

# Bar band invades the Metro Centre stage

BY MARK REYNOLDS

If you've ever walked into the Tickle Trunk on a Friday night you've probably seen them. Big Fish, one of the undiscovered gems of the Halifax music scene, a proto-typical bar band, is one of the city's hardest working acts.

Toiling far from the media glare that Halifax's alternative and celtic groups bask in, Big Fish have managed to carve out a satisfactory niche for themselves. Either through the two or three shows they play each week, or through word of mouth, they are gaining fans, as their regularly packed shows at the Tickle Trunk prove.

Fitting perhaps then that I walked into their rehearsal while they were working out "Never Going To Break My Stride". The band was putting the finishing touches on their last show at the Trunk before their biggest gig to date: opening the Metro Centre's twentieth anniversary party.

Their rehearsals are as relaxed as their stage show suggests. Sarah Stevenson and Jake Crawford are working on harmonies, while Dale Letcher and Andy Gallant are working on chord changes, a mere three hours before the first set is scheduled. The rehearsal is often interrupted by jokes and laughter. Clearly, they've done this umpteen times, it's still fun for them. Watching them, it would be easy to believe you're watching a small kitchen party in progress.

Part of the band's appeal lies in this relaxed approach, and part of it lies in the diversity of their performance. Letcher plays guitar and harmonica. Gallant plays bass, drums and trumpet. Stevenson plays percussion and tin whistle. Crawford plays the bodran, percussion, and tin whistle. They all sing, either solo or in very tight, four-part harmony. They also all play the kazoo.

They've managed to learn these diverse parts for the over one hundred songs that make up their repertoire. The variety of musical skills in the group, combined with the sheer number of songs available to them, means that their weekly shows stay fresh — for them and for the audience.

Letcher formed the band about a year ago. He had been performing with Crawford at open mike nights, and they would sometimes be joined by Stevenson. After taking a hiatus for a summer they re-formed, and were soon joined by Gallant.

"We put an ad in the Saint Mary's paper looking for a bassist. We didn't know we'd get drums and trumpet too," said Letcher.

Big Fish work out their songs collectively. With four vocalists to choose from, they experiment with who is best equipped to handle vocal duties for any given song.

"It's trial and error...if it still sounds bad, then we'll just chuck it," said Gallant.

Though most of the band's songs consist of lighter party tunes, there is no particular genre of music they focus on.

"We have diverse

interests...we like to recreate songs," said Letcher. "We take songs from the seventies and eighties and 'celti-fy' them."

"We try to please the crowd, that's what's important," added Stevenson.

So far the band has been pleasing crowds all over the Maritimes. In addition to the regular Friday night gig, they've toured all over Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

"It's better money than a part time job, and it's a lot more fun too," said Gallant to general agreement.

The band will have a tape out by the summer, and hopes to start playing some larger festivals.

When the band took the Tickle Trunk stage later that night, there were about one hundred people in the bar. The band seemed familiar to many in the crowd, and many called out for their favourite songs.

The performance started with "What I Like". The audience applauds, but is hardly bowled over. By the second song, I notice the table next to me playing the game of *Life* while singing along to "Margaritaville". By the third song two women were on the floor dancing with wild abandon, expressing the Irish in them to Spirit of the West's "Old Sod".

Over the course of the forty five minute set, the crowd builds to the point that the dance floor has expanded into the table area.

At some point during the show they decide to utterly ignore the set list they've prepared, and Gallant pulls out his trumpet for their signature song, Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline".

The band finishes their first of three fifteen-song sets. I decide to go home and catch them tomorrow at the Metro Centre.

How does a bar band get a gig at the Metro Centre anyway?

"They approached us," said Letcher. "We sang 'Oh Canada' for a hockey game and played intermissions there."

Big Fish weren't concerned about their show making the leap to the much larger venue.

"Some stuff will translate better than others," said Gallant, saying that they just won't play songs that don't work.

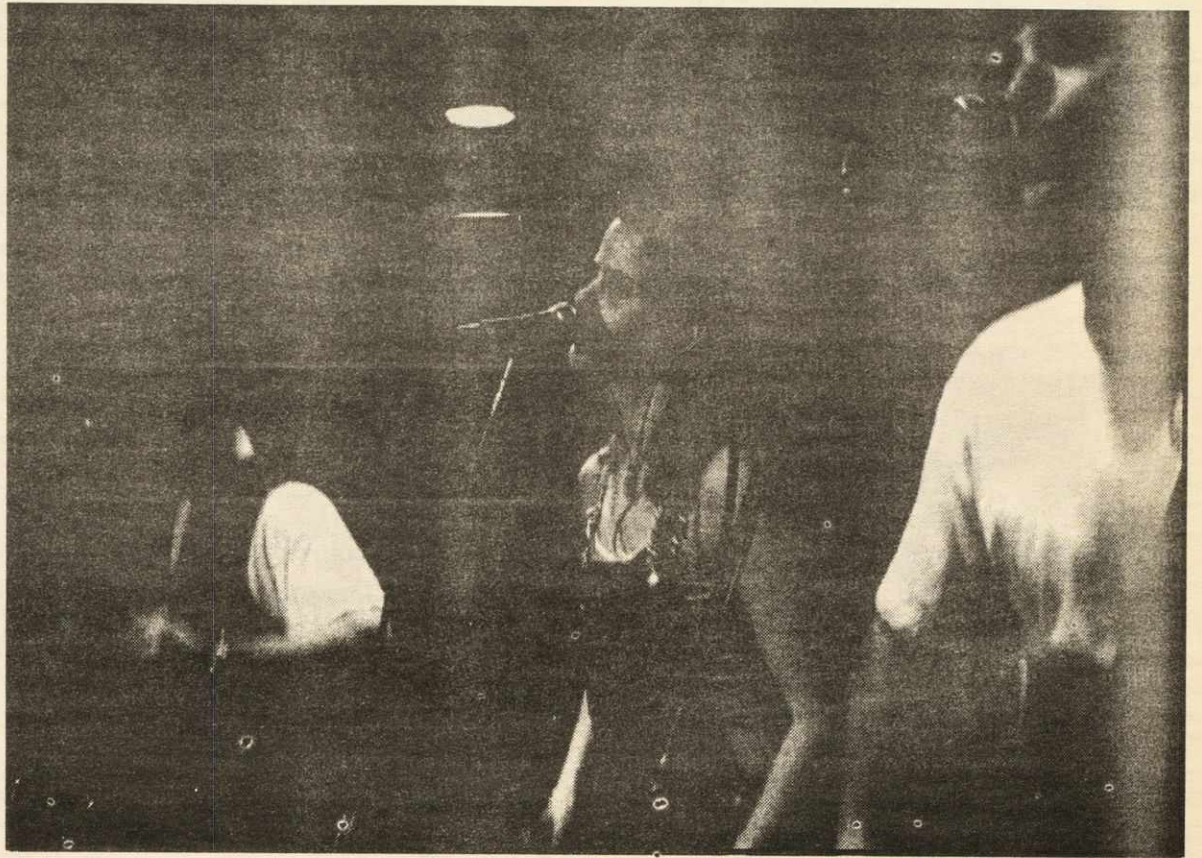
Are they excited?

