

features

New Wave musicians excite Chapel Hill fans

By Dorothy Rompalske

This is supposed to be an article on "New Wave" music in the Chapel Hill area. But, if there is one thing to be learned it's that there really is no such thing as "New Wave" music at all.

When asked, lovers of popular music in Chapel Hill have attempted to define the term "New Wave." In almost every case the response is the same. First, the individual falls victim to a sudden tug of gravity. Then, grasping hold of the nearest stationary object to regain his balance, he looks skyward and sighs while shaking his head in amazement that such a question is even asked.

When pressed, most people come up with a definition similar to WXYC disc jockey Ken Friedman's: "New Wave is rock 'n' roll with a sense of spontaneity and urgency—not formula. It's music of change with somebody doing something different, always something different."

According to Alan MacDonald, who plays the bass and sings for the Chapel Hill-based Psuedes, New Wave is a "rebirth of music from the early sixties. It is based on learning from the experiences of the past."

Most people interviewed maintained that "New Wave" is just a convenient label to stick on all music that is new and exciting. The owner of a local record store claimed that the term is just a name record companies put on something to sell it.

The label "New Wave" may be far too broad. According to record salesman Dasht Hopes, "Some of it is for people who want to dance, but hate disco. And some of it," continued Hopes, "is for people who are into the art aspect of music, especially computer programmers, scientists, and chemistry and physics majors. They like strangeness."

Hopes explained that there were different types of local New Wave bands: "Some are very serious, like the Psuedes and the X-Teens. They don't tell the crowds they play for to eat shit and die."

Other bands, like the Cigaretz of Raleigh, currently seeking fame in New York City, have opened concerts by informing their audience that, "We're very bored to be here." It's rumored that the band once got so bored that they stopped playing in the middle of a set and began watching television on stage.

Another Triangle area band, Butchwax, is described in a local underground magazine: "They are contemptuous of everyone and everything within ear-shot or at eye-level, but stop short of spittin'."

Most musicians questioned were hesitant about labeling the music their band plays. Nothing short of interrogation by KAOS would have gotten one member of the new Secret Service to classify their songs. Curious folks can find out for themselves when that band makes its debut at the Cat's Cradle on June 13 and 14.

John Frierson was a member of a Greensboro-based rhythm and blues band until his group found female singer Suzanne Sexless and a new name, The Stimulators. Now they do New Wave music and are playing a lot more often.

Their music, Frierson stressed, is now more responsive to the audience.

Frierson echoed remarks by other musicians when he complained about a lack of local clubs to play in: "There should be a place where people know they can go to hear New Wave. If there was, it would make some money."

According to Cat's Cradle manager David Weaver, his club will feature new wave bands almost every Sunday night. "People are finally catching on to the music. It attracts a good, fun-loving, drinking crowd."

Also, look for new wave bands at the Station in Carrboro, Uptown Main Street

and the Sallam Cultural Center in Durham, and at the Pier in Raleigh every Monday night. The Cafe Deja Vu, also in Raleigh, is featuring The Fabulous Knobs May 23 and 24. The X-Teens, who play some interesting original material, will be there May 30 and 31.

Most area musicians are hoping that the obvious success of last weekend's "New Wave Sampler" offered by the Carrboro Art School will mean more bookings for their bands. At that concert, The Psuedes, the X-Teens, and the Dots from Durham played to a very enthusiastic full-house.

Ken Friedman, whose "Anarchy in the P.M." radio program on WXYC is a

favorite among local new wave fans, also sees a growing interest in this music around Chapel Hill. He predicts that more clubs and more bands will be surfacing in this area in the near future.

Friedman praised the quality of several local bands, indicating that some of the newer bands, like the Psuedes, have strong potential. He sees some of the more established bands, like the X-Teens and the dB's now based in New York, as likely candidates for national attention.

Dasht Hopes summed up the local new wave scene and the people involved: "It's all crap," he offered. "Obviously, everybody ought to be a farmer."

Popular local group plays familiar styles

By Sarah West

Chapel Hill is in many ways a mecca for music-lovers and music-makers, largely because of the local bands and musicians who call the town their home. One of the newest of these bands is the Psuedes.

Although the Psuedes only have been playing since Christmas, they already have acquired a large group of fans in Chapel Hill. Guitarist Mike Mandina attributes the band's appeal to the type of music they play.

"We play songs that people know and like to dance to, and we do them well. Bands that play the kind of music we do get a good response because of the nature of the music itself. As far as the fun meter, our music enables people to have a good time."

Alan MacDonald, the bass guitarist for the band agreed with Mandina. "Our song list really is appealing. We play songs that we like to hear—they're poppish and danceable."

Determining the appeal of the Psuedes' music is easy enough; putting a definitive label on the type of music they play is not. It would be simplest to categorize them as a New Wave band. New Wave is the in trend, and the Psuedes play songs by groups classified as New Wave, such as the Ramones and the Talking Heads. The band members themselves, however, hesitate to describe their style simply in terms of New Wave music. This is partly because of the difficulty of defining what New Wave music really is.

"We play a lot of old stuff from the early 1960s—songs by the Monkees and the Ventures," Mandina said. "New Wave is derived from this music, but it is a little different." He also said the British influence of 15 or 20 years ago was the "first wave", and that it was basically the same type of music that's popular now.

MacDonald terms New Wave as a feeling, a rejuvenation of music. "It's a whole new scene based on rock 'n' roll and a return to simplicity."

For Pete Gamble, who plays guitar and synthesizer, New Wave is a meaningless term, a catchy phrase. He sees the Psuedes' style more in terms of the mid-1960s power-pop, psychedelic music. Gamble cites the music of the 1960s as a strong influence both on Mandina and himself. Drummer Sara Romwebber defines her music as pop and classic rock 'n' roll.

Clearly, the band members do not define themselves merely as New Wavers, or by any other catchword. Rather, they see their style as a fusion of each member's musical roots. The disparity of musical backgrounds reflects the age span within the group, which ranges from Gamble, who at 30 is the oldest member in the group, to Romwebber, who is still in high school. Mandina and MacDonald are both in their 20s.



photo by Billie Gamble

Gamble, MacDonald, Romwebber, Mandina

MacDonald views the wide age differences and the mixture of personalities as a significant factor contributing to the band's appeal. And despite the surface differences, or maybe because of them, the band members obviously enjoy playing music together.

"We like the band," declares MacDonald. "The mixture of personalities creates more energy."

Gamble, who has been playing in bands for 14 years (the Psuedes is the 15th band he's played in), says the Psuedes is his favorite. "We have color—very few bands do. It's in the music we play and in the way we play it."

The band evidently intends to stick together for quite a while, and as MacDonald says, their intention for the future is to get better. Other plans include additions and variations in the band's song list. At present, the band plays only one original song, and while Mandina acknowledges the possibility of adding more original material, he doesn't seem to feel that original compositions should entirely replace the band's present song list.

"I don't feel any need to play original material if it isn't better than the songs we're playing by other people," Mandina said. "Actually, what we're planning to do about our song list is to gradually eliminate the songs we don't like until we just have one favorite that we can play for 2 hours. We'll learn to play that one about 30 different ways, maybe go with several different languages."

Upcoming gigs for the band include a return engagement at Cat's Cradle June 8 as well as a benefit concert at Butner. The band also has played at outdoor concerts and for private parties. Apparently, the Psuedes intend to concentrate on the Chapel Hill-Raleigh area. Gamble said he finds the people of Chapel Hill the nicest of any town he's lived in, and the bands better than in most other areas. Perhaps he summed up his feelings best at the end of their last concert—"Chapel Hill is the center of the universe."



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