

A "Sociable" Social Maritime Style



Rik and Norm said it best; "Well, I see the kitchen party's starting out there." Even though the crowd in the SUB ballroom was about 200 strong for last Thursday's Grad Class Social, the folksy show put on by Newfoundland bards Great Big Sea and local favourites Rik and Norm ensured that everyone felt like they'd never gone too far from the fridge.

Rik and Norm, a duo from Moncton who look sort of like a biker and a middle-aged tax accountant, opened up in front of one of the biggest crowds they've seen yet. "We're kinda used to playing with a couple amps on milk crates and McDonald's heat lamps for lights," Rik explained after apologising for their somewhat less than dramatic entrance. "Okay, that wasn't the best stage entrance we've ever made, but then again we're really f#@*ing drunk." The pair managed to get the crowd involved, helped out by one lovely and talented member of the audience who stepped up on stage to play the "Rik and Norm s%#tkicker," a rubber boot stuck onto an old piece of broken bed with

beer caps loosely nailed onto the stick for that down home rattling effect. For his lively backup stomping, he was awarded an all-expense-paid trip to the band's next show in sunny Nackawic.

The music-comedy team provided a great warm-up for the headliners, encouraging everyone to drink up and playing an oddly hilarious mix of tunes from "I Got You, Booze" to a version of American Pie that displayed their rather elusive vocal talent. They continuously begged for requests from the audience and then completely ignored them, especially the ones for the Village People. After an extraordinarily long and energetic set, both Rik and Norm were clearly ecstatic with the response. "Universities are always such great crowds," Rik explained, happy to find a suitable venue for their really, really off-colour brand of humour, which could easily offend patrons of the contemporary bar scene. In a room where it doesn't take much coaxing to get the whole crowd to shout expletives on cue, though, the duo worked beautifully and charged the audience for the main act. Watch for the live demo tape (not a CD as Rik claims not to be able to spell it) coming soon to a bootlegger near you.

After a brief intermission, during which two lucky contestants won weekend getaways to Montreal, Great Big Sea hit the stage. The crowd, a large part of which was made up of expatriate Newfoundlanders, almost immediately took to their feet and headed for the space cleared in front of the stage, gleefully free of security types. It was good

to see the Campus Police just standing around looking stupid instead of actually acting that way, although the Brownshirt at the door did take upwards of two minutes to scrutinize the ID of my 25-year-old friend. Remember, literacy is a right, not a privilege.

Anyway, the band came out strong and didn't let up for two great sets. The music produced by the four, who formed Great Big Sea about two years ago, reflects their diverse backgrounds and eclectic musical talents. All but one had been in rock bands (Bob was in a punk band) before deciding to team up and draw on the traditional music of their island home, creating a truly original sound. And they accomplish this with an easy professionalism, sharing the vocals, leaving out the drummer and making use of such instruments as the tin whistle, bodhran and fiddle to add the Celtic element to their more conventional guitar-bass sound. While somewhat more reserved this time than they were at their last show here, when they opened for Uisce Beatha, this can probably be chalked up to lessons learned drinking hard night after night on the road. The experience and maturity comes off as polish though, narrowly escaping the pretentiousness that sometimes comes with a bit of popularity. Alan Doyle, the guitarist/bouzouki player said that they depend on the people that come to their shows and they're not about to alienate the fans. "Maybe in ten years when we're a bit bigger," he joked.

Drawing on familiar tunes off of their self-titled debut album, such as the crowd-pleasing "What Are Ya At?" as well as sur-

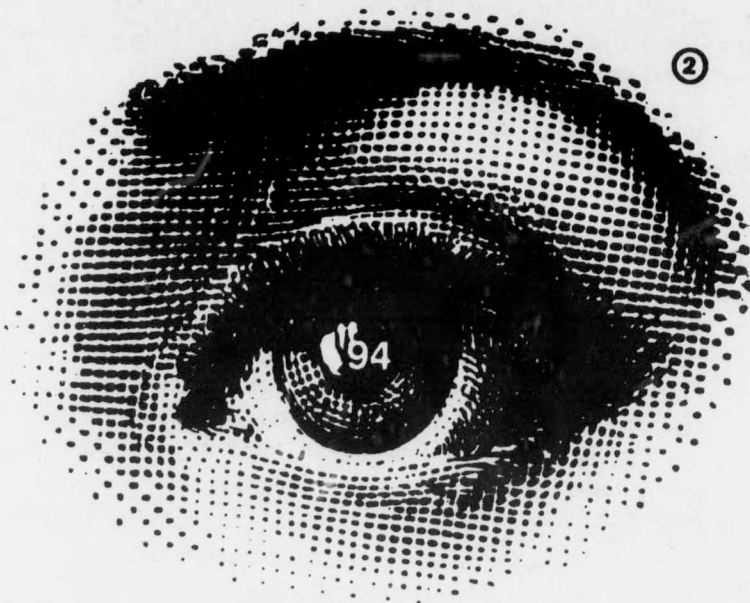
prisingly catchy new songs written or learned during a break from touring at the end of last year, the band enticed the already electrified audience into whirling and jigging and reeling like the good Maritimers that they almost all were. The band is also still willing to perform great covers, including the essential "Home For A Rest" and a great version of "Brown Eyed Girl." The four obviously enjoy being on stage and put on an enthusiastic show for the most part but, on occasion, the energy waned. Whether it was due to the rigours of the road or the same detached professionalism that lends the music its high quality, the band will have to be careful not to take highly spirited audiences for granted. Luckily though, no one in this crowd seemed to notice. As near as I can tell, we were all pretty drunk. Great Big Sea are expert practitioners of the not so fine art of performing drinking music, making frequent use of their trademark "sociable" call, on which everyone raises a glass and moves a little further down that windy road called drunkenness.

Speaking of which, it has to be mentioned that although everyone at my table seemed pretty happy with the choice of beverages being served with characteristic flair by the boys of Bartenders Unlimited (I gotta learn how to do that pouring-two-beers-at-the-same-time trick), some were concerned about the complete absence of non-alcoholic beverages. Perhaps SMARTPACC was busy making those

ever so inspirational CHSR ads, I don't know. In any case, at the risk of falling into disfavour with our very own internationally acclaimed Temperance patrol, I have to say that live Celtic music without beer is just unthinkable. If there was anything to complain about, it was the lack of hard liquor. For those seriously averse to the wonders of fermentation, the pop machine was just downstairs. Although having said that, it probably wouldn't have killed the organizers to throw a couple of cases of Coke behind the bar. Some sort of licensing intricacy, I'm sure.

Meanwhile, back on stage, Great Big Sea closed the night with a rocking encore, wrapping up an altogether great night. I know the encore was good because I remember dancing to it, but I just can't recall quite what it was. You see, I considered it my journalistic duty to get in the mood of the show and have a few drinks myself. Like Rik and Norm said, "the more you drink, the better we sound."

By Greg Moore



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