

Lightning hopes to strike soon

by Gisèle Marie Baxter

Acolyte Productions Ltd. is located in a white warehouse-type building on Isleville Street in Halifax; it is a sophisticated, well-equipped recording studio operated by two enterprising young men. Bill Blakeney and Andrew Shipley do production work on commercials, but are also currently involved in recording a demo tape with a local band, Lightning. Recently, I had a chance to talk with the band's bassist, Don White, as well as Bill and Andrew, and to listen to some of the music at the studio.

Lightning consists of Don White, his wife Anne (keyboards, principal songwriter), Kurt Vaughn (keyboards, songwriter), Carolyn Sandford (vocals), and Kirk Ross (drums). The idea of the band originated with the Whites and Carolyn Sandford about a year ago; the present line-up (except for Kurt Vaughn) has been together around six months. The band tried to include a guitarist, but discovered guitars did not fit into the electronic sound they had developed.

Don sees technopop as a definite future direction of rock music, as "everything else has been tried", but Lightning is, for a number of reasons, an electronic band with a difference. For one, the technopop which is now very popular in England and Continental Europe and which has had some impact here has not greatly influenced Lightning; they listen to few electronic musicians beyond Gary Numan. The band's sound may have similarities to that of Kraftwerk or Ultravox, but it is not derivative; songwriter Anne White was, according to her husband, "raised on heavy metal" and although Lightning is not a heavy metal band, her bass lines are influenced by that brand of rock.

Also, the band's studio technique is different from that of many other electronic acts, as Bill Blakeney explained.

"They go for a live sound in their recording... their background is in performance and so in the studio they tend to take it that way as well, rather than using the studio to construct their songs," he said.

Besides, while a number of electronic musicians seem to be frustrated guitarists who recently discovered synthesizers because of their numerous possibilities, Kurt Vaughn and Anne White are proficient, experienced keyboardists, both well-known in local musical circles. Don sees this as a definite advantage: "The more experienced a person is on his instrument, the better he can make it sound."

Although the relatively inexperienced, studio-oriented technorockers have produced some striking and effective music, Lightning's approach has impressive results. The band bypasses the stark thematic imagery of much electronic music for songs of love and modern life, delivered with

power and directness. The songs I heard combined solid, danceable rock with effective synthesizer work — though there was a delightful change of pace provided by one lovely ballad — and were a good setting for Carolyn Sandford's strong, declarative vocals. Her voice reminded me (as it has other listeners) both of Grace Slick and Lene Lovich, though the similarity is not intended. As musicians, these people play very well together, considering the few months the band has been in existence and the fact that Kurt Vaughn only joined a month ago. This is often exciting music, and although the tape still needs some production work, I find a good sense of pop music structuring in this band.

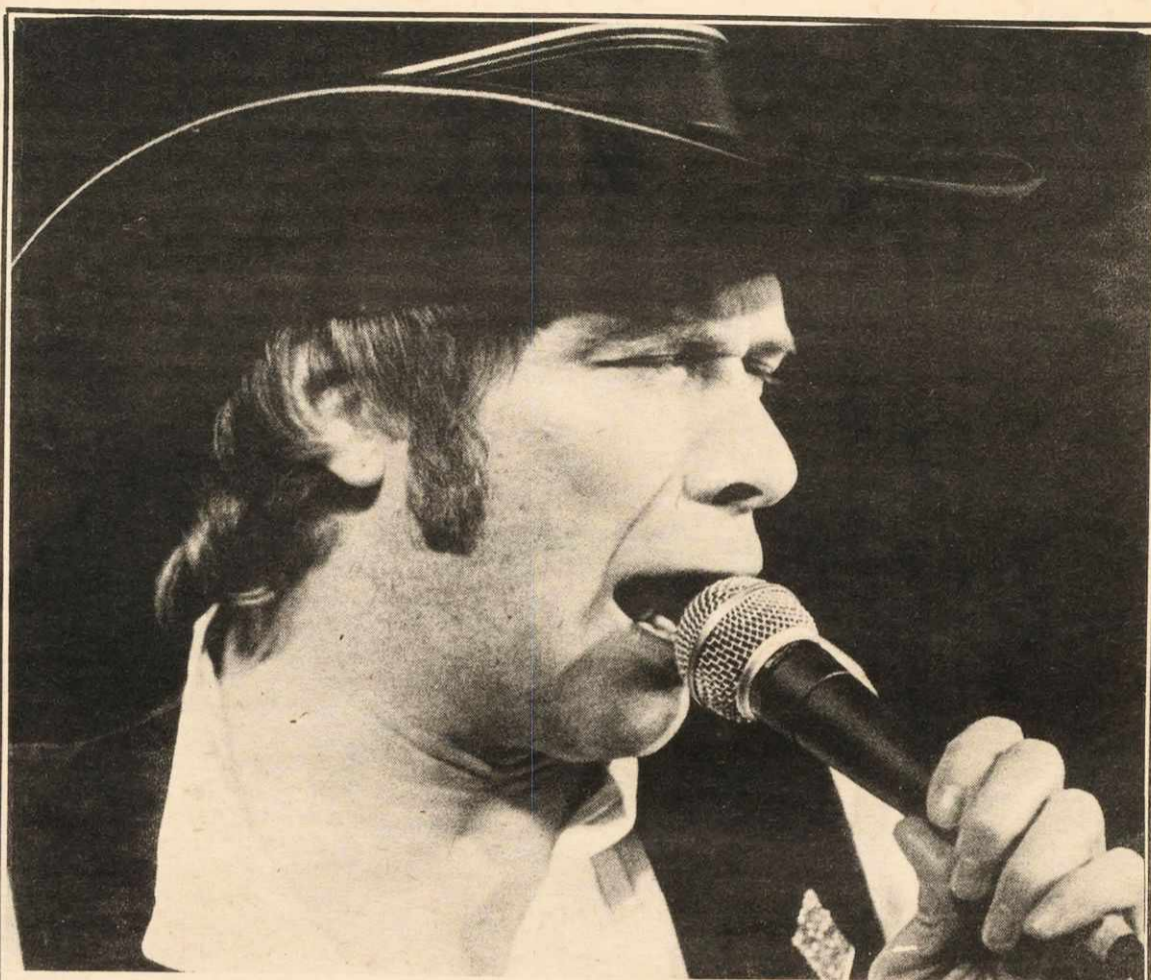
Lightning is a band with plans and ambitions. After the demo tape is finished, it will be sent to record companies; both RCA and MCA have expressed interest in hearing it. "We're sort of hoping for an international-type deal," Don told me.

