

# Band seeks own sound

The Smoking Phones do not want to be known as another fraternity band that plays covers of old rock 'n' roll standards. They may be carrying around a reputation built on time spent playing at Chapel Hill parties, but that's fast becoming a thing of the past. And they have proof.

The group has had an EP out since last April, and it's good. They're in the process of phasing out every cover song they ever did and replacing it with their own material, which can stand up to the harshest of critics. And, perhaps most importantly, they're talented, confident and willing to give up everything to go as far as they can with their music.

The Smoking Phones are Lawrence Gray on guitar and lead vocals, Frank Liggett on guitar, harmonica and vocals, Frank's brother David Liggett on drums and vocals, and Rob Boyle on bass. They've been playing together for two years, and now more than ever they're taking what they do very seriously.

"I actually didn't think it would go beyond playing at parties," Gray said, "but it evolved into a really serious artistic thing. The problem was that we were in a market where no one wanted to hear original stuff. They wanted to hear songs they knew and could sing along with."

For a while, that was fine, but it wasn't really what they wanted. So, with the help of Lloyd St. Studios they made a record, composed of four songs so unique that about all they have in common is Gray's voice and intelligent, discernible lyrics. That versatility is one of the many things setting the group apart from other bands who start out playing at parties and wind up sounding like standard R.E.M. reincarnations.

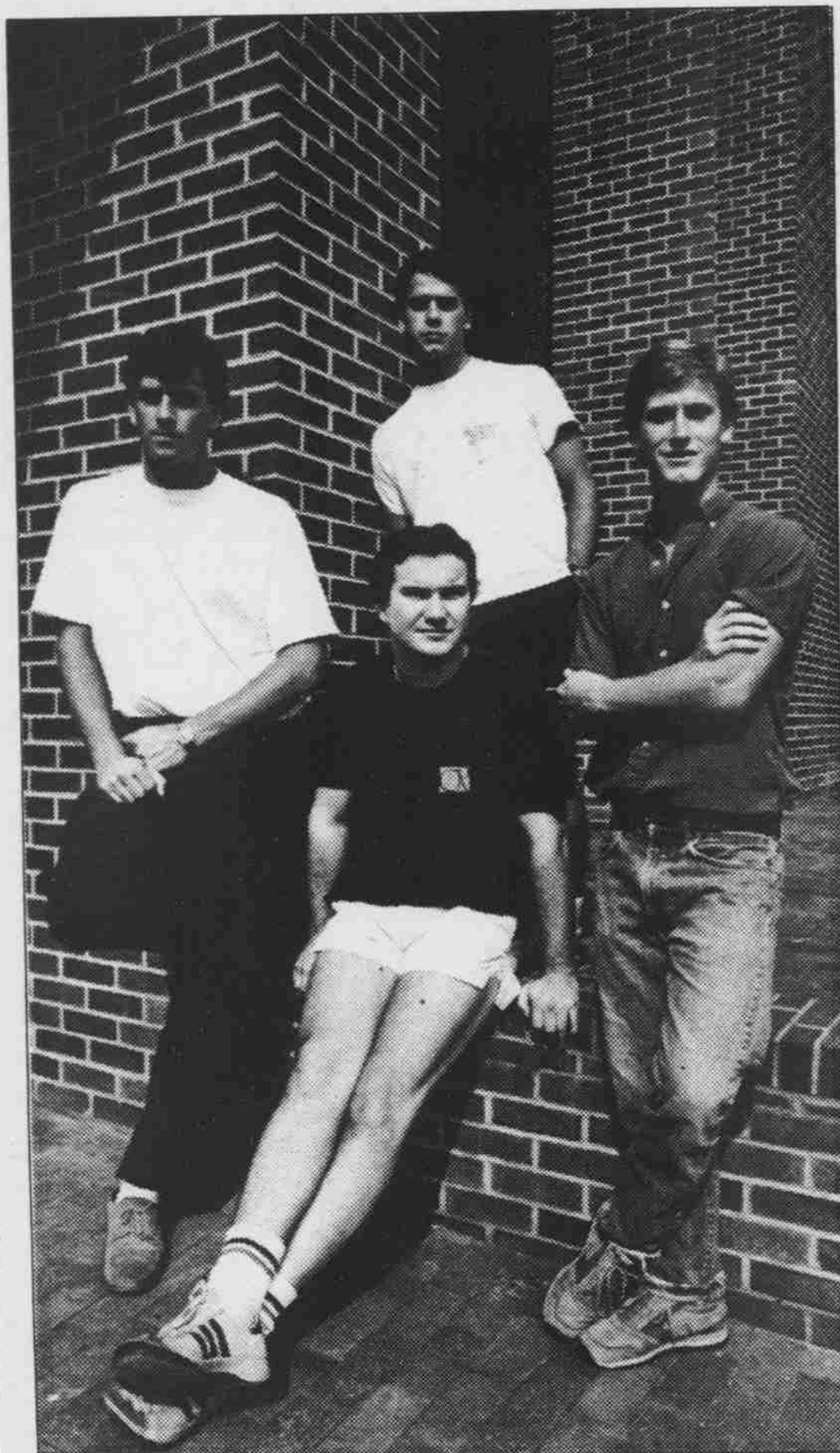
"I would attribute the songs sounding so different to the fact that we all listen to such a wide variety of music," Frank Liggett said. "David and I listen to a lot of CCR (Creedence Clearwater Revival) and blues," he said, "and a lot of that comes across pretty clearly, especially in the way I play the guitar."

