

Basic English influenced by Froot Loops cereal

By TRACEY REID

"We're all influenced by different things. I'm influenced by Froot Loops every morning. It's not just musical — it really spans everything, your whole environment." Such is the belief of Sean Ryan, bassist for the Toronto-based band Basic English.

That dreaded word — influence — has come to play a major role in the description of the young band. REM is often cited, as is Leonard Cohen and the Rolling Stones — talk about extremes. Being compared to such well-known acts is fine with the band. Guitarist and vocalist John Davis thinks that such comparisons are "a test of cool" by people who want to see "how long you can stand it."

Davis, Ryan, Tim Armour (lead vocals, guitar, and harmonica), and Roger Whyte (drums) are willing to put up with it, but eventually want to establish and rely on their own identity. Someday, Davis mused, perhaps "people will be saying somebody else sounds like Basic English."

"That'd be nice for a change," added Armour, laughing. Basic English formed in Moncton, New Brunswick, "in January 1978, in a basement," explained Armour and Davis. At that time, the band consisted of Armour, Davis, Whyte, and bassist David Potter, the original lead vocalist.

On picking a name for the band, Davis explained, "I just flipped through the dictionary and stuck my finger on it. Literally."

"We had a few names before," continued Armour, "but I don't remember any."

The band soon outgrew Moncton, and Whyte, Davis, and Armour left for Halifax where Davis and Armour studied English at St. Mary's University. A new bassist,



BASIC ENGLISH: Last year's Q107 Homegrown winners play upcoming Toronto dates.

John Graham, took Potter's place and Armour assumed the role of lead vocalist.

Eventually, even Halifax appeared to have its limits, and the band set out for Toronto, leaving Graham behind.

In Toronto, the band expect "to have a lot of places to play, just jump right into it and be really happy, be playing every week, quickly gain a following, and within a few months have a permanent bassist." Armour said that's pretty much how it happened, but Ryan wryly stated that it took two years. Davis added that the band "went six months without making any music," causing their first Toronto winter to be "pretty depressing."

Things picked up when the band recorded a "pretty sloppy" single, entered it in the 1987 Q107 Homegrown Contest four hours before the deadline, and won — "lucky

charms." Davis added that their timing was right and that the judges "wanted something different. I could easily have seen us coming seventh out of 12, or even 12th out of 12."

Armour laughed when he remembered that the other bands "had digital analog delay. We had Sears guitars."

Davis thinks this may also have helped them win. "Maybe the judges were susceptible to something a little less slick. Can't see any other reason."

Then Ryan, a native of London, Ontario, literally came into the picture. Davis had dubbed the bass parts for the single entered in the Homegrown Contest, but they needed a bass player in a picture for the Homegrown album. The band had never heard Ryan play, but he instantly became a member at the photo session.

"I could have been God-awful," laughed Ryan. "I was just praying they wouldn't think that."

Although the band has little musical training, Basic English is composed of four talented musicians. After eight years, the band plays mostly originals, but receives a great deal of attention for unusual covers — often ones that even seasoned professionals wouldn't dare attempt on stage.

"There are lots of things we'd like to do, but there are technical and artistic reasons for not doing them," explained Davis.

"Yeah," added Armour. "We wouldn't do a George Michael song."

The band is currently writing enough to get by, but they agree that is definitely not enough. They work days and play nights, which doesn't leave much energy to write. Davis explained that the current repertoire took years to put together because "once you write a song you have to take it to the band and rehearse for weeks."

Currently, the band does not even have a practice space. Armour said they have been touring Canada for "months and months" and joked, "we went to Australia!" Most of the time they aren't even able to practice between gigs. "We can hardly remember the songs," states Davis, smiling.

The guys are looking for a record deal, and things look good — a few possibilities, and hopefully something by next year. Once they land a deal, they will look to college radio as an immediate target, but hope to cut across several markets — as Blue Rodeo, one of their favourite bands, has. "We have the most fun when we get frantic," explained Davis, "and we get most frantic when the audience gets most frantic. This happens mostly when the audience is young."

