

And five years of just being a twosome grew kind of gruesome.

"It almost became a parody," said Harvey, who's group rolls into industry in Pontiac Thursday, Oct. 10, to support their major label release debut, "Cakewalk" (Giant). "We felt

people were making a bigger deal of that (being a two-man band) than the music. We'd hear things like, 'Oh, you're not bad for a two-man band.'"

Rest assured, though, the House of Freaks didn't add guitarist Steve McCartney, formerly of the Long Ryders, and bassist Bob Rupe, formerly of the Silos, just because of a few off-handed remarks made by members of the record-buying public. This outfit has been more about sound manipulation than commercial capitulation.

Evidenced by three cracking LPs, two of which were distributed by Rhino Records ("Monkey on a Chain Gang" and "Tantilla"—And, of course, the recently released "Cakewalk" on the Warner Bros. subsidiary Giant).

Boredom HAS always been the catalyst for Harvey and Hott, who attack all the previously held theo-

ries of what a rock'n'roll band should be. Using an odd variety of percussion—in this case a gear shift and garbage can lids—along with quirky rhythms, House of Freaks present an aural plethora of musical styles such as rock, folk, blues and country.

As a duo, the House of Freaks could sound bigger than life. But "Cakewalk" realizes the full potential of a musical foundation laid five years ago when Harvey and Hott moved to Los Angeles and began kicking up a ruckus.

New members McCartney and Rupe, both from Richmond, have helped make that possible. "You definitely sort of fall into the four-man band cliché," Harvey said. "Now we know we can take it down to the two-man thing. We have a lot more range this way."

In the process, House of Freaks veered away from a growing trend of two-member bands with Flat Duo Jets, Chickasaw Mudd Puppies and Timbuk 3. Though Timbuk 3 has forsaken their boom box and is touring as a foursome.

"Oddly enough, all these bands are different," Harvey said. "Maybe you have to be really imaginative when there's only two of you."

Such could be said for House of Freaks. Banter can be heard between members between cuts on "Cakewalk" and the various noises

alone makes one feel they've accidentally walked into a basement recording session.

Even a Richmond telephone directory was used, creating a sound by flipping pages ("They have a different sound than a New York phone book. There's more of a slap than a thud.")

THE REINS haven't tightened with the band signing to Warner Bros. label. "They just think of us as a bunch of weird guys," Harvey said.

The band bypassed any pre-production before going into the studio for its major label debut. Harvey and Hott selected 14 songs and picked out what sounded best, using production talents of Dennis Herring (Camper Van Beethoven, Timbuk 3 and Throwing Muses).

All of which kept things interesting while recording. Restless energy inspires the band and Harvey can't fathom a day when there won't be enough of that around.

"When I'm really fed up with it, I'd probably go back to school and teach history," he said. "I think why we keep going is it's like driving on a country road and you want to see what's around the corner."

House of Freaks will open for School of Fish Thursday, Oct. 10, at Industry, 15 S. Saginaw, Pontiac. For information, call 334-1999.



Bryan Harvey and Johnny Hott, who founded the House of Freaks five years ago, decided to add guitarist Steve McCartney and bassist Bob Rupe to their lineup.

IN CONCERT

JOHNNY WITH AN EYE

Monday, Oct. 7 — Johnny with an Eye will perform at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

KENNY NEAL

Tuesday, Oct. 8 — Kenny Neal will perform at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

THE WONDERSTUFF

Wednesday, Oct. 9 — The Wonderstuff will perform with guests, The Milltown Brothers, at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. For information, call 961-MELT.

M.O.D.

Wednesday, Oct. 9 — M.O.D. will perform at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

THE CYNICS

Wednesday, Oct. 9 — The Cynics will perform with guests, Come in 60 Seconds, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

TRINIDAD TRIPOLI STEEL BAND

Thursday, Oct. 10 — Trinidad Tripoli Steel Band will perform at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

PAMELA WISE QUINTET

Thursday through Sunday, Oct. 10-13 — Pamela Wise Quintet will perform at Baker's Keyboard Lounge, Livernois and Eight Mile, Detroit. For information, call 864-1200 or 864-1201.

