

Spirit Haunts McInnes Room

BY GREG MCFARLANE

Ontario's Starkicker.

Under the foreboding signs of the Belvedere cigarette company, Spirit of the West played their celtic-influenced rock to a jam-packed Halloween audience at the McInnes Room last week. The Vancouver-based quintet was preceded by Halifax's Booming Airplanes and St. Catherine's,

Dressed in Costumes ranging from a disco king to a "Canadian Batman," the band immediately broke into "Venice is Sinking" as soon as they took the stage. The band performed many other fan favourites, such as "Sadness Grows" and "The Crawl" to a raucous and more than appreciative crowd.

Spirit of the West, who seem to have plenty of staying power among university audiences, enjoys playing at venues on campus.

"We are played on college radio a lot more than we are on regular radio, so it makes more sense to come to the universities," said Linda McRae, who held everything from a bass guitar to an accordion in her hand during the

concert. "The crowds are fun to play for, the rooms are good, and everybody has a good time."

McRae, who bore resemblance to Raggedy Anne on Thursday night, also noted that the band enjoys touring through Nova Scotia.

"It is unfortunate that we don't come as often as we would like to, but we have a really good time here. The Maritimers are a lot more aware of [celtic music] than a lot of the people in Canada."

When asked about the barrage of Belvedere advertisements covering every square inch of the McInnes Room — not to mention the second floor foyer of the Student Union Building — McRae seemed ambivalent.

"It is quite expensive [touring through the Maritimes], and they helped us to get out here," said

McRae. "We would not have been able to if it had not been for them. It is one of those things that is a necessity sometimes."

On the whole, Spirit of the West put on an entertaining show. The encore consisted of "A Ship Named Frank" and "The Crawl," which seemed to convey the two sides of the group: heavily issue-oriented, yet also wild, beer-chugging party animals. The power went out during the encore, but four lights were still lit. Those lights, however, were covered by Belvedere signs.

The band, touring to support its latest CD — *Open Heart Symphony* — will start recording material for their next album in March or April. Linda McRae, who is leaving the band at the end of this year, will soon release a solo record, entitled *Flying Jenny*.



SOTW's Geoffrey Kelly

DANIELLE BOUDREAU



SOTW's Linda McRae

DANIELLE BOUDREAU

Frank who? Here's Johnny

BY NIK MADAN

The smoke wisps slowly towards me, as if dancing in time with the strains of the Sinatra tune that's playing in the background. The aquamarine eyes, cold, unblinking, murderous, seem to penetrate to the very depths of my soul.

"That's Favourite with a U," he snarls while lighting up another Camel.

"Got it," I say. Or maybe I haven't got it. It's hard to know what to think when you're talking to Johnny Favourite. I'm supposed to be interviewing Halifax's latest music scene sensation, but I haven't got a word in yet. He likes to tell a story. We're fifteen minutes into the "interview".

"So my step-dad was working for a guy called Vic Katroni when he got sent down. Just like that. I was about six or seven — just a kid. I mean, it's not like he killed someone. So things got tough. My step-mother had to bring us up. Me and my half-sister Jessica, that is..."

"Don't tell me. You were so poor, she had to work three jobs," I joke.

