

DUNEDIN HAS:



(A) AUDIENCES (thank christ!)



(G) SUPERGROUPS (WITH A RELUCTANCE TO SETTLE ON A BAND-NAME)



(H) PARTIES (WITH CELEBRITIES DANCING BOOZILY TO 70'S DISCO SINGLES... UNIQUE, HUH?)

Return of the Living Dwarfs

Dunedin's winters are not normally the brightest around (though 1987's is rumoured to be milder than most) but the promised return of a couple of prodigal sons was definitely what most folk were looking to as a source of midwinter cheer after a lacklustre month on the local music scene.

Having endured the cinematic "thrills" of the eminently forgettable *Mosquito Coast* and offensive *Soul Man* on consecutive weekends, some of us were ready for a bit of genuine excitement — excitement that the thought of the Tall Dwarfs engendered into our sadly depressed souls.

Y'see Chris and Alec used to be in a Dunedin anachronism called the Enemy, seen by few, but a memory cherished by many. That was 10 years ago, and they've done a lot of things since then — got famous with the Sex Toys or something-or-other, made some records and videos — but the rock dinosaur hadn't been home for a while.

Alec puts a mild damper on much of the early furore of Friday night's *Jesus on a Stick* launch by leaving

the comics in Christchurch. So for yer eight bucks at the door, all you get's a scrap of paper saying "entitled to one JOAS." If they ever bloody turn up, that is... shifty-eyed weasel face, that Knox. No one seems to mind though, and the "full house" sign is up well before nine o'clock.

Even the unseeing "hordes" locked outside would've recognised the guitar noise coming from the first band onstage — lotsa shards of the chord G spliced with indelicate pickin' signifies David Kilgour, and Steven is the three-piece (once called Chums) featuring his virtuoso talents on guitar and vocals. He drums too, in regimental 4/4, when Jeff steps out to play a bit of funky bass and sing.

Steven take things relatively easy, it appears, with all three doing a bit of

everything. Sometimes however it sounds all too familiar, almost parodic, but the good songs they have show some spark of the almost magical intuition that creates the very best music. Hear the instant-appeal pop of 'Laundry' or the ragged loud finale of 'Tape Recorder' and realise that it's something good a-brewin'.

Friday's Dwarf set was the slightly-anarchic, mechanical-breakdown, try-and-smash-a-beercrate-with-ye-head show. They set the tone by opening with the aural onslaught (via backing tape) of 'Nothing's Gonna Stop It' and charged. Chris screamed and Alec thrashed. Two hours pass by in a sonic blur. There are treats a-plenty and the one-two finish of 'Crush' and 'Pull Down the Shades,' complete with two drummers, works a treat. Many promise to be back for more tomorrow...

But few make it to Saturday afternoon's performance at Chippendale House. The intriguing case of the stallion that failed to service on *The People's Court* means I miss the first half hour (it even had Judge Wapner shaking his head in disbelief). Of the local solo sets, Shayne Carter sounds best — he's got a good repertoire to draw on, and though this isn't as good as his

solo JPSE support a couple of months ago, songs old and new come across strongly.

Chris Knox hasn't played his songs solo for a while; he's got to read the words to most and forgets the odd guitar accompaniment — not too hard to rectify quickly, because he only knows one barre chord; knows it well though...

His set's a mixture — angry vitriol ('NZ Music Industry') to a short series (ironically following a comment on the large number of "hippies" in Dunedin nowadays) of dippy, quite wonderful songs, culminating in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' the story behind which silenced the small crowd. The heart behind the snarl and putdowns of Friday night was glimpsed, and it coulda almost been a special moment...

But Chris Knox is like corduroy trousers. Like enduring, favourite trou: staunchly unfashionable. Happy though, to be that way (witness 'Beauty' and other fashion-is-shit songs) and fun. Like he'll play a Beatles medley because he loves the Beatles and not cos it's "20 years ago," and what's best is that for all the numberless hordes wearing cords, you still won't catch the so-called hipsters in an old pair, and you won't catch 'em down at the

empty, echoey space that is Chippendale House on a Saturday afternoon either. I like that; pretensions just don't fit in with brown cords.

The Dwarfs' request session fizzles a bit. It's getting late and there's only a potbelly stove warming the big room, but we get a chance to see things go a little differently from the previous night. The omnichord chimes through some fun things, but some of the requests are beyond the two-man band; wait for the second set at night, when they're joined by Paul Kean on bass and Malcolm Grant on drums. Home for tea then, and it's gonna be interesting to see if we get a third, different tone in the evening back at the pub...

RTR's as useless as ever, but Snapper, first on at the Ori, are always interesting. *Garage*-man Richard Langston sums them up as "country and western meets Suicide," and that's as good a description as you'll get. On any other "good night" for the band, huge colourful bursts of distorted organ chords collide head-on with laconic C&W guitar riffs while Peter Gutteridge plays the Lee Hazelwood role to the hilt.

But tonight was a lot different.

Dominic Stones' guitar was as loud and distorted as the organ, and the set careered headlong towards termination. Snapper's song structures contribute to this — the wonderful 'What are You Thinking' is probably beyond two verses. They were loud, and Allan Haigh's taut drumming was the only hint of C&W roots. "Clippety clop." Good though.

Knox's voice is well-shot by now, and he's had a quarter of a haircut, so it's bound to be a different looking and sounding Tall Dwarfs on stage tonight. There's another full house and the effect of Knox's shagged larynx means that the first set is a lot better organised, and in general lots better than Friday's first set.

Alec Bathgate's mature guitar playing is the highlight — songs like 'Come Inside' he injects with a folk-edged, third-Velvets-LP twang. Sublime. Other songs hinge on Knox dancing and hitting the omnichord — the Young Marble Giants are a cited influence and this is where it shows through. Wire are another influence cited by the Dwarfs, and the second set, as a full band, veers towards resonant heavy rock, in a dense, Wire-like way; stuff like 'Song of the Silents' working intensely well...

Saturday's encore was a drawn out affair. There's a spirited, haphazard and unrehearsed version of 'Venus,' assorted pissing around and stuff (obligatory 'Pull Down the Shades') and ultimately a jam (the hippies) with spontaneous Dunedin nonsense from Knox. No one seemed to care, but to my mind, though Saturday's set was technically better, it lacked the sheer exhilaration of Friday.

For me, the lasting image is a mixed one. Songs are in there somewhere, but it's the three Knox-faces of the weekend that linger: him in the middle of the still-packed dancefloor at about 11.15pm, the rest of the band losing interest, but Knox carrying on with some rabid diatribe about "Dunedin people"; then there's the guy singing tenderly about a troubled uncle, and then bawling out that Beatles medley to the only barre chord he knows...

A showman and a wonderful show. A pair of well-worn brown corduroy trousers. Good for trying on through a cold southern winter weekend. All that it promised to be.

Paul McKessar

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