

Gary Herb & Johnny Potato!

by Michael Baker

Doing a live act in a gay bar on a Friday night, with a crowd into heavy drinking and heavy cruising (like any bar in the world on any Friday night), takes guts. And if the crowd isn't used to live entertainment, it can be really tough. Just before press time, we received this letter from a reader in Raleigh:

To the Editor, Front Page:

I am writing to: (1) comment on the audience who saw (certainly not heard) Gary Herb and Johnny Potato at 42nd Street on October 30; and (2) to encourage your readers to see and hear them during their engagement at Stephen's/after all in Chapel Hill.

The reception given these entertainers last Friday night was an embarrassment. Live entertainment — really live — is rare in the area's gay bars, and performers of this caliber are rarer still. That the performers has to interrupt their act several times to request quiet was completely unnecessary. When Gary Herb had to stop in the middle of a ballad to ask, "Is anyone listening?" is an outrage. Is this how our community supports two of our own?

Many of us in attendance had come expressly to hear "two-thirds of GOTHAM," a group enjoyed and appreciated in the past. We were denied that, as they were denied even minimal consideration. The professionalism of the two performers was all, surely, that kept them from walking off the stage (although that was requested by several hecklers). They were gracious, and deserved so much more from us.

Already I'm beginning to hear gay people say, "No, I'm not going to see them. I heard from someone who saw them in Durham that they were terrible." This rumor is completely ridiculous! It was the audience that was terrible.

Their appearance at Stephen's will, fortunately, give many of us another opportunity to see them and, this time, hear them. Johnny Potato's lyrics span camp/clever/poignant — they need to be heard, and I look forward to that opportunity. Gary Herb is a versatile and extremely talented performer — perhaps the audience at Stephen's will appreciate that.

For the record, Gary Herb says he took no notice of hecklers at 42nd Street. Like a true professional, he concentrated on performing for those who were paying attention. When asked about last Friday, he told *The Front Page*:

"It went very well, I thought. There were about 850 people there and they really seemed to like us. There were some people

"This bright duo put forth a lively load of entertainment on its opening shot, zany original songs with an underpinning of oldies, or takeoffs on oldies."

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Fast songs mixed with faster comic jibes in a performance that was lyrical, uproarious, melodic and, er, raw."

— *Washington Post*

"A highly kinetic personality, Herb moves virtually non-stop. . . Potato provides a strong accompaniment and also does some solo singing with a Hoagy Carmichael-like twang."

— *Women's Wear Daily (!!!)*



(Reader's name is withheld by request.)

The *Front Page* was sorry to hear that things had not gone well at 42nd Street. I'm sure this is not the sort of reception that the management wanted. . . after all, they went to the trouble to invite Gary Herb and Johnny Potato to appear. Perhaps Friday night was simply not the right night to do it, perhaps there wasn't time enough to adapt the dance floor into a proper stage — who knows? What's discouraging about this sort of thing is that club owners may not be willing to try other live acts in the future, or ask Gary and Johnny back, and that would be a shame.

talking all around the back and I had to ask a couple of times if they were listening to us. But I was real pleased about it. I thought the crowd was wonderful."

For those, like most of the staff of *The Front Page*, who are planning to catch these two while they're in Chapel Hill, here's some background info:

The act known today as Herb & Potato was formed in June 1980. This isn't the first time, as many of you know, as partners on



Now is that a come-on or is that a come-on? (Treat Williams in "Prince of the City." How many remember him in the film of "Hair"?)

stage. . . both were original members of GOTHAM, the male trio which split up last year, shortly after their engagement in Raleigh, after working together seven years. Now as a duo, Herb continues his career as lead vocalist and ringleader with the deadpan Potato making his special mess at the keyboard.

Together after their four-year absence, Gary Herb and Johnny Potato have created an intimate cabaret act "using every tasteful gimmick in the book," Herb comments. "Even our grandmothers would understand this act," which includes Herb's impression of Ethel Merman sleeping with a hive of killer bees and such songs as "Supoena" (a spoof of *West Side Story's* "Maria"), a country and western satire called "You Want Me To Get You A Beer," "I'm Just A Fugitive From White FM," and perhaps even "Jesus Drives A Yellow Mustang" or the "Birth Control Blues." This outrageous musical duo will be appearing at Stephen's in Chapel Hill Wednesdays thru Sundays, now thru November 15. call (919) 929-0217 for more information or to make reservations.

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