

Something about a band that has the nerve, in the middle of a Friday night show, to let their obviously insane drummer stroll, Fiddler-on-The-Roof-style, across the stage singing *That's Amore* at the top of his lungs while the accordion player blows bubbles at the crowd just somehow clicks with me. I occasionally tire of big light shows, awesome sound systems, and stolid, slick and predictably imagistic and cliché performances. They have their place, but give me **Spirit of the West** any day of the week.

I won't complain about the crowd, and how small by comparison to the rather irritating **Grapes of Wrath** concert crowd of last week it was. I won't even complain about the Cretaceous Liquor laws that require people of my age to pay the Liquor Commission twenty bucks (or whatever the hell it is now) for an N.B.L.C.C. card in order to have a beer. And I even think I'll ignore the whuffling, nuchal-crested tribe of robust australopithecenes loping through the crowd gleefully fulfilling the letters of those laws. Beer or no beer - you'd have had to have been dead not to thoroughly enjoy yourself last Friday night. Even the Cafeteria seemed like a nice place to be.

It is often forgotten exactly why bands tour with an opening act. It's not a gratuity to cousin Fred's little brother who wants to be a rock and roll star. It's not to promote local talent, it's not so the headliner will look and sound better by comparison, and it's not so everyone has time to be fashionably late and get suitably pissed before the show starts. These things happen, but are functions and permutations of the underlying concept: opening bands are there to warm up the audience; to get them excited and in the mood for a show. Friday night, **The Fat Lady Sings**, a four-man band from Ireland, worked the audience hard, and made an inspired attempt to interest the audience and get them going, and succeeded wonderfully. With a hard-edged contemporary Irish-rock sound, the **Fat Ladies** barked out songs from their recent release "Twist" with exuberance and flair. Strong lead vocal lines and good innovative rhythm guitar work blended with traditional Irish sounds to produce a pleasing mix reminiscent of much of the similarly-influenced music of bands like **Spirit of the West**, the **Proclaimers** and, particularly, the more rough edged work of bands like **The Waterboys**. It took awhile, but the crowd eventually moved in on the stage from their shuffling perimeter semi-circle, spurred by stage antics and the guitarist jumping down to rollick amongst the onlookers (paying the price of having proffered beer split all over his guitar as well). Good stuff guys, come back to Canada anytime.

So, unlike last week's **Grapes** show, I was eager to hear the new material played by this interesting and highly entertaining band. With far more room to romp than last year (**Spirit** played the post-ridden pediment in the CHSC last time), the band showed itself to be enthusiastic and highly mobile. Here is a band that implements effects and technology rather than depending on them: reverb vocals in specific places, delay, echo - all used for effect and not to beef up something thin or wimpy.

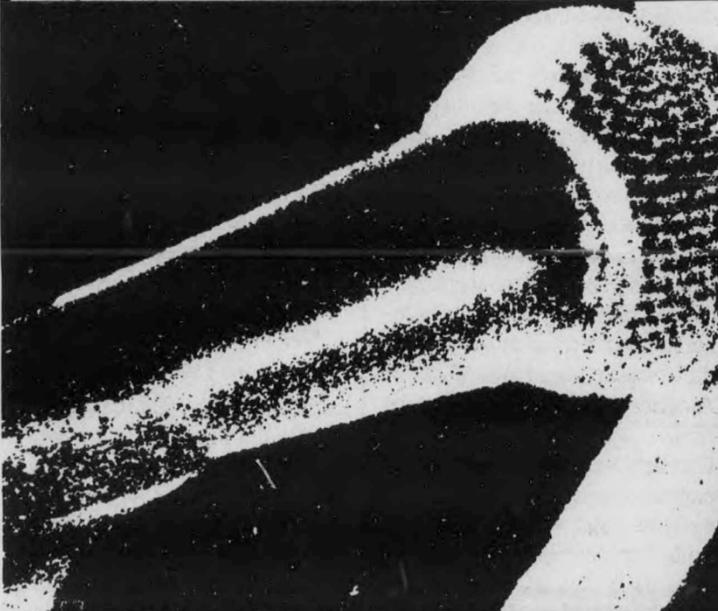
The overall sound quality was crisp and easy, well-mixed enough so you didn't have to notice it. I assume that actually mixing this band must be a nightmare - how do you mix an electric slide mandolin? **The Spirit** utilizes a bizarre range of instrumentation - from accordions to Irish wind instruments - unpretentiously.

From slow, innovatively arranged and reflective tunes like *Lets Make a Mystery* to the romping, boozarama *The Old Sod* - **Spirit** carried the crowd into a well-sculpted euphoria, their harmonizations punctuating the steady, clean lead vocals of John Mann, as swapping verses in songs like *The Old Sod* clearly proved confidence in all the member's vocal abilities, and, as mentioned before, even the drummer (who spent almost as much time out front as behind his kit) was allowed a solo in his tenor aria version of *That's Amore*.

An appreciative crowd, an excellent pair of bands, and a welcome format change, combined to throw off the characteristic stench and atmosphere of the old cafeteria. Money well spent.

Just a note: If you didn't see **The Watchmen** last night at the CHSC, you probably missed something great. Don't do it again. Go to Tina's on the 7th and see **Shadowy Men from a Shadowy Planet** (the guys who do the theme song for "Kids in the Hall") to make up for it.

CKA



Spirit of the West have been busy since they were here almost exactly one year ago (Saturday the 27th last year at the CHSC). The new album "Go Figure" has been doing well, and it is obvious that they are earning some well-deserved respect and money (we hope). Frankly, I was scared as hell to listen to "Go Figure." Too many times a Canadian band will get a little slap-happy in the recording studio with the new-found fame and funds usually accompanying the production of a second album. The skulking figure of the latest releases by bands like the **Grapes of Wrath** and **54 40**, who both, as far as my taste goes anyway, degenerated to over-produced a.m.-oriented slush, leered over my shoulder as I put "Go Figure" in the CD player. **Spirit of the West** didn't degenerate, they merely progressed. Some won't like it, because it's not the same stuff as "Save This House." To be honest, that kind of change is healthy, but takes a while getting used to. "Save This House" is, for me, so far one of the best albums of the nineties on the Canadian scene. Its Appalocho-Celtic-country and Western-up-beat-foot-stompin-beer-guzzlin sound born of funk, calypso, Irish jigs and reels crisply recorded and tastefully produced. Lyrically involved and aware, as well as musically interesting, I admit to heavily repeated listening. "Go Figure" takes a similar approach lyrically, complaining bitterly of politics and bureaucracy, among other things, but stretches the more compact sound of "Save This House" into a larger spectrum, allowing for voice effects, full drum tracks, and hard-edged distorted rhythm guitar lines in a number of places. There's just more stuff to listen to, with the familiar Celtic touches still discernable. The amazing thing is that while there is more, none of it gets in the way. I found a few of the tracks a little shlocky, particularly *Spot the Difference* and *Pulling Lame* but even these have moments in them where the norm is traversed. Tasteful, progressive, and interesting, "Go Figure" shows that "Save This House" was more of a gamble than I had originally thought.



Spirit of the West

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