Also, the band is thinking of recording an extended-play disc containing four or five original songs, which would be released locally.

Lightning is concerned with its visual presentation as a live band, and Don would like to see the eventual use of lightning and special effects to augment the songs. "Carolyn's trying to work in some theatrical-type movements," he said. "We don't want to come across as a raunchy bar band... we like to look nice onstage."

Onstage, Anne White plays rhythm synthesizer while Kurt provides lead work and effects on a Yamaha 40M; Carolyn will also be doing some keyboard work soon. The band's set consists of original material, except for two Gary Numan songs, "Cars" and "Ariane".

In line with its new-music sound, Lightning will also be using one of the prominent new promotion devices: video. (Andrew Shipley expressed



Long John Baldry's performance at Winter Carnival last Thursday night was not all fine music and good cheer. Following a liberal dowsing with beer and lewd insults, Baldry was provoked into a fight with a rather ill-mannered person in the crowd.

"I was having such a great time this evening, it really is such a shame that some asshole has to go and ruin it all. If he wanted to act like a baby he should have done it at home", commented Baldry on the beer thrower.

"I've had some wierd things said to me but this guy was positively crude. It makes me angry when people feel that they have to do something like that," said singer Kathi Macdonald who suffered similar harrassment.

great enthusiasm about this medium's future in relation to recording.) Besides a live tape to be made at the Fleet Club, the band will film some interpretations of individual songs. "We had a couple of ideas for 'Never Let Me Go', with Carolyn hanging out a window," Don mentioned, quite tongue-in-cheek.

Don White feels that the band will definitely have to leave the province to fully succeed with its electronic sound. I suggested that music here

seemed rooted in the blues- or country-rock tradition; he agreed, saying that the band was "taking chances with a new type of sound". However, he also agreed that should the band achieve commercial success somewhere like Toronto or England, people "would definitely pick up on it — it would be the same thing as happened to Martha and the Muffins." (The Muffins, you may recall, returned to Toronto from England to great praise after ranking high in the Eng-

lish charts.)

Wherever they achieve success, this band has a head start on getting there, with its talent and professionalism. From what I've heard, Lightning strikes me as an act well worth checking out, and they have some local concerts planned for the near future. They will do a benefit for the Red Cross (place and date to be confirmed), will be in Greenwood on February 13 and 14, and will play the Grafton St. Café on March 7.

Sgt Baxter introduces new flying act

Gisèle Marie Baxter

Consider this one of the G.M. Baxter Introductions to Obscure and Semi-Obscure British Acts. Actually, I picked this one up for two reasons. The cover art, an arrangement of reflecting metal rods and spheres over a mainly blue collage background, is quite striking. Besides, the album was produced by David Kershbaum, who did a great job on Joe Jackson's second (perhaps best) record, "I'm the Man".

R.A.F. is a four-man band fronted by David Valentine, who handles vocals and keyboards and writes all the songs, which are arranged by the band. The result of this collaboration is a crisp, well-produced, frequently danceable pop-music product.

The songs are generally of the frustrated-romance genre; although the lyrics are not outstanding, they are (with few exceptions) appropriate. As instrumentalists, the members of R.A.F. play together with spirit and enthusiasm; good use is made of a guest saxophonist, Bobbie Heatlie, who reminds me of Martha and the Muffins' Andy Haas. Valentine has a real talent for effective piano introductions.

There are songs on this record which work especially well. "Warm Welcome on a Cold Night" picks up the tempo from its slow introduction with a sharp saxophone/drum line, and maintains a good balance between the saxophone and guitar riffs. "Blue" has a genuine kick to it, sizzling little synthesizer effects, and powerhouse drum-

ming which echoes the Boomtown Rats. "She Used to be Mine" has a wonderful early 1960s feel about it. Over a consistently tight piano line, the band has arranged harmonies which effectively recall that musical era; Valentine's vocals are fine and assertive.

The best track on "R.A.F." is the last one, "Waiting for the Weekend". This theme should be a cliché by now, and was handled much better by The Jam ("Saturday's Kids"), from "Setting Sons", but this song somehow works very well. It starts off pensively with an incisive Monday morning image — "I've been tracing my thoughts in my cornflakes/Waiting for the phone to ring" — then rocks brightly and powerfully with a great sense of sharp-edged adolescent passion. There are

lovely crashing-wave synthesizer effects at the fade-out, under an evocative piano/bass/percussion line.

The final two songs on the first side could easily have been discarded; "Don't Take Sweets from Strangers" recalls the Boomtown Rats so strongly that I have no idea whatever it's supposed to be parodistic or genuinely threatening or both. "Take Me to Your Leader" is a somewhat ridiculous UFO song about female aliens, which at any rate lets Valentine fiddle with the dials on his Minimoog.

However, the other eight songs, while they do not demand too much from the listener, provide thoroughly enjoyable, often fast-paced, well-produced pop. "R.A.F." holds out promise for future efforts by this band.