

Toronto's Ben Mink

Fiddle crazy

Stuart Ross

Ben Mink is something of a renaissance man in the fiddling business. He's fiddled and played mandolin for Stringband, Murray MacLaughlan and Mendelson Joe. He's one third of Toronto's surprisingly successful FM, he's written a tune for the film *Head On* (John Huston played piano), played in a fiddling competition with a dead fish hanging from his fiddle, and most recently embarked on a solo career, with the elpee, *Foreign Exchange*, on Passport Records.

Mink spent most of his teen years in Downsview's Bathurst Manor, where he met many of the people he's working with now. There he led a relatively conventional life, until the turning point came: "I figured I was just going to get out of grade 13 and go to York, and just be normal, except I really started getting into the fiddle, and getting all these calls to play professionally."

When he joined up with Stringband he was doing mainly ethnic and traditional music, but after a few years and a couple of great albums he left the band on good terms (he still does occasional work with them): "They were great people, and it was very good for me, but it wasn't always what I wanted to do. Like, I'd be off somewhere drinking a six-pack and they'd be eating granola. But I didn't want to end up as a hoe-down stomper, I felt I had more to offer than that."

I commented on the traditional content still present in the eclectic, electric instrumental *Foreign Exchange*, and Mink reacted strongly: "There are no traditional pieces, it's all affected by tradition. But I consider tradition to be the Rolling Stones by now. The only difference between the tradition of some little fiddle tune in the mountains 300 years ago and the Rolling Stones is time. People forget that traditional music at one time was



Ben Mink: does the Devil lead his bow?

completely new—nobody ever saw a banjo before 1800, just like nobody saw an electric guitar before 1930."

Mink has many influences. He listens to a wide range of music, from classical to new wave, "for ideas. Ideas can come from anywhere. They can come from me dropping my coffee cup right now."

And Mink is something of an innovator—not only in his music, but with his instruments as well. He has hollowed out and cut away his electric violin to improve the sound. Inside the instrument is a whole scene made of plastic miniatures: Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, and a bunch of cows. His mandolin (it has MANDOLIN written on it for the benefit of reviewers) is actually a cross between a mandolin and an electric guitar.

Frankie, Annette, and Ben have gone through many gigs together. They've played everything from tiny clubs to large halls and stadiums. But Mink prefers the intimacy of the small clubs, where he can hear what people are yelling at him. "The thrill of playing a big thing is that it's a big thing. You don't get any eye-to-eye contact because the stages are so high that all you see are little bald spots on people's heads."

Mink will be seeing a lot of bald spots in the next few months. He's busy touring to promote the new FM album, *City of Fear*, and pushing *Foreign Exchange* whenever he gets the chance. Soon they'll be erecting statues of him in Wilmington Park.

F F & F: Future phobia

Abbe Edelson

Fin Fur n Feathers, now playing at Solar Stage, is a musical written and directed by former York student Maureen Brown, which raises important questions about the future. Although the opening scene dragged on as the characters were pacing the dark stage, the show soon picked up as it moved swiftly from modern dance to

cabaret-type numbers.

The elements (i.e. water et al) are represented symbolically by three dancers, moving about the stage in one exquisite sequence. Brown's competence and creativity as a choreographer is clearly displayed here. When the dance is completed, the "elements" confront Red, who is in charge of the "Feet First Travel

Agency" (providing the entrance to the future) about their reservations. Red, played competently by John Steer, finds that their reservations have been cancelled by "them", the controlling force in society. Red, as the "Everyman", is pulled between the "elements" request and his subservience to his superiors. He tells us that according to "them" animals will be used for fuel, energy, scientific experiments, and sometimes amusement. But, how will life as we know it continue without the elements? The irony of this problem is successfully expressed through songs such as "Earth Loving Mammals" and "Underwater Creatures" composed by Brown and arranged by Ron Wise.

Fin, Fur n Feathers stirs us to question our road to the future in an amusing and creative fashion. The play is a successful mixture of different dance forms and the imposing sound effects of the voice of "them", which descends upon us from above. Will life as we know it survive without the elements? (Overpowering organ chords sustained.) Catch *Fin Fur n Feathers* at Solar Stage this Saturday and Sunday.



Fab Four ponder their golden years.

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