

Making it

High school dreams come true for Smith

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Scanning the radio dial midway the DJ's voice pierces the ear.

"Here's Erica Smith, who definitely has a hit on her hands with 'Temptation Eyes,'" says the man on the radio.

False promises made in the glare of the afternoon sun? Hardly.

Erica Smith's stock is rising faster than mercury on the slip of a boiling tea kettle. She has done the unheard of, what is thought to be the unattainable.

Smith, 19, has made it on Top 40 radio, cracked it like the short-order cook who specializes in making omelets. She's in the Top 20 at WHYY-FM and her rendition of the Grass Roots' hit has been the No. 1 requested song at WCZY-FM.

And get this, she's from Detroit. "When I heard it, I looked at the radio," said Smith, sitting in the control room of Sellar Studio in Sterling Heights where "Temptation Eyes" was recorded. "It was great. Actually, I was driving down I-94 on my way here. I was looking into everyone else's car thinking, 'Are they listening to it?'"

They are. More than that, apparently, so are major record labels. Gary Spaniola, who produced the maxi-single, said he expects Smith to sign a deal "hopefully in the next two to three weeks."

THINGS COULDN'T be better, if Smith mapped out the whole scenario out herself. Actually, she did.

As a high school student in West Virginia, Smith kept a daily journal. In it, she would plot how she would return to Detroit and launch her own solo singing career.

Smith followed through on her written word. When she graduated from high school, she coaxed her stepfather to drive her to her birthplace of Detroit. Then she started on her quest.

Smith eventually hooked up last year with Gary Spaniola, a well-known name in Detroit music circles, and things just took off. So fast, in fact, it even makes her 19-year-old head spin.

"It's not as planned as I had thought," she said. "It's a lot different."

Somehow, Smith appears to be a person who can handle it. At times, she appears awe-struck by her sudden notoriety.

But listening to her three-song single finds a mature woman whose powerful voice can crystallize the words she sings.

Spaniola has worked with a slew of Detroit artists. Some of note include Ready for the World, Toby Redd and Rhythm Corps.

He thinks she's for real.

"HER VOICE has feeling," said Spaniola, who performed with the popular Detroit rock outfit Bitter Sweet Alley. "There's a lot of people who can sing well, but it means nothing."

The collaboration between Smith and Spaniola is a productive one, not to mention a creative one.

They co-write each song. She brings in the lyrics and the melody



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while he supplies the structure. Already, they have 13 to 14 tunes ready for an album.

If it weren't for Spaniola, Smith would have sought success elsewhere. She performed in a Top 40 band that performed on the hotel-motel circuit.

"It was lonely," she said. "At first it was fun and exciting, but that wore off very quickly. You're singing someone else's songs. You're not expressing yourself. You're just there."

Like many frustrated artists in the area, Smith was planning a move to

New York. Then Smith read an article in Detroit Monthly magazine, citing Spaniola as one of the bosses of the 1990s. The rest is history.

Her successful foray into Top 40 music is almost an unprecedented one for a local artist. Some avoid it for fear of the sell-out label.

"I don't consider it a pitfall," Spaniola said. "You're up against Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston. It's the hardest market to crack."

"Everyone says, 'Oh it's too commercial. We don't want to go for that. I guarantee you that if you get

those artists behind a closed door, they would want to be on Top 40."

NONETHELESS, there are other traps to avoid. For one, there's the banality of dance pop.

Then, there's the image versus substance issue. Smith's dark looks certainly make her attractive along with being a talented songwriter and performer. She wants to find a balance between the two.

"I don't want to be dubbed, 'Oh she's trying to be another Madonna,'" she said. "But I think it's important to have an image."

IN CONCERT

● **IODINE RAINCOATS**
Iodine Raincoats will perform on Monday, Feb. 13, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

● **ASH CAN VANGOGH**
Ash Can Vangogh will perform on Tuesday, Feb. 14, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

● **THE DIFFERENCE**
The Difference will perform on Tuesday, Feb. 14, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

● **JUGGLERS AND THIEVES**
Jugglers and Thieves will perform on Wednesday, Feb. 15, at the Token Lounge, Joy Road, one block east of Middlebelt Westland. For information, call 529-2245.