"I'd love the old high school tour," mused Armour. "Wouldn't that be great? Let's just play high-schools. Screw this university stuff," he laughed.

Thankfully, the band is getting out

and playing clubs. All of the life and energy that came out in an interview before their show last Thursday at the Siboney Club was captivatingly transferred to the stage. Originals such as "Lost in the Shadows" showcase the natural talent of each member, making them all frontmen.

On "Last Mile," Armour proved himself a capable vocalist, extending his range to its limits. This also occurred on a cover of "Avalanche," where Armour's voice takes on a curiously haunting tone that drew in the crowd.

Davis played guitar flawlessly, and at some points his playing threatened to send him soaring into the rafters with the music. With blinding speed he propelled such songs as the band's own "Highlanders 48" to incredible heights, only to bring it crashing down just when it seemed about to cause the room to burst.

Such talent was also apparent on the classic "These Boots are Made For Walking," in which the entire band whipped itself into a frenzy. It was also in this song that Ryan's more-than-capable bass playing showed. Although bassists tend to fade into the background, Ryan rarely does, and his backing vocals prove that the band made the right decision in taking him on as a permanent member.

Roger Whyte rounds out the band with his relentless drumming, driving home songs such as Leonard Cohen's "Memories" with little effort.

Special attention should be paid to songs like "Outside the Law," the flip side of "Images of Love," the band's first single. The video was independently produced using money won in the Homegrown Contest. Both are receiving heavy airplay on CFNY and MuchMusic. It is a song like this which has a definite influence which is difficult to pinpoint. One cannot quite figure out who it sounds like.

Then it suddenly becomes clear. It sounds like Basic English.

Basic English plays tomorrow at Lee's Palace, and November 2 at the Horseshoe.

DVP's jazz rocks Winters

By ROSLYN ANGEL

Who or what is DVP? It could be the Don Valley Parkway — but it's not. DVP — who named themselves after this particular stretch of roadway — is a local Toronto jazz band on the rise.

The five-member band, who performed in the Winters College JCR on October 18, have only been together since May, but they have already recorded their first album, *Swish Timing* — to be released in about eight weeks. Though a little rough around the edges, DVP has enough talent and promise to make an impact on the jazz community.

DVP's founder, Charlie Ringas (drums), writes the music for the band. Alongside Ringas are Kevin Cooke (bass), Gary Atkins (guitar), Jens Van Vliet (trumpet), and Bernardo Padron (tenor and soprano saxophone). Although they've only

been together a short time, DVP's members really "get along personally," said Ringas.

This quality is seen in their performance. They are in tune with one another, and respect each other's space and time in the performance. But they also have fun. Music is "an expressive outlet for them," said Ringas. Simply — they enjoy what they do.

During the first set, DVP played a progressive jazz piece called "Courrier du Bois." The song, supposed to be a combination of rock and jazz, seemed to segregate the two styles rather than combine them. At one point, the band sounded like a rock group instead of a jazz band.

"Glad for Someone," on the other hand, seemed to be the crowd pleaser. The song featured each member in a solo. Padron, on soprano saxophone, gave each note

a quality that went beyond exceptional. His gift for performing with feeling is a crucial asset to the band. When the instruments were combined, the band's collective force showered over the room.

The performance, presented by CHRY and the Winters College Council, is hopefully one of many such events. CHRY's Patrick Bloomfield wants to present jazz performances monthly. The idea has been introduced to the Winters College Council, which would fund the concerts. Bloomfield has already arranged to have two Quebec bands perform, as well as guitarists from England and New York.

If the Council approves the proposal, not only will other bands like DVP perform on a monthly basis, but an "alternative jazz festival" will also take place, for three to four days in the spring, Bloomfield said.

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alone, forgetting that today's theatre-goers don't shock easily. Particularly funny is the scene in which Helen rides Steve while describing her fetish for the fox-hunt. The borderline eroticism goes one step too far, and becomes obscene. It is not only the sex in *Decadence* that is obscene; in fact the sex is probably the tamest part. What is obscene is the attitude. Steve and Helen both think they are admirably decadent, when in fact they are simply disgusting.

