

## STREET SCENE

## Local bands compete for dream gig



STEPHANIE A. CASOLA

It's a dream most musicians in the metro area share — walking out under the smoky lights, beyond the velvet curtains and onto the stage battered from a long history of rock legends and

**■ What musician doesn't strive for the level of success that could only be contained by the largest entertainment venues in the area?**

Hills. The finalists in this year's competition are Blue Dahlia, Domestic Problems, Scott Fab, Kingsnakes, Knee Deep Shag, Molly, Rooster and Southfield.

Ten judges (including myself) have been chosen based on their knowledge of and interest in the local scene, to narrow down the group to three lucky winners. Finalists will be judged on their overall performance and stage presence. Each band is allowed 10 minutes of stage time to perform about two original songs.

Ken Karasek, drummer of Rooster and a former Rochester resident, said he's "extremely thrilled." "We all are. It's always been a dream of ours to play the Palace, Pine Knob or Meadowbrook."

Together since 1997 and based in Lake Orion, Rooster's twangy Americana rock sound has catapulted the band from the local scene to performing regular gigs across the Midwest and recording in Nashville. The band's debut, *Solid State*, has been followed up by recent recordings with producer Clark Hagen (Chet Atkins, Ray Stevens). "We're gonna do the best we can," said Karasek. "We're completely prepared."

The Kingsnakes entered the contest last year, but didn't make it to the finals. The blues-rock quintet based in Westland will rely on sheer musical ability to be a worthy competitor. Bassist Tom Diaz said he doesn't think of the show as a competition. "It's just gonna be fun to go," he said of Meadowbrook, the biggest venue the 3-year-old band has ever played.

They'll be up against the power-pop of Grosse Pointe-

based quartet called Southfield — a band that got its start after singer-songwriter J.T. Harding won prize money on VH-1's *Rock and Roll Jeopardy* and used it to record a CD. Ferndale's Scott Fab will draw on his soulful sound and past performances with the likes of Sheryl Crow to compete in the competition.

From the Kalamazoo scene, Blue Dahlia and Knee Deep Shag are ready to battle it out. Blue Dahlia gained national radio airplay with three singles from the band's self-titled 1997 debut, and has recently released a 4-song EP, *Enthusiast*. Guitarist Becky Pingston is a Clarkston native and vocalist Leslie Boughton is a Plymouth native.

Knee Deep Shag will prove to be a worthy contender, holding such accolades as the 1999 Detroit Music Award for Best Urban/Punk Artist. On the heels of the band's latest and most profound album to date, *Good Disguise*, Knee Deep Shag can pack a house.

Then, of course, you've got the Grand Rapids set, Domestic Problems and Molly Together. Since 1993, Domestic Problems is a virtual party onstage, six members strong. Capturing the comical mayhem of a DP show, the band released *Live* last October and has shared the stage with heavyweights like the Dave Matthews Band, Morphine and Ben Folds Five.

With half as many members, G.R.'s punk-pop trio, Molly, relies on three-part harmonies and songs chock-full of hooks. Citing influences from the Sex Pistols to Poison, band members have said they try their hardest to make the songs come alive.



Rooster



J.T. Harding of Southfield

Armed with guitars and some good old rock 'n' roll know-how, these finalists will follow in the footsteps of last year's winners, including The Atomic Numbers and Sister Seed.

Bryson noted that the Opening Act Contest is a beneficial opportunity for all musicians involved, win or lose. "Performing in front of thousands of unfamiliar faces can also serve as a huge confidence builder for the artists," she said. "The contest itself is a perfect forum for artists to get direct feedback from music writ-



The Kingsnakes



Knee Deep Shag

ers, promoters and other people in the entertainment industry. And being able to say 'performed at Pine Knob or Meadowbrook' certainly can't hurt!"

Support local music and check out the Opening Act Contest Finals: 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 23, Meadowbrook Music Festival, Rochester Hills. Free admission and parking. (248) 377-0100.

Stephanie Angelyn Casola writes about popular music for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. She can be reached at (734) 953-2130.

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it as simple as possible."

"The vocals are most important," said Dunlop. "You can have another song."

One song on the album, *Slide Show*, went through many incarnations before reaching its final form. "We wanted the sound of a car behind it," recalled Dunlop. "We tried recording it in a car. After 'too much noise and bumping about,' producer Nigel Godrich (Radiohead, Beck, Pavement) opted for a backdrop of recorded street sounds. 'Nigel is very much a perfectionist,' said Dunlop. But it worked."

The band even went so far as to start the engines of several cars in a parking lot. "I think it's incredible," said Dunlop of the album critics call a must-have. "It was the first time we sounded like we sounded in our heads."

Four years after the band began, four friends solidified a space in the current wave of pop music trends. They're not so schizophrenic after all. "We got to know each other after playing so many live shows," he reasoned.

Touring steadily since last spring, the band will head back to London after the next round of shows. But they still insist Glasgow is home. "We moved to London to get a deal in the first place as a band," said Dunlop. "There was more of a chance in London."

Dunlop's musical roots trace back to his early teens. "I used to play piano when I was younger," he said. "I got into guitar. It was easier to carry about with you."

Having parents who listened to Scottish country music and developing an early obsession with metal — of the AC/DC and Kiss variety — Dunlop's early influences were scattered somewhere between the two. He picked up a guitar at age 13 and hasn't turned back.

Dunlop, now 28, says he doesn't notice much difference between touring in the States and touring in Britain. "I think people are people no matter where you go." It's that sweet sincerity that's gained Travis a sterling reputation in pop music.

While *The Man Who* upins its web around new American fans, Travis has already written enough material for a third album and plans to go back into the studio by the end of summer. Travis hopes to team up with Godrich again and record in

sunny Los Angeles. Expect the new material to reflect the sounds of a more optimistic British quartet, without abandoning the drifting melancholy beauty of *The Man Who*.

Perhaps the band's been too long away from the rainy Scotland days they remember. To borrow from another British foursome, where Travis is concerned, "Here Comes The Sun."

See Travis with guest Leona Naess, 6 p.m. Friday, May 19, St. Andrews Hall, Detroit. All ages. \$13. (248) 645-6666.



Travis

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