

UNCA band plays first gig at New French Bar



Ian Hayes - Staff Photographer

Left to right, Ritual members Ben Melton, Dustin Allen and Paul Blackwell played the band's first show opening for Caltrop and Fin Fang Foom.

Music students combine musicianship with pure rock aggression

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Concert Review

In Asheville, a city that prides itself on a diverse music scene, it is increasingly rare to find bands that just plain rock.

One of the newest bands of this variety comes from UNC Asheville, a metal band called Ritual that has only existed for two months.

Ritual played their inaugural show at the New French Bar on Biltmore Avenue last Thursday opening for two Chapel Hill bands: Fin Fang Foom and Caltrop.

Dozens of new listeners witnessed Ritual's pummeling half-hour, three-song set. The untitled opening song received a loud ovation as it switched from slow and quiet to fast and chaotic with little warning.

"We don't really know what we're going to sound like yet," said guitarist Paul Blackwell, a UNCA senior majoring in audio engineering and music performance. "I mean, these are just the first three songs we have. It should be changing once we start writing together in the practice space."

Blackwell, excited about his first metal show in Asheville, could not have found

more suitable headliners. Caltrop and Fin Fang Foom appeal to a similar taste and the same regional fan base.

Blackwell and bassist Ben Melton played in a metal band called the Stolypins while they attended Chapel Hill High School.

"Paul and I were working on new songs for a while without a drummer around. We said to ourselves, 'One day, we'll have a drummer and we'll really do these songs,'" said Melton, a senior who also majors in music performance.

Soon after the Stolypins disbanded, Blackwell and Melton joined Myles Holt and Parker Simmons to form John Wilkes Boothe and the Black Toothe, who played a handful of shows in Asheville last year.

While Holt and Melton still play together, guitarist Blackwell split from the group to form Ritual last summer.

Melton agreed to play bass, and Blackwell got in touch with 29-year-old drummer Dustin Allen, who graduated from UNCA with a degree in percussion performance and has played in several Asheville bands.

According to Blackwell, Allen was looking specifically for a new band that was "heavy," despite his incredibly diverse musical education.

"I've incorporated a lot of schools of thought from my studies at UNCA," Al-

len said. "I studied Afro-cuban drumming, classical snare pieces, metal and punk."

"I used to set up five music stands with music from all of types of disciplines and practice switching between them. I'm trying to bring that attitude into my drumming," he said.

Blackwell and Melton also learned a lot from the UNCA music department, which affected each band member differently.

"For me, UNCA created the desire to oppose jazz," Melton said. "There's nothing wrong with jazz, I just don't like it."

"But, it's hard to say that school and music aren't interrelated," Blackwell said. "You can't prevent any aspect of life from having an effect on other parts of your life. We study music theory, and it's subtly inspiring when we play metal."

Ritual showed lots of potential at the New French Bar, playing well as a unit and nailing some dramatic changes in speed and tone.

Blackwell's lightning-speed solos were matched by Melton's quick bass lines, while Allen's double-kick pedal allowed for a wide range of tempo.

"I used to hate guitar solos, coming from punk rock. I liked the spirit of punk, but not the spirit of really good musicianship, which I always thought kind of ruined the music. But now I enjoy fast soloing be-

cause it's just really fun."

Blackwell enjoys progressive metal like Mastodon and Isis, while Melton attributes influence to Baroness, a five-piece metal group who came to Highsmith Union while on tour last spring.

"We're very influenced by Baroness' dynamic. They interweave their parts in such a way that it keeps you captivated for the whole song," Melton said.

Blackwell said that Ritual is similar to the music he used to play in high school. But over the course of three years, Blackwell gained a new appreciation for lengthy instrumental passages that require more attention to tone.

"I've been getting into effects pedals lately. I added two to my setup, and I built an octave-fuzz pedal myself," Blackwell said.

Ritual has found an excellent niche in Asheville's metal scene. The spirit of punk is still there, but there is no lack of professional musicianship.

"After we got in touch with Dustin, we had our first jam session at his house," Melton said. "We said, 'This works. We need to keep doing this.'"

Ritual's brutally loud amp stacks and well-composed distortion epics will hopefully remain a strong force for years to come.