

Opening doors to new music

By Larry O'Connor staff writer

A life of rock'n'roll is often glorified. To Jim Cortez, it's all in a day's work.

The Southfield-Lathrup graduate is an AOR (album oriented rock) promotions man for Elektra Records on the East Coast. Such a job is not usually found in the classifieds or through a job bank.

Much like the bands he helps promote for Elektra Records, Cortez's rise in the business has been an upward climb. He started as a sales clerk at Harmony House Records in Royal Oak, bugging record company representatives who used to drop by for a job.

Cortez then worked in the back room of Warner Elektra Atlantic (WEA) offices in Farmington Hills, shipping out records. He later became a Midwest radio promotions man for Elektra Records.

Since then Cortez has shook hands with radio programmers and traveled with the likes of Motley Crue, Metallica and George Strait.

Yes, the common refrain goes, it's a dirty job but someone has to do it. And who better than a guy who as a youth used to dream of meeting rock idols? Now it's an everyday reality, something he's not embarrassed to admit he enjoys.

"I got to meet Pete Townshend last year," said Cortez, 30, who lives in the Boston area with his wife, Ardy. "I never thought I'd ever get to meet someone from the Who. The Who meant a lot to me when I was growing up."

CORTEZ TREK in the record business, though, is not about hero worship. Instead, he's involved in a never-ending battle to open radio airwaves to new music.

And that is not easy, especially in Detroit where he worked as an Elektra promotions man covering the Midwest for three years. Radio here is traditionally conservative, preferring to play Jethro Tull to the Cure or 10,000 Maniacs.

Cortez waged a grassroots campaign. He'd arm himself with sales charts and a list of stations na-



Jim Cortez, formerly of Southfield, works in radio promotions for Elektra Entertainment. Cortez is pictured here in a publicity photo for Shouting Club, a local band for which he was the lead singer.

tionally who were already playing a record. He'd bring radio programmers out to concerts like 10,000 Maniacs, showing them the group was not "a green haired punk band."

He had success. 10,000 Maniacs received air play on a Top-40 station, WCZY-FM, thanks to Cortez's efforts.

"I had to figure out that whole record-radio relationship," said Cortez, who was lead singer in the local band, Shouting Club. "That was a real eye-opener. I had to learn that game."

"They don't want to hear about new music in Detroit. They play it safe. They stick to Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. It's hard to get a new band through doors."

If anything, the stagnant Detroit radio market provided the perfect launching pad. Any new album Cortez was able to get on the air was a considerable triumph.

CORTEZ SAID he was able to do it without losing his integrity. He admits there's an honest way to get a

record played, or a dishonest way. "I would try to get a record played on its own credibility and my credibility," Cortez said. "I didn't try to buy—anyone."

Last year, he earned a promotion to Elektra's office in Boston. He travels up and down the East Coast, working primarily with AOR programmers.

Things are still difficult there, although more alternative and college stations can be found on the East Coast. Success he does have can be attributed to enthusiasm, which in his case is genuine.

"I could never sit around and work music I didn't care about," he said. "I couldn't sell a dinosaur band like the Doobie Brothers or something."

Few of those exist at Elektra. The label has a roster dotted with several breakthrough acts of the '80s including 10,000 Maniacs, the Cure, Tracy Chapman, Sugarcube, Metallica along with the notorious Motley Crue. ("They're a tightly run organization," he said.)

Some of those groups, like Metallica,

Cortez has seen start from the ground floor. He mentions the heavy metal group as being pretty down to earth. Some groups like the Cure or Tracy Chapman have little interest in participating in the publicity machine, he said.

CORTEZ IS also a first-hand witness to the less-than-savory aspects that comes with rock'n'roll — the groups and other hangers on. Cortez recalls one time being with Metallica. The entourage was harassed by fans near the hotel, in front of the radio station and when they returned.

Once back to the hotel, the floor the band stayed on was vandalized.

