

STREET SCENE

Nineteen Wheels gives Michigan first listen



CHRISTINA FUOCO

Nineteen Wheels is building its potential success with its debut album "Six Ways From Sunday" (Aware Records) one day at a time. Although the album has national distribution, the band chose to release it initially only in Michigan Tuesday, Jan. 28.

"It sounds like we're setting our sights low by just putting it out in Michigan. But I've had records that have sat in stores in faraway places. It doesn't do anything for the ego to get national distribution if you can't sell them. If you can't sell them, it doesn't mean anything. If you can't promote it to radio to get the sales or tour, it doesn't mean anything," said lead singer/guitarist: Chris Johnston, a 1984 graduate of Birmingham Seaholm High School.

It sounds as if the band is off to a good start. They work with FGA, the same Nashville-based booking agency as R.E.M., and MTV has licensed the album "Six Ways From Sunday" to use during episodes of "The Real World - Boston." Two songs from the album, "Make It To The Warm" and "Eyesore," appear in the independent film "35 Miles From Normal" which was recently screened at the Sundance Film Festival.

"Six Ways From Sunday" is a departure from its first release, "The Tempermill Recordings" EP, put out by the Ann Arbor-based Skillet Records. The Tempermill Recordings carries a roots rock almost country flavor while "Six Ways From Sunday" is straight-ahead Midwestern rock 'n' roll.

"I think that being quiet before was almost like a reaction to other music. Things are always going up and down, and I think we're on an up cycle. If we stay on it, it's fine with me," said Johnston, formerly of the

Hannibals.

Johnston admits that it's also partially due to an endorsement deal he got with J.F. Naylor, a local amplifier company, after all the band's equipment was stolen in Boston in late September.

"Now that I've got a big amp, I can turn up. All that was kind of an excuse to actually be louder in some ways although your stage volume shouldn't go up or down depending on the size of your amplifier. But just having a bigger amplifier makes you feel like more of a rocker or something," Johnston said with a sly grin.

For the recording of "Six Ways From Sunday" the band teamed up with producer Tim Patalan, who has also worked with Sponge, Hoarse, and Jeff Buckley, at his studio The Loft in Saline.

"I can't say enough good things about him," Johnston said about working with Patalan. "As a person, he's a fun guy to be around. He's the kind of person that you

never see frown. To be a producer, you have to have all the patience in the world. He's got all the patience in the world and then some. He's encouraging too. He's worked enough that he knows what it takes to get a good performance out of somebody. He's willing to do that. A lot of his suggestions were right on."

Patalan's goal was to make an album that was diverse. On Patalan's urging, Johnston's vocals are chameleon-like-sounding as if there's more than one primary vocalist.

"One of the things he said he didn't want to do is make a record, in his words, that was sammy, where each song sounded the same. Originally 'Come On Jenny' was more of a rock song, and 'Last Card Down' was more of a rock song."

"We had this category that was 'safe rock.' 'Come On Jenny,' 'Country Girl' and 'Last Card Down' all fit in this 'safe rock' category. We said, 'Well, let's just

have one song that's 'safe rock.' 'Country Girl' stayed in that category. 'Come On Jenny' we gave more of a Motown feel, mostly in the beat. 'Last Card Down' we just injected an extra long dinner break right before we came back and recorded that. We really changed the feel of it from an up-tempo rock song to 'turn down the lights and try to really rethink it.'"

Live, however, Nineteen Wheels does the faster version of "Last Card Down."

"Sometimes just a three-chords-and-a-cloud-of-dust rock song, which we write a lot of, go by so quickly and you kind of say, 'Hm, that was interesting.' But the actual song behind it deserves more than that. 'Last Card Down' is a good example of that. It's a lot more interesting to me this way."

Johnston said he and his bandmates - bassist/vocalist Tim Marzocchi, guitarist/vocalist Scott Owens, and drummer Greg Williams - are happy with the

way the album turned out.

"The songs are probably not necessarily any longer than they should be. It's a really trimmed up record. I'm really happy with the song order. It's a complete sounding record to me. I sure hope it's not the best record we ever make. I think we can still make better records. It goes by quickly."

Nineteen Wheels celebrates the release of its new album with a party and performance with special guests Wally Pleasant and the Scott Fab Band, 9 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 1, at the 7th House, 7 N. Saginaw, Pontiac. Cover charge is \$6 for the 18 and older show. For more information, call (810) 335-8100.

If you have a question or comment for Christina Fuoco, you can write to her in care of The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, or you can leave her a message at (313) 953-2047, ext. 210, or via e-mail at CFuoco@aol.com.