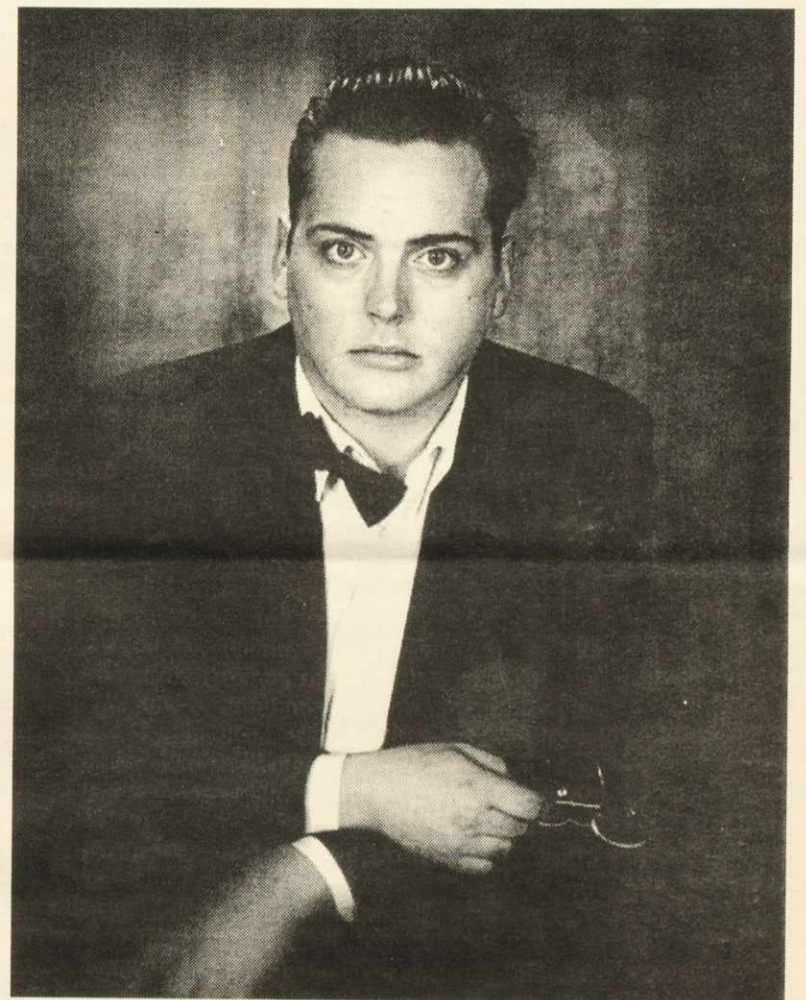
"Four," he says quietly. He's not laughing.

"So where did the jazz come in?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"Where did it come in? Listen kid, jazz is it. It doesn't come and go, it's just there. When you have classy guys like Richard Rodgers, Cole Porter, Gershwin writing songs, it's something beautiful. It's...it's life. You know? That doesn't come — it's inside here," he says while beating his chest with a fist. He lights another Camel. For the first time, he looks away from me. The killer's eyes suddenly take on a liquid haze.

"When I was a kid messing around the streets of Hoboken, New Jersey, jazz was all around me. Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, those were the kings."

The dry spell for lounge music in the States took him across the pond to Europe — England, Norway, Portugal. Doing odd jobs ("This and that," he says) to earn a drink, Johnny ended up in Greece. He hooked up with some musicians, put together a big band and toured. This was his real schooling. After the break-up of the band, he landed in Kingston, Ontario. He



played Ontario and Quebec for a while, collaborating with the lounge singer Johnny Vegas. When that was done, he came east and set about putting together another band — this time on his terms.

I hesitate before asking my next question. He stares, silently puffing away. It's unnerving. I prefer it when he's talking.

"What relevance does jazz have today?" he answers. "These songs are the most beautiful ever written. They will never grow old. We — me and the band — arrange all the songs. That's just as hard as writing new songs. I do that, too. I'm just sick of the scene here in Halifax. You can only go so far with a guitar, bass and drum combo. I want to start a new scene in town. I hope other musicians will get into it. I want to see people getting dressed up, having a swell time — just enjoying themselves, you know?"

I know. Johnny's stage act is infectious. The night before, I took in his regular show at the Tickle Trunk — "show" being the operative word. Dressed in his usual suit, bow tie, silk scarf, slicked-back hair, and two toned shoes (think 1940's mobster with a

drink in one hand and a cigar in the other), Johnny Favourite and the Swing Kings rocked the joint. His set is punctuated with humour (the Irish in him, he says), venturing into the crowd to dances with the ladies (he is known as "the last of the international playboys"), and offering cigarettes to his audience. And the singing? The voice can be rough or silky smooth. You can be swinging on the dance floor one moment and crying into your drink lamenting the loss of an old girlfriend the next. On stage, Johnny is truly in his element. Pure class.

I ask if he takes his act from Sinatra. I regret it right away. The eyes narrow and he flips up his fedora with a finger. I can see a nerve twitching in his temple.

"Just because I like a drink and have fun with the ladies doesn't mean I'm copying Sinatra. I do my thing; he does his. I have a good time. I dress up, I dance, I drink, I smoke, I sing some tunes, and I joke. That's all. I've got to go see my barber now."

With that, he gets up, turns up the collar of his overcoat, throws his newly lit Camel into my Diet Pepsi, and leaves.