Then there are the girls who wait around for bands after the show.

"It exists," Cortez said. "I think it's kind of sad, really... they end up going from the bus driver to the security guy, being blind because these guys are telling them they are going to meet the band. Most of the time you see girls crying because they get abused and they don't even meet the band. It's tragic."

IN CONCERT

• M-16 M-16 will perform with guests, In-Vain, on Monday, Feb. 12, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• J.D. Lamb J.D. Lamb will perform on Monday, Feb. 12, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

• Crossed Wire Crossed Wire will perform with guests, Colors, on Tuesday, Feb. 13, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• Dang Trippers Dang Trippers will perform on Tuesday, Feb. 13, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

• Largebeat Existence Largebeat Existence and Double Blind will perform on Wednesday, Feb. 14, at Club Heidelberg, 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. For information, call 663-7758.

• Difference The Difference will perform on Wednesday, Feb. 14, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

• Big Box 9a Big Box 9a will perform on Wednesday, Feb. 14, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• Valentines Benefit Sun Messengers, Ash Can Van Gogh, Crossed Wire, Phineas Gage and Soul Station will perform 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. Wednesday, Feb. 14, at the Majestic Theatre, 4124 Woodward, next to the Gnome Restaurant, Detroit. Advance tickets are \$5 and are available at Ticketmaster.

• First Light First Light will perform on Thursday and Friday, Feb. 15-16, at Rick's Cafe, 611 Church, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-2747.

• Phineas Gage Phineas Gage will perform with guests, The Fade, on Friday, Feb. 16, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off I-75.

• Allison & the Odd Sox Frank Allison & the Odd Sox will perform on Friday, Feb. 16, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

Tickets will be \$10 at the door. Proceeds benefit the American Heart Association of Michigan. For information, call 833-9760.

• Jeanne and the Dreams Jeanne and the Dreams will perform with guests, Howling Diablos, Wednesday through Saturday, Feb. 14-17, at Key West, 2420 W. Six Mile, Detroit. For information, call 592-0690.

• Ash Can Van Gogh Ash Can Van Gogh will perform on Thursday, Feb. 15, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

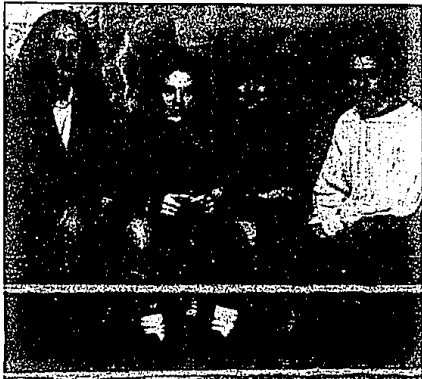
• Knaves The Knaves will perform on Thursday, Feb. 15, at 3-D in Royal Oak. For information, call 589-3344. The album performs Friday, Feb. 16, at Lili's in Hamtramck and Sunday, Feb. 18, at the Jukebox in Royal Oak.

• Anne De Davis Anne De Davis will perform with guests, Jugglers and Thieves, on Thursday, Feb. 15, at Club Heidelberg, 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. For information, call 663-7758.

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Crossed Wire will perform with Colors Feb. 13 at the Blind Pig in Ann Arbor.

Bands give a toot for Picnic Horn

By Jill Hamilton special writer

Picnic Horn Records held its first ever showcase of new artists recently at the Blind Pig in Ann Arbor.

The showcase was to let people know about the label and to introduce the bands. All three bands have albums either pending or already released — The Holy Cows with "To Be or Not to Be" which is a real talkin' about," Anne Be Davis with "Scout's Deposit" and the Opossums with "Marsupial Eruptus."

"We hope someone who can help us will see the show," said Rodney Robeson, head of Picnic Horn Records in an interview before the showcase. "We want people to know we're serious."

And serious they were. Audience members were handed official-looking programs then treated to one heck of a show.

