

HALIFAX GOES 'POP'...

BY MICHAEL EDWARDS

About this time last year, Halifax was designated to be the new Seattle. Or maybe it was that Seattle was called the new Halifax. I forget. The point is that in order to celebrate the boom in bands and record labels down there, the first Halifax Pop Explosion was organised. They managed to attract all manner of bands from all over Canada and the US including Velocity Girl, Redd Kross and Lou Barlow (of Sebadoh fame). It was a resounding success, and so it didn't come as a complete shock when the second one was announced this year for September 28th to October 2nd.

I didn't make it down last year, but when I heard that Stereolab were stopping off on their way back from their Lollapalooza stint then I was convinced that I should make the pilgrimage to Halifax to check things out. So the Bruns joined forces with CHSR to send a crack team of their finest journalists to cover the Pop Explosion for those who were unfortunate enough to find themselves stuck in New Brunswick last weekend. This is our story.

Thursday

We finally made it down to sunny, sunny Halifax after a false start the night before. So, alas, we missed out on the first show of this year's gathering which had the Spinanes headlining. I heard they were rather good though. Jale were also playing the previous night, but they were still quite conspicuous for the rest of the weekend - I even had the chance to talk to Alyson about what is going on in Jale-land, and I shall bring you up to date with that next week. But enough of what may have been; let's get on to Thursday's bands.

Just when you thought that Sub-Pop had signed everyone and their dog, they pull another band out of the bag. And that band is *Zumpano* (from Vancouver incidentally...) who donned some rather natty suits. They weren't too bad at all despite ripping off a frightening obvious piece of 'Stairway To Heaven'. Never mind. Their better songs used a keyboard which sounded uncannily like a harpsichord, and conjured up images of the Left Banke and other psyche bands. Then they got all loud and gnarly. Sigh. It could be interesting to hear their recording debut though.

And if you are going to do loud then you should do with a certain amount of panache and that is exactly what Toronto's *Change Of Heart* did. Very loud and very confident. Touring with their new *Tummy Suckle* album, only available at the gigs, they sounded better than I have ever heard them before. Wonderful guitars, incredible drumming and some rather inspired samples stuck in for good measure too. And it was all done with a sense of humour too, even though some of it was at the expense of the headline band - their continued uttering of "Stereolab" touched us all too; some more than others. The guilty party knows who she is. It all climaxed with the final song whose name escapes me. It was noisy, lengthy and the perfect end to an amazing set.

The next act seemed like a curious choice after the previous cacophony, but yet it worked out rather well. Very well in fact. *Mary Lou Lord* came on armed only with her acoustic guitar and did a fine job despite having problems with the sound engineer who seemed determined not to let her hear herself on the monitor. And having such a tiny little voice, that could have been a bad thing but it wasn't. Her songs were funny, and touched on subjects that everyone could understand dedicating a song to "everyone with colds, allergies or boyfriends who are assholes". When Lisa Loeb's 'Stay' was requested from the audience, she sang only the first line - "You say, I love David Geffen...". Hard to believe bile could come from such a sweet looking thing. And even harder to believe is that she busks for a living; I shall re-

veal her full story in the weeks to come.

Topping Thursday's bill were England's *Stereolab*, a band whom I have been wanting to see perform live for quite a while; they didn't disappoint. They are not the most exciting band to watch on stage with a minimal amount of movement from their six members, but they more than make up for that with their sound. Its hard to believe that so much power can come from a single chord, but very often that is exactly what they would use for an entire song, with Tim Gane's chiming guitar layered upon the Farfisa drone. Those old analog keyboards help to produce a wall of sound which is unlike any other. The vocal harmonies of Lactitia Sadier and Mary Hansen are the crowning glory of the whole ensemble; the words and music merge into each other so hypnotically that the sound moves through your entire body. Quite blissful, and the probable highlight of the entire Explosion.

Friday

We decided to frequent the earlier 'All Ages' show on Friday, and ended up missing the first band (*The Monoxides* - sorry boys) as we were lined up outside Brunswick Hall. When we did get in, we were met by a rather exuberant younger crowd partaking in such delightful activities as stage diving. Sigh. The innocence of youth. So that meant the first band of the evening for us was Newfoundland's finest *Hardship Post*, who are now also in the Sub-Pop stable. I have always had a soft spot for them after seeing them play with Eric's Trip about 18 months ago, and tonight they delivered a tighter-than-ever set. They played a couple of songs from their *Hack* EP, both from their last 7" (the one in the wonderful sandpaper sleeve) and plenty of new material too. They sounded really good, and it seems as if its just a matter of time before they become real famous.

The last band at the first show (and also the second show, but I'm getting ahead of myself now) was *Sunny Day Real Estate* who have just released a new album on - gasp - Sub-Pop!!! They seem to me like a band who have two categories of songs. First they have the upbeat one where they get to do some neat guitar work and show off their vocal harmonies. Then they have the slow songs which get sort of dirgy and not much fun to listen to. Luckily the split wasn't quite 50-50, so they get a passing mark. Just. They did have one of the coolest t-shirts of the week though if that counts for anything.

Then we had to leave between shows so we could stand out in the cold and rain for a few minutes. Nice touch. When we got back in for the bar show, the first band were Ontario's *Tristan Psionic*. They were most noteworthy for their lively bass player bounced all over the stage. So much so that he ended up on his back at one point, but he just got right back up and carried on as if no-one saw a thing. But I did. They weren't all that bad really - a little on the uninspired side, and that was reflected by a lack of crowd response. I'm sure they sold some CDs though.

