

ON STAGE

It's a miracle — and it's almost Christmas

Miracle Legion

Friday, November 30, 6 p.m. and 10 p.m.

Cat's Cradle
Tickets: \$12

You don't need to tell Carolina students what time of year it is; everyone with two finals on the same day can tell you exactly how many days there are until Christmas. It's the time for miracles, and you can believe that few students are praying for white Christmases.

Friday night will be time for a different kind of miracle: Miracle Legion, at the Cat's Cradle. Their current tour is the appropriately titled "It's Almost Christmas Tour," and for those students with school blues they'll probably even play "Blue Christmas" if you ask nice and have been really good this year.

Their new album this tour supports ... ? Love to tell you about it. Problem is, it doesn't exist. As frontman Mark Mulcahy puts it, there's really no reason for a tour except "the spirit of giving." Says drummer Spot, "We have a bunch of lights, a big Santa Claus, silk toy soldiers, snow and a few Christmas songs that we like to drag around with us this time of year." When asked to supply a sample of their current work, Mulcahy sent a 45 of "The Little Drummer Boy" and the aforementioned "Blue Christmas." You get an idea of just how serious these guys are in comparison to your run-of-the-mill rock band.

Formed in the early '80s, Miracle

AMANDA GRAVES

Concert

Legion broke ground as a quartet in 1984 with a critically acclaimed debut, "The Backyard." Strangely, they managed to do so without even moving to Athens, Ga.

They did, however, procure a label as R.E.M. clones, one they don't particularly agree with, but don't shun either. As one band member put it, "It's better than being compared to Bauhaus." Regardless, after signing with Rough Trade and releasing another LP, *Surprise Surprise Surprise*, and an EP, *Glad*, the future appeared to be fairly rosy for the Connecticut-based band.

Unfortunately, and perhaps befitting the acknowledged intellectual character of the band, it was about that time that two members decided being rock musicians wasn't a satisfying lifestyle. But unlike many bands so bereft, Miracle Legion chose not to throw in the towel.

Stripped to half the original lineup, Mulcahy and guitarist/instrumentalist Ray Neal, they went back to the studios (Prince's Paisley Park) to record their best work to date, 1989's *Me And Mr. Ray*, and subsequently launched into a tour with Iceland's Sugarcubes, somehow managing to create a viable, if somewhat sedated, "rock" show with the single voice and acoustic guitar setting common to folk music.

Sometime in the last year, Miracle Legion expanded once again, adding a bassist,



Miracle Legion in the bright lights

Dave McCaffrey, and drummer "Spot." Adding people, according to Neal, gives more flexibility and generally "allows you (the band) to do more things." The current "It's Almost Christmas" tour (the fifth of its kind) is somewhat shorter than usual, comprising only fourteen shows in two weeks. Although, as previously mentioned, there is no new album as yet, Miracle Legion does have about twenty new songs, some of which they will showcase during Friday's performance, and plan to record soon.

On stage, Miracle Legion exudes energy, but does so, in keeping with their contradictory nature, in a strikingly sedate manner, due in large part

to Mulcahy's stage presence, reminiscent of a two-year-old in a china shop who's been told not to touch anything. Clearly, performing his music works him into a frenzy which rivals that of any performer, but, much like Joe Cocker with his wild arm gyrations, Mulcahy's release is limited to almost gnomelike bouncings around and up and over the stage (and anywhere else he deems suitable).

Neal, on the other hand, rarely moves far from his spot on stage, gyrating his torso while grinding out guitar work and working up one hell of a sweat in the process. There are no

"rock star" poses here, and little of what one might even call dancing.

Friday night's show is a great opportunity to get a break from the pressures of exams, projects and other school stuff. As guitarist Neal says, it will be "fun but serious, serious fun." At last year's Cradle appearance, Mulcahy promised there would be a party afterwards, inviting everyone in the crowd but seemingly never saying where it would be. Who knows, maybe this time he'll even provide that information. Do you want to take the chance of missing that?

And, to quote Spot, at worst "it beats going out and fighting the shopping crowds."

King of the Nyle reigns again with warmth, humor

Nyle Frank

Friday, November 30, 8:30 p.m.

Skylight Exchange
For ticket information call 933-5550

Believe it or not, there was a local music scene of sorts before the invasion of post-punk and jangle-pop spinoffs. Amid the restlessness of the '70s, during the protests and political discontent, a young songwriter/singer/piano player/entertainer emerged as a campus cult figure. His name was Nyle Frank and he was king — king of the invisible universe.

