

A promising Canadian group

# Chalk Circle

by Scott Neily

A few weeks ago I got the chance to talk to the members of Chalk Circle at Dartmouth's Crazy Horse Cabaret.

Composed of lead singer/guitarist Chris Tate, bassist Brad Hopkins, drummer Derrick Murphy, and keyboardist Tad Winklarz, the band started about five years ago in Ontario when the first three got together in high school. After a couple of years as a trio, they moved to Toronto, met Tad, and have been a quartet ever since. Their name is from a play called *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; the good-vs.-evil nature of the story fitted well with their style of music.

"It just seemed to make sense with what we were doing," said Brad. "A very positive name. We went with it, it's here with us now and we're really happy with it."

Though they presented a good show, the band didn't seem to fit into the Horse's usual scene. I enjoyed their performance, finding them to be a cross between alternative and top 40. Their intelligent and thoughtful music is great to sit back and listen to over a cold beer, but maybe not the best type for a bar like the wild & Crazy Horse.

I spoke to Brad before the show about the group's sound: "If you talk to every individual guy, you'd get a different answer. We

like a lot of different things. We're very open with what we listen to and I think that's what makes the sound so unique. Everybody has such a different influence and it all blends together, somehow."

They ably demonstrated their diverse songwriting talents with great tunes like April Fool, This Mourning, and *Clouds*. The song *Superman*, containing a few lyrics swiped from Whitney Houston's *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*, sounded a hell of a lot better than the original.

"I dunno... I think a good song definitely has to grab your attention, one way or another," explained Brad. "Everybody puts their two cents in and hopefully, something good will come of it. You definitely have to like it yourself before you go out and play it. Ideas for songs can come from anything. From day-to-day things to personal things to relationships to something you've seen on TV. There are no barriers. It's just whatever's out there and just putting your thoughts on paper. We never know what we're going to come up with."

As of yet, the band isn't signed outside of Canada, although their record company, Duke Street, is talking about a distribution deal with a large American independent. Never having played in the states, Chalk Circle is hoping to open the market up with some tentative dates in

the near future. The success of many bands has depended on promotion, and I asked Brad if Duke Street was giving them the necessary exposure: "For Canada, very much so. They have a major distributor, which is MCA, and they take care of every individual territory. You get the personalization of a small record company with Duke Street, and you get the the big distribution from MCA. As far as the rest of the world, we're still trying to get signed elsewhere. We've been talking with a lot of different people, but everything's just talk right now. It took us a couple of years to get signed in Canada, so we're taking small steps and that's one of our big steps coming up, hopefully."

I asked Brad about the future of Chalk Circle as one of Canada's most promising groups. "Who knows? Hopefully, people will be surprised. We never get into a certain thing where we just sort of do it over and over. Every time we write a new song, it's a surprise for us. It could be really heavy or a sort of jazz-influenced song. It's exciting and we never know we're going to come up with. I think that's part of the strength of Chalk Circle — just to be able to try different things, not worry about what people think and please ourselves first. People will just have to take it like that."

As they are very much a team



PHOTO: SCOTT NEILY



PHOTO: NEILY

and like to relax by themselves before a show, I had enough time before leaving to ask them if they had any general mottoes for success. "Yeah . . . . Mongo", laughed Brad (I later learned that Mongo is one of their valuable stage crew members).

"I think that to just be able to do what we're doing and be happy about it. I feel very strongly about that. That's what counts, really, not worrying about how much money you're making or whatever. Just keep doing it, keep working harder at it and try to improve as a band. That's the most important thing. Just to be able to do it is a great feeling. So, just keep it up, basically."

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