● **T-A-J-BAND**
The T-A-J-Band, a reggae group, will perform on Wednesday, Feb. 15, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

● **DEFUNKT**
Defunkt, Island recording artists, will perform on Thursday, Feb. 16, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

● **LONNIE BROOKS**
Lonnie Brooks, a blues artist from Chicago, will perform on Thursday, Feb. 16, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

● **FRANK ALLISON**
Frank Allison and the Odd Sox will perform on Friday, Feb. 17, at Lilly's, 2330 Jacob, off Jos. Campau, Hamtramck. For information, call 875-6555.

● **HIPPODROME**
Hippodrome will perform on Friday, Feb. 17, at Jameson's, 1812 N. Main, Royal Oak. For information, call 547-6470.

● **CARUSO**
Caruso will perform with special guests, Y B Soy, on Friday, Feb. 17, at Hamtramck Pub, 2004 Canfield, Hamtramck. For information, call 365-9760.

● **URBATIONS**
The Urbations will perform Friday, Feb. 17, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

● **NICK CAVE**
Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds will perform at 10 p.m. Friday, Feb. 17, at Saint Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. Tickets are \$12.50. For information, call 961-MELT.

● **BLUE FRONT PERSUADERS**
Blue Front Persuaders will perform Friday and Saturday, Feb. 17-18, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

● **THE SHY**
The Shy will perform on Saturday, Feb. 18, at Lilly's, 2330 Jacob, off Jos. Campau, Hamtramck. For information, call 875-6555.

● **STEVE HARDELLA**
Steve Hardezza will perform Saturday, Feb. 18, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

● **ZOMBIE SURFERS**
Zombie Surfers will perform with special guests, Screamin' Savage and the Cavemen, on Saturday, Feb. 18, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off I-75. For information, call 365-9760.

LIVE

COWBOY JUNKIES

— Blind Pig Ann Arbor

The questions came fast and furious. Why are the Cowboy Junkies playing at the Blind Pig? Why wasn't I told that the 10 p.m. show was sold out? Why didn't I get tickets for the extra show on quiet week?

With the fabulous Connells only drawing only 40 people when they played the Blind Pig, when did the Cowboy Junkies get so popular? How would their moody, melancholy songs translate to a live setting?

Would they smile? Would I be the most depressing gig ever? But most importantly... how was I going to get a ticket? Thankfully, nobody had taken this assignment, so happy days!

First impressions of the crowd were kind of scary. I don't think I've seen such an older audience. Maybe they all meant to go to The Ark, but got lost. Good Lord, beads and sweaters were everywhere. Is the musical tastes of the under-23 crowd that limited?

At 9 p.m., a ragged looking crew took to the stage led by the stunning

Margo Timmins. And she smiled!

With this inconspicuous entrance, they gently defined the mood of the evening with "I Don't Get It" from their wonderful album "Trinity Sessions" (RCA). This was followed by a captivating version of the old classic "Blue Moon." Throughout the set, the Cowboy Junkies were quiet and subtle. But this lack of assault demanded your attention.

Rumor has it that the reason for the lack of show in the Ann Arbor area is that Margo Timmins' enchanting voice melted it all away, including many hearts presents at the Blind Pig.

Highlights of the night included the magical steel/alice guitar playing of Kim Deschamps and Margo Timmins' a capella version of Bruce Springsteen's "My Father's House" from his "Nebraska" LP.

Gentle sadness, pure pain, raw emotion. The thing that dreams are made of.

— Cormac Wright

COLLEGE

Here are the top 10 songs receiving air play on WOUX-AM, campus station of Oakland University in Rochester.