What springs to mind is the scene in which Steve and Helen step out for an elegant and expensive dinner, and wind up ordering just about everything on the menu. The scene is highlighted first by a bloated sense of self-importance (as Steve says of the waiter, "Just because he has Charles

and Di to dine/He thinks his piss tastes like wine"), and then by a terribly gross, scatological, but cathartic and hilarious scene about getting sick. From both ends. *Decadence*? Surely not.

The other couple lead a lifestyle that is infinitely duller, with Sybil pulling the strings, as she is not only sleeping with Les, but is also paying him to help her bump off Steve. Together they scheme. Sybil's means are typically upper-class — she wants to cut off Steve's money. As she says, "money's the best lubricator, there's no need for K-Y."

Les, on the other hand, dreams of putting broken glass in Steve's drink, ripping his guts out in turn. Les is the only character who is of the working class, and his resentment is obvious; it is his only true motive for wanting to kill Steve. Les resents the upper-classes and their in-roads and short cuts, as opposed to the means of a "good old-fashioned thief" like himself. What would make the play

much more satisfying, however, would be a closer examination of Les' character as a contrast to the likes of Steve and Helen.

The set consists of a single chesterfield, while the actors each stay in one costume throughout the play: she in a formal gown, and he in a tuxedo with tails, made up like Joel Grey in *Cabaret*. All else is mimed, and with a calculated sense of sloppiness. Although facial expressions are outstanding, there is no eye contact throughout the entire play — obviously part of director John Bourgeois' (any irony in the name?) stark blocking, which makes *Decadence* seem like a puppet play.

Decadence makes for an evening of bawdy jokes and social satire, and a lot of fun. But is it for the proletariat or for the bourgeoisie? *Decadence* is for anyone who feels like exploring the seven deadly sins in an hour and a half.

And who doesn't?

Acoustic alumnus shows off his lyrics

By HEATHER SANGSTER

"I'm not a record company's marketing dream," says singer-songwriter and York grad Brian Morgan.

Morgan abandoned his "satisfying yet frustrating" membership in the Toronto band The Big Parade to pursue a solo career so that he could "show off lyrics." Although it "seems to sound the same," Morgan suggests that his acoustic sound can include a little bit of everything.

A little bit of everything, indeed. One hears in Morgan's music, early Gordon Lightfoot, a little jazz, a little folk, a little blues, a few Maritime tunes, and a few traditional Chinese songs — all played with equal creativity and ability.

Morgan studied violin and went on to guitar and country and western and rock and roll music. At home, his mother sang opera and his father's extensive jazz collection was always available.

At York, Morgan studied ethnomusicology, which opened his ears considerably. "In a one-hour listening class, I heard everything under the sun."

However, it has been Morgan's travelling experiences which surface in his music. His first recording, *Ode to a Deaf Dog*, reflects his experiences in Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Turkey, Greece, and West Germany. Like travelling, his music has "no boundaries, no restrictions."

Morgan's immediate plan is to record his most recent adventure in the province of Sichuan, People's

Republic of China. Through an exchange programme at Bethune College, Morgan taught English as a Second Language to a select group of students at the Canadian Studies Centre at Chung Wai. His position demanded only 12 hours per week, which gave him much opportunity to write and perform his music.

And perform he did — quite successfully.

"In other countries, they have a real respect for something different," says Morgan. "When my audience knew English, I was very well received. I had quite a high profile. . . . I was somewhat famous."

Morgan had a rude awakening upon his return to Toronto, where recognition is hard to come by. He sees the Canadian music industry as difficult to break into.

"The problem is that we are not confident about our artists. Audiences are docile about arts. The things we produce are really unique, but we don't see that until we step outside Canada."

Morgan intends to change this attitude and will continue to pursue his unique brand of music. He wants to give the Canadian audience "a good picture of what I am doing as an artist. . . . a taste of something interesting and unique." Morgan is determined to catch people's attention.

But Morgan's next step is to reach more of his Canadian audience. He will perform his new songs — written in China — with some of his older, "improved" material at the Free Times Cafe on October 30 at 8.