

ernie serves up hot coffee



(left to right) Steve Mitchell, Bruce "Mr. M'boob" Russell, Mark Kuntsi and mascot Ernie of "Ernie's Coffee Shop."

Afraid of Nothing with Ernie's Shop Coffee Sneaky Dee's
Nov 21, 1989

by Howard Kaman

Sometimes, I suppose, small is beautiful. Or low key, in the case of Ernie's Coffee Shop.

In a double bill at Sneaky Dee's pitted against Mark Harrington's *Afraid of Nothing*, the Shop came out a clear winner. When Harrington told the audience the show was a stage "competition," he did not realize it was his band that would lose.

What Ernie's Coffee Shop demonstrated is that, above all, bar music should be fun. Although their lyrics may touch on serious topics, the band plays the music with such passion as to outweigh the occasionally heavy-handed words.

AON, on the other hand, seemed to have little interest in playing for the audience at all. Instead they performed in front of a video camera, meticulously taping their whole performance. Why? Perhaps the band was making a demo for a local independent. Or, perhaps they just don't feel confident on stage.

Indeed, they did not seem happy to play at all. While the chosen songs were fine lyrically and musically, the group failed to set fires with their ability to perform. Harrington's guitar was mediocre at best, while drummer Dario Battista and keyboardist Anne Marie Marchildon seemed utterly bored.

Adding insult to injury was AON's one cover song, Marchildon's disemboweled reading of

Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane." In an attempt to duplicate the distinctive version made famous by the Cowboy Junkies, the group only deepened their embarrassment.

On the other hand, Ernie's Coffee Shop displayed all the energy and enthusiasm necessary to keep the audience engaged for several hours. With just two guitars, bass and percussion, the Shop's brand of folk-rock made for a highly enjoyable performance.

While the group has no singular leader per se, Stephen Mitchell's homey commentary on songs like "My Li'l Abode" gave the show an intimacy that worked well within Sneaky Dee's claustrophobic confines. The show was made even better by the band's clever little touches, like the Ernie doll sitting on the monitors, which Mitchell kicked around with glee.

As for a cover, the bands version of Aretha Franklin's "Chains," which opened their portion of the show, amply demonstrated their terrific vocal harmonies and power.

As many musicians have said many times, ultimately a band's staying power lies in its ability to perform live. While AON's tape *Chaos Theory* (reviewed in these pages last September) may have been a marvel of experimental rock, the group has so far failed to translate their music well into a performance. Although certain songs, such as the cutting "Free Trade Blues" come off adequately, their show lacks the sparks that set a stage on fire.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ernie's Coffee Shop has sparks aplenty, to keep that fire burning for quite a long time.

ism: not interested in "coming-of-age-on-the-farm stories"

by Jeannine Amber

"Abstract ideas that can fill a page, yeah, print that." Such was the spontaneous *raison d'être* given by editor Darren Alexander for York's newest literary magazine. Like its ad hoc mandate, *ism* is irreverent and slightly tongue-in-cheek but not without potential.

ism, launched last Tuesday, is brought to us courtesy of some creative writing students who contribute to, and edit, the tri-annual publication.

Alexander's impromptu description notwithstanding; the magazine is designed to fill what he and others see as a void in the literary scene at York.

According to Alexander, "There seemed to be a need for an alternative for writers — a venue for prose fiction" and "there certainly has been no room (in the past) for comedy or science fiction."

Along with a desire to showcase prose fiction, Alexander and co-editor James Grainger hope the pages of *ism* will reflect the concerns and interests of people growing up and living in a large metropolis.

What they don't want is "coming of age on the farm stories" nor, according to Alexander, do they want "work that requires an accompanying handbook of footnotes to be deciphered." They are looking for work that is "accessible" but at the same time has "a real edge to it."

The work in *ism* does have an edge that is, perhaps, not razor sharp, but maybe that comes later. Regardless, the material between its covers is definitely

promising. There are several noteworthy pieces and only one I didn't understand. Hurray for accessibility!

In an untitled poem, Petra Strangenberg offers an astute comment on what it's like to belong to a generation living in the shadow of a boom of hippie-cum-yuppies:

he embodied all my ideal
before i was even born
fighting injustice
with more energy
and enthusiasm
than i feel
i'll ever have—
and yet
he still
ended up
changing sides

Many of the works in the magazine do exude the urban mentality Alexander is striving for. Particularly, the haunting piece "A lesson in Objectivity," written by Alexander and "The Last Child," by Gary Nix. Both pieces conjure up disturbing images of a metropolis without falling into a trap of clichés. It is a commendable feat. The authors handle their subject matter well; obviously they are on familiar ground.

Not quite so successful is a piece written by Grainger called "Whoso List to Hunt." The story is of a man's (presumably Grainger) experience at a VD clinic presented through a conversation between the man and his penis. We are all familiar with the vehicle of giving voice to body parts and it can be an effective tool when used in moderation. But in Grainger's case, this conversation is not witty enough, nor is this a strong enough premise to sup-



ism magazine's editor, Darren Alexander (r), and co-editor James Grainger (l).

port the limited attraction of a visit to a VD clinic.

Either we've been through this ourselves and don't want to be reminded, or we haven't and don't want to know. If we, as readers, are going to be dragged in there with Grainger, he had better make us laugh pretty damn hard. Perhaps Grainger could try having his penis at the clinic by itself — a monologue of sorts.

In all the pages of *ism* there is only one love poem, by Erin Jenkins. It begins on a most wonderful and refreshing cynical note,

but unfortunately degenerates into something akin to sentimental mush.

Other than this minor digression, the *ism* editors have managed to stay mercifully clear of overly emotive I-just-got-over-my-teenage-angst-and-now-my-life-is-much-worse self absorptive laments and the like.

Last year, both *Yak* and *Eat Me Literally*, York's two literary alternatives to the sometimes austere *existere*, suffered the plight of many student run publications — the editors graduated

and the magazines folded. York has one of the few creative writing programmes in Canada and, as such, demands the existence of more than one venue for writers. To be published is not just an ego stroke, it is an important means of receiving feedback. This promising debut of *ism* comes as a welcome and necessary addition to York's literary scene.

ism is available at the York bookstore and submissions can be left at 236 Vanier College, in the creative writing office.