Blonde Redhead are causing a bit of a buzz these days after working with Sonic Youth's Steve Shelley. And after hearing them, it seems kinda obvious that Sonic Youth have been a main influence on their sound. In fact, it almost seemed that it was possible to hear



Tim Gane of Stereolab gets funky with his bad self - photo by Marc Landry

parts from various Sonic Youth tunes during their performance. But impersonation is the most sincere form of flattery, and Blonde Redhead still sounded damned good. They have a scratchy guitar style which was intricate yet saturated the entire hall. The virtually identical voices of the two singers entwined around each other and the guitars in a pleasing way too. And a wonderfully scuzzy, driving bass too. Pretty damned good.

Another part of the local contingent were next - *Thrush Hermit*. Their EP on Murder Records, *Smart Bomb*, is more or less what we got both song-wise and sound-wise. They were pretty straight forward with their fairly heavy guitar pop which almost got out of hand at times. Their better songs are the ones which are more stripped down allowing what subtleties they have to come through. They are not a particularly bad band - its just that they don't seem to have that special spark that makes them SHINE. And after that it was *Sunny Day Real Estate* all over again as they topped the bill at both Friday night shows.

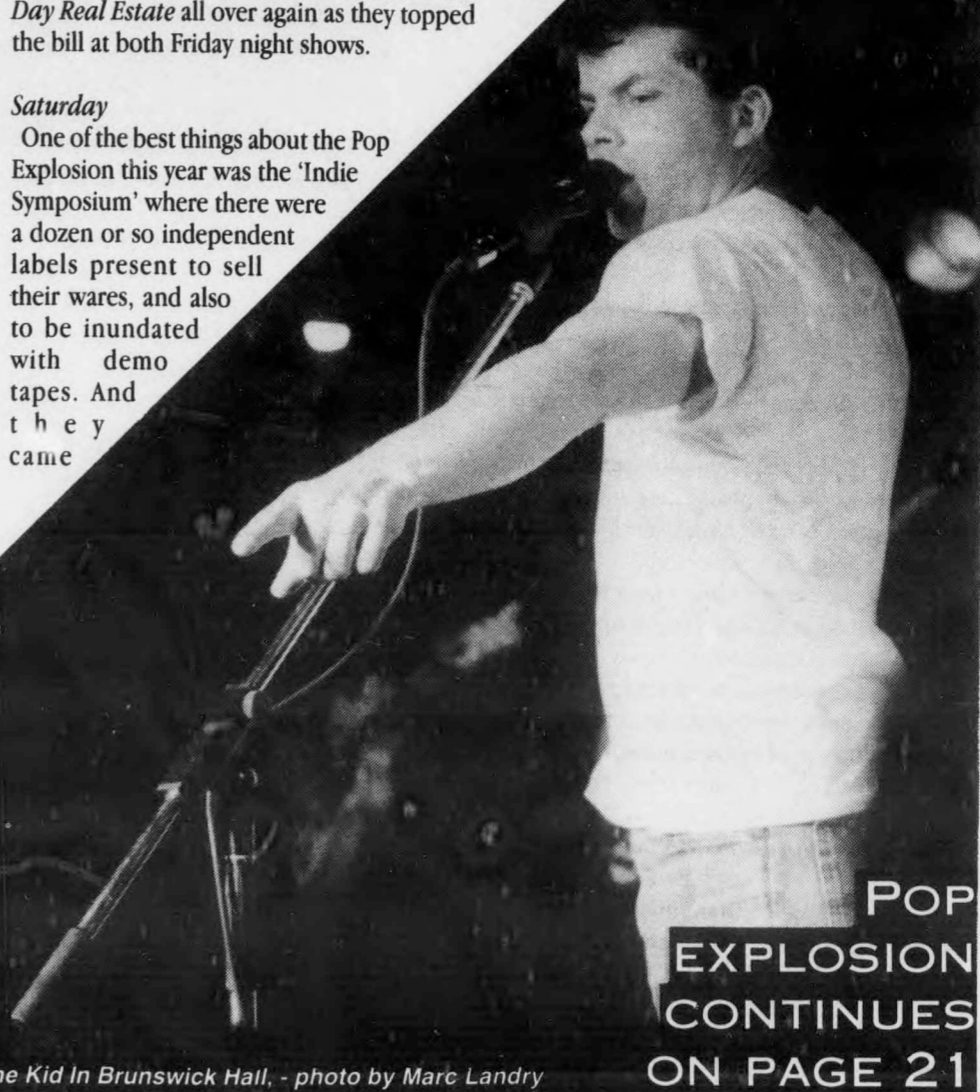
Saturday

One of the best things about the Pop Explosion this year was the 'Indie Symposium' where there were a dozen or so independent labels present to sell their wares, and also to be inundated with demo tapes. And they came

from all manner of places as far afield as Cleveland's Scat Records and Vancouver's Mint Records, as well as the local favourites Murderecords and Cinnamon Toast. Oh, and Sub-Pop too. So I stocked up on vinyl, stickers and what ever other goodies I could find before heading upstairs to the afternoon concert.

I only got there in time to catch the final band *Six Finger Satellite* whom I had heard all manner of good things about although never actually heard them before. The most impressive thing about them was the way that their lead singer took control of the stage and had a presence that I don't think

I saw matched during the



The Kid in Brunswick Hall, - photo by Marc Landry

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