THEATER

'Annie' charms audience in Nancy Gurwin production

Nancy Gurwin Presents Bloomfield. Shows 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets \$15, seniors \$12.50 and students \$10. For more information, call (810) 288-1508 or (810) 354-0545.

BY BRAD FIELD
SPECIAL WRITER

The girl in the title role, Dana Steingold, scored a personal triumph amid good songs, dancing, music, a cartoon-come-life, in the Nancy Gurwin production of the musical "Annie" at the Jewish Community Center. Steingold danced and acted, and belted out one tune after another from the opening bars to the end.

Of course, she had some help. The Meehan-Strouse-Charnin musical has a huge cast, which Michael Gravame's direction

organized into effective action across the wide Aaron DeRoy Studio Theatre stage. Bill Glace as Daddy Warbucks and Jamie Mistry as the villain of the piece showed pleasant voices and good dancing. Ed Guest in the small role of President Roosevelt was fun. Tania Velinsky was vibrant in the thankless role of the grumpy matron of the orphanage, and a chorus of eight little girls was stunning as the orphans. They had the audience standing and shouting at the finale. Where do they find these

great kids?

The answer must be in Nancy Gurwin's company, which again produced a lively evening of family fun.

The busy Gravame is credited with both the set and costume design.

The set changes were cleverly indicated by a kind of computer-screen tool-bar across the proscenium arch, with appropriate icons spotlighted to indicate the orphanage, a Hooverville slum, the Warbucks mansion, and so forth.

Valerie Mould's choreography was nicely calculated to make use of any special talents. Joan Bowes' musical ensemble provided dependable back-up for about thirty songs.

The audience at the opening, a Sunday matinee, was easily a little girl. While one or two got fussy, all the others sat with eyes and mouths open, especially at the sight of the chorus of orphans and of the star, Steingold, showing off their talents with professional aplomb. In this genial show.

Annoying 'Nerd' fills theater with laughter

Avon Players presents "The Nerd" through Feb. 8. Shows 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday & Saturday; 2 p.m. Sundays at the playhouse on Tienken Road (1 1/2 mile east of Rochester Road, Rochester Hills. Tickets \$11. Call (810) 608-9077.

BY TAMI TABACCHI
SPECIAL WRITER

The Avon Players have made a welcome addition inviting the world's most unwelcome guest. "The Nerd" is a hilarious comedy by Larry Shue, and audiences can catch this annoying houseguest through Feb. 8.

The show opens with an introduction to Willum Oubert, who hasn't been having a particularly pleasant life lately. With his girlfriend just days from taking a job in another state and having to compromise his work as an architect (not to mention the potential IRS audit), it doesn't look like things can get much worse for him.

A phone call announcing a visit from the man who saved his life in Vietnam seems to be just the thing to raise his spirits. While they had only met briefly, Willum is elated at the prospect of seeing him - until he arrives, that is.

Not only is Rick Steadman the complete nerd, he is also annoying, empty-headed, untalented, and totally out of touch with reality. Willum and his friends hysterically look for unconventional ways to get rid of the tedious houseguest, which in turn fills the theater with laughter.

Director Jay Hohauser has collected an experienced group of

actors to bring life into "The Nerd." Sergio Mautone is perfect as the nerd, Rick Steadman. He is not only faultlessly into his character throughout the performance, he is seriously funny.

Matthew James Pagnani is precisely pathetic as the mundane architect, Willum.

Listen for 30-year Avon Players veteran Chuck Thompson, who has all the best lines as the very gay neighbor, Axel Hammond. Liz Hohauser is charming as Willum's girlfriend, Tansy.

Dillon O'Connor and Nan Frederick do a nice job as the Waldgraves.

Fourth grader Jeffery Hyke, though he basically screams and runs across stage in his scenes, is demonstrative as the Waldgrave's child from hell, Thor.

Set in the 1970s, Jill Blazis-Sloan has done a great job on costumes, finding just the right bell-bottom pants for Tansy and annoying polyester shirts for Willum.

The set is also very 70s, designed and dressed appropriately by Kim Gar and Liz Bradford-Hohauser.

"The Nerd" is an amusing comedy with a great surprise ending. This is the show for anyone who has ever had an unwelcome guest that they just couldn't get rid of. It will also help you believe that maybe that person wasn't so bad after all!

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Sponsored by the Friends of Paint Creek Center for the Arts, this optional black tie fund-raiser

promises a delightful evening, 7 p.m. to midnight, of mingling and dancing to music by the Jello Shout - plus gourmet hors d'oeuvres, desserts and cash bar.

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