"I'll probably puke just before going on," said Stevenson.

The next day at 4:30pm, the band is back on stage, but the differences from yesterday are astounding. The Metro Centre floor is covered with tables for the revellers expected that night. The spotlights dance around the set-up crew. One bump on Letcher's guitar causes a bang that echoes three times in the cavernous hall.

The whole band looks hyped, a far cry from the relaxed rehearsal yesterday. Crawford is literally jumping around the stage, and he can't seem to stop tapping on his bodran.

They do a quick run-through of "Blister In The Sun", where Gallant plays a snare drum instead of bass. They decide that it makes the song sound too thin, and drop it from the set. Flexibility is definitely one of



Big Fish performs their regular gig at the Tickle Trunk. (Photo by Ryan Lash)

their strengths.

Back in their dressing room, Letcher sits down in one of the chairs provided for the band. I ask what the band plans to do in their future.

"Right here...this is beyond my expectations," he said. The band enjoys what they're doing already.

"That's the best time, when people are dancing right in front of us," said Gallant.

At 8:30, when the band is scheduled to go on, it doesn't look that they'll be getting anyone dancing. Although most of the tables are filled, the stands are not. There is also a huge open space on the floor, enough to intimidate even the most extroverted dancers.

Big Fish are the opening act for the night, and they start with "Farewell to Nova Scotia", an odd choice, but they get a good response, if somewhat muted.

By the third song, both the band and the audience has warmed up. Crawford launches into a completely over the top "Day-O" and the growing crowd is singing and clapping.

The band, somewhat nervous before, is starting to relax.

"Hey wow, a smoke machine!" cracks Crawford. "Either that or the stage is on fire. We'll be fish *flambé*."

Sarah and Jake are starting to dance on-stage, a luxury they never have while performing on the Tickle Trunk's postage stamp. They are soon joined by a few, then many brave souls on the floor.

It occurs to me that Big Fish didn't need to change their regular bar show for the Metro Centre at all. Through the course of their show, they turned the Metro Centre into their own bar. They joke with each other and with the dancers, who are throwing their coats onto the stage for safekeeping. Despite the size, this doesn't feel like an arena show.

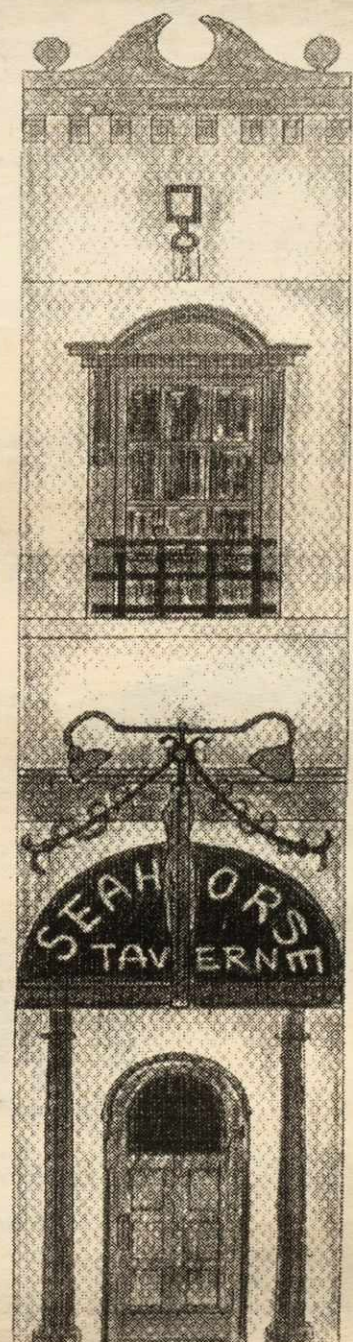
They launch into a fan favourite, "Mrs. Robinson", which changes into "I Want Your Sex" in one of the band's

trademark mid-song shifts. I realize that this practice is almost subversive, even deconstructive. There are no sacred musical cows; all music is shown to have the same roots. Big Fish show

that no matter what our musical tastes, it is all one, a musical Nirvana. Or maybe it's just all for a good time.

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