

# arts & entertainment

What do you get when you put together a bowed upright bass, a cheesy keyboard, a violin, a rainstick, cello, some vibes from a xylophone, a dulcimer, an accordion, a french horn, flute, tuba, a couple radios, a Sears amp with vibrato, a home-made banjo, and any other thing that can be used and abused musically or sonically, add four guys in barefeet and throw them all in The Gas Station?

## Dinner is Ruined!

by Tammy Rogers with excerpts from an interview by Bradley McInnis

**T**his relatively new band out of Toronto is on the cutting edge of "new music" in the true sense of the word. With their bizarre choice of instrumentation and beautifully disturbing songwriting, Dinner is Ruined is one of the rare bands actually making original music today.

"What we want to do or be is a collective group of musicians interested in *maybe* expanding the music we grew up with in some small kind of off-hand way," says singer/songwriter Dale Morningstar. "Use different instruments, not weird instruments, but use every musical source we have at our fingertips and just try to warp it a bit and have our own personalities come out of that."

Because of their instrumentation and a low-fi, high-res sound, Dinner is Ruined has oft been compared to Tom Waits but that's where the comparison should end. One could also say it is reminiscent of contemporary jazz with its element of chance and liberal use of horns. It has the same spontaneity and abandon but in a rock context.

But as Morningstar says, "why stop at jazz? There's classical and music from around the world." Trying to incorporate the influences of all types of music, taking the inspiration behind those styles and shaping it to his kind of music is all part of Morningstar's writing style. His influences are not only auditory but visual as well, taking in energy from landscape, the sky, people and art.

Along with Don Kerr, Dinner's drummer, Morningstar owns and oper-

ates The Gas Station, an increasingly busy independent recording studio. Located in a warehouse in a converted women's prison in Toronto's warehouse district, The Gas Station has produced such projects as hHead, Chicken Milk, Kyp Harness and Squirrel. It is within these walls that much of Dinner is Ruined's songwriting takes shape.

Morningstar describes the process as an "orchestrated collage". "I write the songs but it's still in an interpretive way for the rest of the band members," he says. "Sometimes I'll have chords, melody and words and I'll go in and play by myself and record everything and then dub the other guys' parts on. Other times I'll come up with the basic seed and we'll jam on that and it'll be a communal thing."

"Call Me a Taxi" from their new cd *Lovesongs From The Lubratorium* was a combination of those efforts. It began with a banjo piece recorded from a park bench on dictaphone then played back in the studio and picked up on hanging mikes and put onto 'big' tape. Bird sounds from the zoo were also dictaphoned and used.

"The whole thing [was] kind of a feeling of the moment," explains Morningstar. "Jim [Fields], Mr. Pee, Don and myself recorded a version of the song one day jamming. Later on I recorded another version and Don dubbed in his stuff and Jim dubbed on his bass. So we kept that version but used the beginning of the first version and then added on the coo coo bird thing."

The first time I saw them play was at The Drake, a basement pub in an old

rundown hotel in Toronto (apparently their first gig). They started the set with their "string section", Kerr on cello, Fields on upright bass, and Morningstar on violin and just as they kicked in with a heavy electric sound the power went out almost as if on cue. Without hardly skipping a beat, Morningstar borrowed an acoustic guitar from someone in the audience and they finished the set improvving acoustically to candlelight while everyone cozed up on the floor in front of the stage.

But their music is far from what you'd call easy listening. Because there is so much going on, it is musically very dense. Vocals are treated as just another instrument, with the overall sound being more important than the actual words so they may be pushed down in the mix, forcing you to listen differently.

Not that the lyrics aren't important. The lyrical imagery and content is part and parcel to the whole scheme of things. Some might find his slaughterhouse images in "Harry the Burger Man" shocking but that's not his intent.

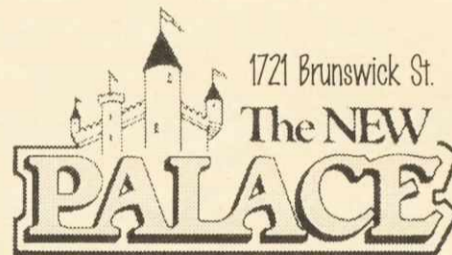
"I don't write to shock but I'm not trying to make things easy either for anyone into words and stuff like that. There are different ways of looking at beauty and all this abattoir stuff is kind of humorous. You can say serious things in a serious way or you can say it in a tongue-in-cheek kind of way and still get your point across. I'd rather do it that way rather than doomy and gloomy."

I got a chance to see Dinner is



Ruined again during their homecoming gig at the Cameron, one of Toronto's Queen St music venues, after completing a cross-Canada tour. They had electricity this time but no shoes in an act of solidarity with their floating member, Mr. Pee, who was kicked out of a Vancouver club for not wearing shoes on stage. It took me a few minutes to realize this was the same band I had

seen at The Drake. Morningstar was singing through a lampshade, playing two trumpets at once, a rainstick and a banjo all in one song. And it sounded fantastic. To just see these guys play the amount of instruments they play in a single song is worth it, but to actually hear how they not only pull it off but make incredible music out of it all is absolutely amazing.



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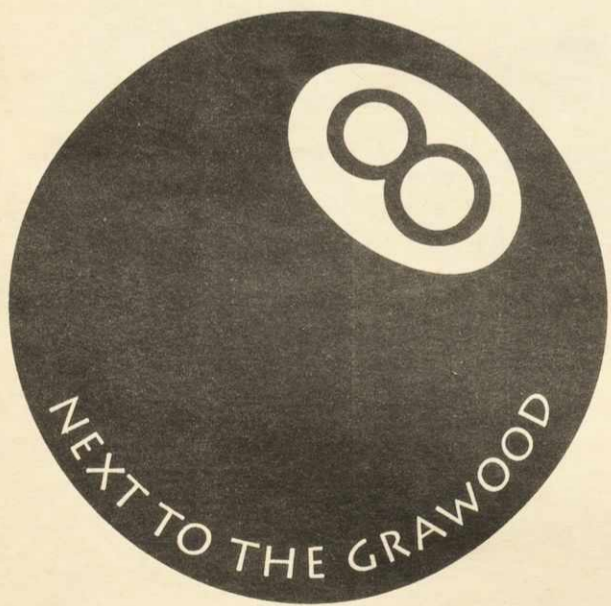
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