THE PIG was crammed to capacity while a hearty line of people braved the outdoors waiting to be let

inside. More than one group of fans tried, to no avail, to avoid the line by sneaking in through the basement door of the Elight Ball Saloon.

Those who obediently waited to get in soon found that, as usual, all of the talk people somehow managed to get places in front surrounding the stage.

Anne Be Davis kicked off the showcase with an energetic set, live-up-to-the-claim-of-being-one-of-the-best live acts in town." Between post-modern pop tunes, the lead singer offered the audience some environmentally minded advice like, "Don't wear mascara," and "Don't eat tuna."

The highlight of the set was a showcase song called "I Realize" which the lead singer described as, "kind of like, uh, a love song." Several other songs were featured from "Scout's Deposit," including "Hon Is Gone." The audience seemed receptive to the new material and stayed on their feet throughout the set.

The Opossums closed out the night

with a set of simple, catchy tunes that they described as "jangly guitar-based rock'n'roll." Opossums tunes revolve around the classic themes of parties, girls and jobs.

These guys can also get down and dirty and play a full-fledged, wailing country tune. After one such twanger, a few audience members felt compelled to gleefully bray, "Yee-haa!"

THE OPOSSUMS devoted a generous chunk of their set to songs from their recently released debut album, "Marsupial Eruptus." One song, "My Thing," seemed to go over especially well with the audience.

The idea of Picnic Horn Records started about six years ago when Robeson and Scott Salyer, two school chums from Chelsea, sat down and started talking about how great it would be to start their own record label.

Once just a pipe dream, Picnic Horn Records became a reality about six months ago when Salyer, a guitarist for The Holy Cows, asked Robeson to take over the business of

running the band. Robeson agreed and Picnic Horn was born.

Two other bands were soon added to the label's roster — The Opossums and Anne Be Davis.

"Scott knew the Opossums from Chelsea and we liked what Anne Be Davis were doing," Robeson said.

He laments that "when you tell someone about a local band, the attention level goes way down." Because of the lack of local support, the Holy Cows will only make limited area appearances in the future. They plan to spend more time touring other cities in the Midwest and have gigs lined up in college towns from New York to Tennessee.

But, Robeson hasn't given up on the local scene — quite the opposite. He thinks that Detroit is the ideal place for Picnic Horn's bands. He points to other alternative bands like Husks, Du and the Replacements that eschewed the West Coast scene, instead, parlaying their regional appeal into national success.

"WE'RE JUST trying to create a scene around here," he said.

REVIEWS

BLIM

The musicians in the Gear were born at the wrong time. Had they grown up with the generation of baby boomers, they would probably have been a big success during the '60s and '70s and now be involved with some sort of "20th anniversary reunion tour" or similar nonsense.

As it is, they will have to struggle with baby boomer controlled radio, newspapers and music mags. Whereas musicians of the baby boomer generation were revered as the important speakers for an era, young, energetic bands of today are dismissed by thirtysomething-year-olds as trivial and repetitive.

With the exception of the Sex Pistols and the punk movement in the 1970s, innovative, modern music is swept under the carpet and lumped into one giant category called by vague names like "new wave," "alternative" and "post-modern."

This is bad news for a band like the Gear. Since their music doesn't fit the dried-out, past-it-prime, classic rock format, you probably won't hear the new album, "Blim," on the radio. This is a shame because it's a fine album.



ty between these bands is Bob Zabor's rough, somewhat atonal not-quite-ready-for-the-opera style of singing. One of the best songs on this album is "Planet of Love." This little ditty sounds like an early Velvet Underground ballad. Bob Zabor's deadpan vocals of lines like "you smile like the moon do/I'm underneath your cosmic woodoo/you glide with the grace of venus/through the velvet ether that's between us" could be vintage Lou Reed.

