

# Bliss: the ever-changing band

By HEATHER SANGSTER

Change is the one consistent factor for the local band Bliss. What humbly began as a violinist, guitarist, and drum machine has matured into an energetic, aggressive, four-piece band that has fired its violinist and hired a living, breathing drummer.

James Paul, Bliss' lead singer and York fine arts student, described early Bliss as "a sort of folk band . . . with a drum machine. We were acoustic, but were labelled as folk."

Unhappy with the sound, Paul scouted for other musicians to add to Bliss and for other bands that he could join. He met drummer and fellow York student Scott Collings at a rehearsal, and quickly and quietly "stole him away, to join Bliss, by telling him that we were going to play rockabilly."

Paul then acquired bassist and York grad John Arnott, who brought another "killer guitarist," Gord Atwell, to a Bliss rehearsal. Paul "grabbed him, corrupted him, and he became part of the band."

By this time, the violinist was gone and Bliss was formed.

"However, what was really funny," said Collings, "was that we were still billed as a folk band and we were getting on stage with all our amplifiers and electronic drums and the audience was still looking for a banjo player."

Bliss quickly shed its folk label by transforming the original, quirky music into something much more appealing. Arnott described the music as something that "you couldn't even tap your finger to. We took all the original tunes and injected a groove into them. We played heavier, funkier songs. It was rock and roll with a groove."

"Our sound, now, is somewhere between rock and funk. But, we've got island influences, blues influences, everything. We've started to settle into a style but we're still changing."

"How we sounded in September is not how we sound now."

Although a cohesive band while performing on stage, Bliss is divided about almost everything else. With four, strong-minded members, "There is a lot of discussion," said Paul. "We argue and insult each other regularly." However, their discussions enhance rather than detract from their musical process and product. After much deliberation, the band can usually agree on a final product, but they vetoed Paul's desire to play "jug band music," and occasionally restrain him from writing heavy-handed, political lyrics.

"Our music starts in a few different ways," explained Paul. "In the past, it's generally something that I've written and they've changed. Everyone writes the music and, generally, the lyrics are mine or my friend's, Paul Morris-Knight."

"Yeah," interrupted Arnott. "Gord writes the same song over and over and over again. It's the same song but there's usually a little hook in there that you can find and make into another song instead."

"But," added Collings, "James is good that way because he lets us change it. We really tear



THE MEN, THE MUSIC, THE BAND: (L to R) James Paul, Scott Collings, John Arnott, Gord Atwell.

his stuff apart sometimes. If he does get upset, we give him a beer . . . king cans. It calms him down. Very helpful for writing songs."

With their new material, Bliss has tried writing the music first and the lyrics second. "We are trying to make more of a point musically than politically," said Arnott. "We have some stuff that's politically influenced, but nothing too heavy. We're just making good music."

The band feels that their latest songs have the most potential for commercial success. Paul calls them "anti-love songs" with nonsensical lyrics, but "they are our best so far." "Burn," what Bliss considers a total departure from everything they've previously done is about an intense love between two people that combines sex and witchcraft. "Soul Factor," a crazy, drunken, train song about a girl that was inspired by Orwell's *1984*, "has a great sex groove in it." "When I Can Be With You," written by Morris-Knight, is a gentle love song with a dark undercurrent.

Bliss plays at least 80 per cent original material and the other 20 per cent — although cover versions — are so bastardized that they sound like original material.

"There is a problem with that," explained Collings. "If you want to play your own stuff, you've got to put up with a lot of bullshit and you have to do so much work for so little."

In the past, Bliss has experienced both the good and bad about being an independent band in Toronto. Their main goal is to increase

their audience, which has been difficult, considering bookings with both hard-core and AM cover bands on the same night ("Makes for some strange audiences"), or they've been booked to play weeknights at 11 p.m. ("no one's awake"). Regardless, Bliss is not defeated.

Collings recognized that "in this industry, you have to have already made a product before being discovered. So, Bliss has gone ahead and established a product ourselves and now, we're gathering an audience."

Bliss has released a seven-song, independent cassette entitled *Miracles*, available at Vortex Records and the Calumet gig (T-shirts available, too). As well, Bliss and Canned Films made a video of the song "This Is The Time For Miracles" that was shown on MuchMusic.

"When we first heard what they wanted to do for the video, we said 'what?'" exclaimed Paul. It involves the band, blindfolded and wrapped in blankets, being driven through the woods by gun-toting militia. The band members are then tied to trees and shot. "That video is so bizarre that whoever sees it," said Collings, "will definitely remember it. It was worth it."