You see, King Nyle thrust himself into the campus hotbed as an entertainer who quenched the campus fires with a healthy dose of collegiate parody and funny songs.

As a graduate student in political science at UNC-CH, Frank, perhaps a bit dissatisfied with his relationship with the political science department, began to create his own university, the Invisible University of North Carolina. The new "University" was

CHARLES MARSHALL

Concert

sort of parody on the traditional college mentality, offering satirical courses and sporting its own invisible intramural league.

And, in late 1970, Frank crowned himself "invisible ruler of the universe" in a ceremony complete with a performance of some of his tunes on a piano in the Pit. Attended by thousands, the ceremony seemed to give the students a refreshing dose of hilarity.

The political science department must not have taken the events as lightly as Nyle had probably intended them to. Philosophical differences caused the two to split. Nyle struck out on his own.

But lightening the spirits of the campus with his quick wit and entertaining skills was only a small part of his career as a musician.

Shortly afterward, Frank abdicated his throne and his image as "king," in an effort to boost his reputation as a

serious and talented performer.

And Frank is talented. An exhilarating pianist, a quality writer of heart-felt songs, and a crisp, witty, and charming vocalist, Frank possesses a diversity that places him in a musical element of his own. He doesn't write songs for the moment, based on trends and current cliches. Instead, he writes songs for a lifetime, about people, places, and things.

Despite his being his own personal visionary, the "lifetime" idea for his songs is no doubt folk-oriented. But Frank, in line with his collegiate parodies, doesn't follow the folksters into "cause" songs and political rhetoric. Instead, his songs are closer to snapshots of a storybook.

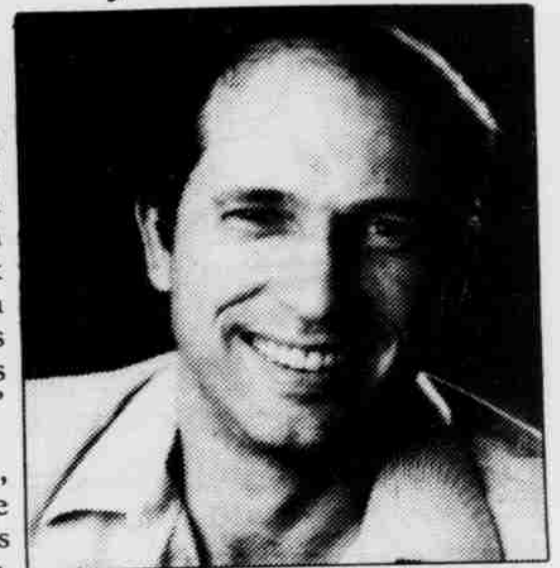
This style looks more toward the piano pop giants who followed him, like Elton John and Dan Fogelberg. In fact, Frank's picturesque, grassroots, homestyle ballads are snugged loosely in the semi-generation gap between traditions set by Bob Dylan and James Taylor, without really boasting relation to either. But Frank's classical pop ballads (that's the best way to describe them) show that most of his work comes from within his own

classical roots.

"Old Piano," capturing the life of a piano player, creates the famed teary-eyed effect, not through sadness, but through vividness. Frank can sit the listener in the window out of which he looks, in the fields through which he roams, or in front of the scapbook through which he browses. "Iowa city," and "northern plains" do this as well as any of the tracks on Frank's collection of songs titled *Comin' Round Again*.

Frank's new home in Nashville, Tenn., has kept him nearer to the musical environment and studios he's recently desired for his songwriting. On the cassette, he thanks the weekly meetings with the Nashville Songwriters Association, International and loads of friends for their support, displaying the same creativity and care he put into the songs.

Frank's *Theme From Hickory Hollow* is a compilation of piano classics. Playing brilliantly, he floats through melodies with a remarkable, ethereal style. He sounds strikingly like superstar George Winston as he plays favorites like "send in the clowns" and "i'll have to say i love you in a song."



Nyle Frank

These songs show Frank's unique craftsmanship, pooling different types of folk, pop and pure piano into a single classical pop style.

Frank has been gracing the Triangle again, rejuvenating his music and his image — classical satirist, skilled pianist and a generational pop hero who can write a ballad or tell a story as well as anyone.

You weren't old enough to see him before, so go see what you were missing.