The subject that seems closest to the Gear's heart appears to be drunkenness. No less than two songs, "Wasted" and "Smoking and Drinking," are devoted to the glories and regrets of a drunken lifestyle.

What we're getting at here is that the lyrics probably won't be printed in any poetry anthologies, but that's really not what's important. The words are only part of the message of "Blim." The rest is filled in by the jangling guitars, anger and honets. They're talkin' 'bout' their generation.

— Jill Hamilton

AGE OF REASON — John Farnham

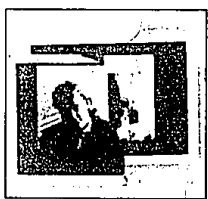
The sticker on the outside of "Age of Reason" by John Farnham boasts enticingly "Australia's No. 1 Best-Selling Artist." This is fairly encouraging.

But after all, Australia spawned such schlock rockers as Helen Reddy and Olivia Newton-John. Unfortunately, Farnham sounds like he would fit into the latter category.

As far as the "best-selling" claim goes, take a look at this week's Rolling Stone Top-50 Album chart. Let's see... at No. 7 Milli Vanilli, at No. 9 New Kids on the Block... to see what we're getting at here?

The best word to describe this album is "yucky." Farnham sounds like the unfortunate offspring of a bizarre mating ritual between Richard Marx, Starship and Mike and the Mechanics. His rock anthem songs are too wimpy and his power ballads are also too wimpy. Both types of songs are set in the same monotonous, not-really-fast-and-not-really-slow beat. The only advantage to this is that when the time comes, it will be easy to convert it into Muzak.

The songs sound like they're just



wallet to be picked for the next big advertising theme. You can almost see what the videos will look like — yuppies enjoying night life in the Big City — especially during the Miami Vice-style elched sax solo by Bill Harrower in "Blow by Blow."

Farnham can't be blamed for all of the faults on this album. In fact, he seems to have done little on the album besides singing and helping with the arrangements. None of the songs are written or even co-written by Farnham. Instead, groups of several different people share song writing credits. Perhaps the proverb "too many cooks spoil the broth" is too many cooks spoil the broth?

While we're on the subject, let's talk about those lyrics. In "Two Strong Hearts," Farnham sings, "We stick together like the honey and the bee/you and me." In "The Fire," he sings "You, you light the fire/but just keeps burning in my heart." Oh, it's just so... deep.

— Jill Hamilton

HERE COMES THE GROOM — John Wesley Harding

Throughout "Here Comes the Groom," John Wesley Harding sounds like a clear-voiced, but fuzzy-minded Elvis Costello. This is clearly no accident. Harding's band, the Gloom Liars features Pete Thomason drums and Bruce Thomas on bass, and the Thomases backed Costello for many years as the backbone of the Attractions.

Harding's songwriting lacks the acid sharpness that has characterized some of Costello's best work. But Harding compensates for this to some extent, by penning soulful, romantic pop songs. So when Harding isn't sounding like Elvis Costello, he often sounds like Squeeze.

Andy Paley's album is filled with nods to both Costello and Squeeze. The organs are crisp, clear and sharp with a minimum of effects and distortion. Best of all, the record was recorded live in the studio, giving it a special force and immediacy.



The title track is a fine companion piece to Nick Lowe's "I Knew the Bride (When She Used to Rock and Roll)." It captures a similar wistful yet urgent tone, recasting the wedding ceremony as a form of leaving-taking. "Cathy's New Clown" is a sassy and tribute to the Everly Brothers hit "Cathy's Clown." The chorus features beautiful vocal harmonies intertwined with ringing guitars.

While "Here Comes the Groom" is short on originality, it nonetheless is an extremely satisfying and enjoyable record. They blaze no new trails, but Harding and his band deserve credit for being extremely adept pop musicians. And this is pop in the best sense of the word — joyful music which draws on both heart and mind, and flirts with the notion of becoming "art" before deciding that it doesn't need to.

— John Logie