"Yeah, right," added Arnott. "It was cold, wet, we were practically naked, it was a long day and they made me fall down a lot. I had dirty knees for a week. The hills, which were much steeper than they looked, were covered in broken glass."

"It was cool to see it on television but it was scary too," admitted Collings, "because they were either going to love us or hate us."

Bliss has plans to make another, more commercial video of their song "Burn."

"It'll be indoors and warm this time," suggested Paul. As well, the band is looking into producing an EP.

According to Collings, "*Miracles* allowed us to get our feet wet and say 'We have a product, we want to sell it, we want a credibility factor.'"

The Calumet gig is an important event for Bliss. They hope it will give them an indication of their accessibility to the university market.

"Again," explained Collings, "we want to get to our audience and tell them we're Bliss, our music is good, so come and see us and have a great time. We're coming and playing in your backyard, and hopefully, you'll like us and follow us off campus to our shows."

Audience response has improved for Bliss, as has their credibility. Their hard work is paying off. Bliss's goal is realistic: "We want to be a killer Toronto band. What happens, happens."

As Collings said, "I'll know we're successful when I can one day play and just walk offstage and have someone clean up my mess . . . then I'd be happy."

Bliss will be playing Calumet College (beside the Ainger) on February 9 at 8 p.m. The event is licensed and free. York ID and age of majority are required.

## Garbage: Holes in the Landscape true to form

By LAUREN GILLEN

*Holes in the Landscape*  
Orchestrated by Paul Andre Fortier  
Burton Auditorium

Rubbish, refuse, or waste — whatever you choose to call it, it's really just plain, old garbage! Whatever took place last Thursday in Burton Auditorium — theatre, dance, or artistic expression — was just plain, old garbage too.

For the past few weeks over 50 students throughout the five of York's Fine Arts Faculties were busy collecting, creating, dancing, vocalizing, pasting and painting for a show in honour of garbage. Their efforts culminated last Thursday in a 40-minute creation orchestrated by visiting Montreal dancer/choreographer Paul-André Fortier, entitled *Holes in the Landscape*. The performance was part of Environmental Action Day.

Now in its sixth year, Environmental Action Day is an event coordinated by the Environmental Studies Department which strives to make the York community more aware of our earth and atmosphere. Environmental interest groups are invited to display information in Central Square. Each year a controversial environmental topic is chosen for an in-depth panel discussion.

This year's topic was garbage. Unlike previous years, however, the Environmental Studies Department felt that garbage should be a full-day theme. Coordinator of External Liaison in the Environmental Studies Department Annemarie Gallagher said, "There should be more action in Environmental Action Day." In an attempt to add such dimension to the day, they turned to York's Fine Arts Department. The objective? To create an artistic yet

informative performance piece about garbage.

For any true artsy, it was an opportunity simply too good to resist: the chance to wallow in artistic self-indulgence while doing something good for the community. Needless to say, York's Faculty of Fine Arts took the plunge.

After two weeks of steady rehearsal, the day of reckoning finally arrived. Eager spectators flooded into Burton Auditorium's lobby only to be led down a rear flight of stairs and onto the stage. The huge seating area of Burton had been transformed into a brightly coloured playing space for the performance.

While the reversal of the stage and seating areas was an interesting concept (expressing the idea that garbage is all around us) no one was prepared for the large

number of people who attended. In order to accommodate everyone, it was standing room only.

What followed was not a show, but rather a series of vignettes, each one making a statement about society's apathy towards the problem of waste and disposal. Each episode was separated by a commercial (courtesy of the film department) telling us to be the biggest, best, and most beautiful people we can be.

The vignettes were the backbone of the performance.

Throughout the show there was a great deal of flying garbage, yelling, screaming, tin can scrunching, and hugging. Somewhere in all of this, the audience was supposed to get an idea of how we are treating not only our planet, but each other. However, even in a bad performance credit must be given where credit is due . . . they hugged really well!

The performance closed to thunderous applause. I couldn't help but feel that I'd just witnessed a public showing of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. The show was intellectually and artistically naked but no one dared publicly admit that they didn't see the art in it!

At this point the question must be asked: "Why was this done in the first place?" Somewhere in all of this artistic expression the problem of waste and how to dispose of it was lost.

Instead of a song and dance show, we should be taking some real action — York University has several recycling programmes in place. If you want more information on how you can get involved, contact the Environmental Studies Department at 736-5252 or call the office of the Coordinator of External Liaison at ext. 2641.