It comes across also in the harmonica parts, compliments of Frank, who didn't learn to play the instrument until two weeks before the record came out. But he's good at it, and it gives the group's music an additional edge.

All of the group's members have musical backgrounds that pretty much speak for themselves. David Liggett started drumming at the age of 12 on a paper drum set from Sears, Roebuck & Co., while Frank bought an old electric guitar from a friend at about the same time. Gray, on the other hand, began on an acoustic guitar his mother bought him, and Boyle learned bass so well, he now puts all his own bass lines on most of their songs.

As good as Chapel Hill is for a band just starting out (as most college towns are), Gray admitted it's easy to burn out here, and they need to get other audience's reactions. The band has played in Charlotte and Raleigh and will be in Charlottesville, Va., within the next two weeks.

The Smoking Phones say feedback so far has been positive, and if that is any indication of their promise, they should fare well outside North Carolina and beyond. The EP now has its own, fairly obvious spot in Fearless Records on Franklin St., and Four Corners has been playing



DTH/Dan Charlson

Smoking Phones members want to break from frat band image

**Alexandra Mann**

**Bands**

it every so often for the past few weeks. The only place where support for the band has been erratic at best has been WXYC. According to Gray, the station heard that the Smoking Phones were a fraternity band and took the record out of the playbox.

Even so, the band still has Lloyd St. behind them all the way. Gray said David Stillson, who engineered the record, hopes to be able to give the band the opportunity to make an album if the EP does well enough.

Perhaps the only thing left to wonder about is how they came up with their name, which for all intents and purposes has no meaning whatsoever. According to Frank, it's probably the hardest thing they had to do as a band. After going through lists of potential combinations, Gray said the decision was made from simply picking two words from the dictionary that sounded good together.

"You can call yourself anything, and people might take you literally," Gray said, "but after they get to know you and your music, it loses that

quality and becomes something you don't even think about anymore."

This is probably what will happen as they get increased exposure and continue to assert themselves as a completely new and original band shedding their old image. The members are doing a lot of writing now, increasing their list of original songs almost daily, and they think things can only improve.

"We're taking this very seriously," Gray said, "but I still have this fear that people will think we're still the frat band they heard before. I have nightmares about becoming the Spongetones."

*The Smoking Phones will perform tonight at Cat's Cradle with Other Bright Colors.*

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