1. "I'll Be You," Replacements.
2. "Stand," R.E.M.
3. "Disco Man," New Order.
4. "Eliabehn," Direenna.
5. "24/7," Great Hall.
6. "Motorcrash," Sagarebes.
7. "Teenage Riot," Souk Youth.
8. "Get Back," Labek.
9. "Who Or What I Am," Colors.
10. "Digging My Own Grave," Karen Monaster.

CLASSICAL

Here are the top 10 most requested selections on Dick Wallace's show on WQRS-FM.

1. "Dum Busters March," Coates.
2. "Stan," R.E.M.
3. "Creech Suite," Dvorak.
4. "Piano Quintet," Schumann.
5. "Spring Concerto," Viravidi.
6. "Mother Goose Suite," Havel.
7. "Spring Serenade," Tchaikovsky.
8. "Symphony No. 34," Mozart.
9. "Romance & Juliet," Prokofiev.
10. "Symphony No. 3," Beethoven.

REVIEWS

THE LEAVING TIME

— Michael Shrieve and Steve Roach



Are there any new cop/detective shows out there in need of a musical score?

If the answer is yes, then we may have the album for you. These guys sound like they apprenticed under Jan Hammer or something.

Michael Shrieve is a noted rock/jazz drummer most famous for his work with Santana. Steve Roach is some synthesizer wizard who even gives credit to a Macintosh computer for a few of the sounds produced on this album of instrumentals.

What they have put together here is an album of totally seamless music that has tinges of New Age (is The Wave interested?), soft jazz and an occasional rock-influenced guitar solo by David Thorn.

But the listener gets the eerie feeling that Sony Crockett, some Wiseguys, or The Equalizer is about to cross his path.

Here's an album that actually needs video to survive — the music

CALM ANIMALS

— The Fixx



Here's a band that's been going nowhere for about six years.

Since this British quintet recorded its best efforts, "Shattered Room" and "Reach the Beach," earlier in the decade, the band has broken no new musical ground whatsoever.

Their ensuing efforts have sounded like a valiant attempt to dig up a single with the energy of "One Thing Leads to Another" or "Saved by Zero" (both off "Reach the Beach"). Given that, it means little to say that "Calm Animals" might be better than its most recent predecessor, 1984's "Phantoms" or 1986's "Walkabout."

The music all starts to sound the same after a while. The guitar-laced edge the band had on its best work has been lost in a sea of various synthesized keyboards.

A few tracks may generate some air play, but certainly not excitement. "Driven Out," the first single, has made some AOR play lists and

could cross over to the Top 40 side soon enough.

The ballad "Precious Stone" is a bit of a Fixx departure and worth a listen or two. The title track gives vocalist/lyricist Cy Curmin a chance to duplicate his provocative gem "Red Skies" off of "Shattered Room." But what results is a clichéd commentary to yet another uninspired arrangement. The rest of the album doesn't even excite enough to merit mention.

If there's even a chance for a case to be made that an album's cover may be better than the vinyl within, "Calm Animals" is a formidable candidate for that list.

— Bob Sadler

LIVE IN THE WHISPERING GALLERY OF GRAND CENTRAL STATION

— The Persuasions

The Persuasions cordially invite you to attend their live-digital recording session to be held at 3:00 p.m. April 10th, 1988 in The Whispering Gallery of Grand Central Terminal

never released on record. But when these veteran singers loosen up a bit, they really get down. Their version of "Don't Let Go," the old Roy Hamilton hit, is the essence of rock'n'roll. They also have fun with "This Little Girl," Bruce Springsteen's 1988 tribute to the 1950s music that was his — and their — original inspiration.

The CD sound quality is in-your-living-room fresh, much better than any of the group's scarcely available LP releases. One wishes, however, that Elektra would see fit to release Curlip's, the group's outstanding 1974 album on CD.

This set's clincher is the outstanding version of "Amen," the old Otis Redding/Curtis Mayfield gospel hit. "For every day you wake up and the pain isn't in your body, say Amen," says one of the Persuasions, maybe the late Herbert "Tooby" Rhoad. Say Amen, indeed.

— Wayne Peat