SOUTHGONG ZAK

Thursday, Oct. 10 — Southgoing Zak will perform at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.



Nirvana will perform with guests, Urge Overkill, at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. Tickets are \$10.50 in advance. For information, call 961-MELT.

FLOOR 9

Friday, Oct. 11 — Floor 9 will perform with guests, Chapter, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off of I-75.

CHISEL BROTHERS

Friday and Saturday, Oct. 11-12 — Chisel Brothers will perform at Moby's Dicks, 3452 Schaefer Road, north of Michigan Avenue, Dearborn. For information, call 581-3650.

BIG DAVE AND THE ULTRASOUNDS

Friday, Oct. 11 — Big Dave and the Ultrasounds will perform at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

REGULAR BOYS

Friday and Saturday, Oct. 11-12 — Regular Boys will perform with guests, Crow Bar Hotel, at Sully's, 4758 Greenfield, north of Michigan Avenue, Dearborn. For information, call 816-1920.

THE INCURABLES

Friday and Saturday, Oct. 11-12 — The Incurables will perform at Abley's on the Strip, Telegraph Road, north of Joy Road, Redford. For information, call 721-1622.

MENTAL LANDSCAPE

Friday, Oct. 11 — Mental Landscape will perform with guests, Mushroom Head, at Finney's Pub, 3965 Woodward, Detroit. For information, call 831-8070.

NIRVANA

Friday, Oct. 11 — Nirvana will perform with guests, Urge Overkill, at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. Tickets are \$10.50 in advance. For information, call 961-MELT.

SUN MESSENGERS

Friday, Oct. 11 — Sun Messengers will

perform at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

TREMOR WEEKEND

Friday and Saturday, Oct. 11-12 — Tremor Weekend will feature 15 local bands at Psychobas Lounge, 2037 Canfield, Hamtramck. On Friday, 3-D Invisibles, Inside Out, Happy Accidents, Volebeats, Soul Station, Cuppa Joe and Chunky Seeds. On Saturday, See Dick Run, Strange Bedfellows, Karen Monster, Cinecyclo, Karen Monster, Bigger Than Mass, Shouting Club, Blue Nylons and Weeping Rachel. For information, call 874-0254.

THE DOPES

Saturday, Oct. 12 — The Dopes will perform with guest, Those Who Dream, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off of I-75.

BOP HARVEY

Saturday, Oct. 12 — Bop Harvey will perform at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann

Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

MARC FALCONBERRY

Saturday, Oct. 12 — Marc Falconberry will perform at the Station Lounge, 32413 Michigan Ave, west of Merriman Road, Wayne. For information, call 721-3460.

MONKS OF DOOM

Saturday, Oct. 12 — Monks of Doom will perform at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

FLYIN' SAUCERS

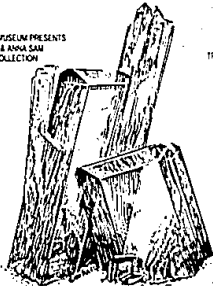
Saturday, Oct. 12 — Flyin' Saucers will perform at Finney's Pub, 3965 Woodward, Detroit. For information, call 831-8070.

UNCLE JESSIE AND 29TH STREET

Saturday, Oct. 12 — Uncle Jessie and the 29th Street Blues Band will perform at The Attic, 11887 Jon Campus, Hamtramck. For information, call 363-4194.

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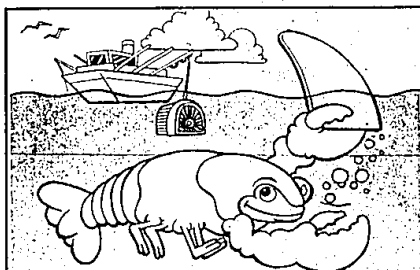


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