

diversions

Thursday, October 24, 2002 ■ Page 5

■ Hellooooh Samuel L. Jackson calls up his posse in Liverpool to arrange nine holes and a power lunch to discuss how his new fashion approach will affect his love life. ... page 8



Candle's 1st Album Shows Sharp Talents

You've heard this one before. There's all this great music out there that you'll never hear — a few good albums that will never crack the popular radar, a dozen musical injustices that will never make it to the court of public opinion.

And a lot of music fans don't have the patience to sift through all the listless bins and find the hidden gems.

But Roman Candle is making it easy for you — the local band's first album is fantastic.

Says Pop is a left-field classic, a masterpiece out of the basement. It's effortlessly catchy and casually cool, thick with studio layers and a private Wall of Sound. It's a homespun *OK Computer*, steel from song to song. Imagine a younger Wilco, but more pop and less country. The band sounds like youth — fresh and invigorating.

But just because Roman Candle is young doesn't mean it's naive. The band is thoroughly schooled in rock history, and it shows.

The Matheny brothers are brilliant rock thieves, borrowing from their favorite styles and molding their own. Their sound defies genre — alt-country pop, singer-songwriter rock. Roman Candle isn't one genre or another — it's everything in between.

As solid as the dusty electronic production is and as sharp as the guitars, keyboard and drums instrumentation are, it's the songwriting of *Says Pop* that draws you in. The lyrics have real heart and a charming absurdist wit, and the melodies are ready-made to stick in your head.

opener "Something Left to Say" grabs you from the gate, muffled and distorted like a great song over a faint radio signal. You can't turn the dial — the rolling tune and fierce drums pull you along. Reverb-filled "Sookie" and "Driving at Morning" hint at an indie rock edge, a droning raucous side.

Softer "Winterlight" and quiet "Merciful Man" balance out the rockers with shimmering pop delicacy. There isn't a song on the album that doesn't fit. Like the best of records, when *Says Pop* finishes you want to spin it again. It's entirely to Roman Candle's credit that we want more. *Says Pop* is a diamond in the rough and is maybe even a little better for not being popular.

There's something privately magical about a great album or a great band that not everyone else knows about. It's a secret — a reward. If everyone liked it, it wouldn't be as special.

That's the indie ethos. Make it big and you sell out, play to a larger audience and lose your uniqueness. But Roman Candle makes a brand of rock that could, and should, apply to the masses — and it isn't a bad thing.

The band doesn't sell out or pander to do it — the songs are just that solid, that universally appealing. The melodies are fresh but familiar, new but known. It takes nothing away from *Says Pop* to say every rock fan could love it.

Roman Candle and *Says Pop* are great, and even the most die-hard indie fans would have to agree that it wouldn't be such a bad thing if everyone knew their music. Rock music as a whole would be just a little better and brighter for having Roman Candle.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

By BRIAN MILLIKIN
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

album reviews
Roman Candle
Says Pop
★★★★★

From Basements to

BRIGHT LIGHTS

Roman Candle sets rock scene on fire



ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF BRENDAN WAARD AND NICK PARKER

When Skip and Logan Matheny, brothers and founders of the local alt-country rock band Roman Candle, gave their original basement-burned CD to their "History of Rock and Roll" professor, John Covach, they didn't have any pretensions about pop stardom or dreams of big names and bright lights — they just wanted to make music.

Now, almost two years later, as Roman Candle prepares for a tour of the United Kingdom, a spotlight on MTV and a performance at the College Music Journal Music Marathon, one thing becomes starkly apparent: Nothing has changed.



DITH/MEREDITH HILL
Lead singer and guitarist Skip Matheny wails over his instrument Tuesday night.

"We gave Dr. Covach our CD during the first couple weeks of class, and at the end of the year we honestly had no idea if he had listened to it or not," said Skip Matheny, lead singer and guitarist of Roman Candle.

"Then we came in on the last day of class, during the exam, and our CD was blasting over the speakers. He made us stand up and wave to the whole class while he praised the CD."

"That was probably the single most inspiring moment in our musical career, even though it happened before our musical career really started," Logan Matheny said.

But that moment, despite modest intentions, lit the fuse of Roman Candle.

After Covach shared their work with their class, the brothers put the first Roman Candle EP, *Roman Candle*, on sale at School Kids — the Franklin Street mainstay for independent music.

"It was amazing how quickly people were buying our music," said Logan Matheny, drummer. "Every time we

would go into School Kids they would ask if we had anymore albums — and we were making every CD in our basement with our one CD printer. All of a sudden it was like we were popular. It was shocking."

Their album quickly became one of the highest selling at School Kids. As a result, interested calls from major labels began pouring in. Struggling to maintain complete control of their sound and also eager to find a label that would work with and not against them, the brothers finally got a phone call that sparked their interest.

It was Trevor Pryce, massive defensive end for the Denver Broncos and owner of Outlook Music Company, who promised the fledgling rockers the freedom they needed.

"When Trevor first called me I was driving a forklift in Portland. He said he loved what we were doing and told us that the last thing he wanted to do was put us in a studio with a producer," Skip Matheny said. "So instead he just bought us all new equipment and restocked our basement."

And it has been Pryce's flexibility that has let Roman Candle take its garage sound into the streets without ever leaving home. "Trevor has unyielding faith in our ability and vision as musicians," Logan

Matheny said. "And that is so flattering and fun — because we can call him up with almost any idea and as long as we can rationalize it, he'll give us the money to do it."

Riding on its local fame and the financial support from Pryce, Roman Candle went on a six-month tour with more than 70 shows that just ended in the town that birthed the group — Chapel Hill.

"This is still our favorite place to play because it feels like coming home," Skip said. "We can play a tiny show at a place like Linda's (Bar & Grill), and people will come singing our songs, and no one is afraid to tell us that they liked our work."

"That is the coolest thing — having a normal person just come up and thank us for playing."

And the diverse, supportive local music scene also inspired their work, Logan

Matheny said. "Chapel Hill is great because the music here is so innocent. You can see a kid walk out of a class angry — red-faced and bleary-eyed — but he can step up on that stage and forget all about it. ... And that is all we're trying to do, express ourselves."

But what started off as two brothers exploring their musical interest has exploded — and is garnering national attention. Roman Candle, in the coming months, has many places to go and people to impress.

Next week, the band will perform at the Cutting Room as part of the College Music Journal Music Marathon.

See ROMAN CANDLE. Page 8



DITH/MEREDITH HILL
Logan Matheny (drums), Skip Matheny (guitar) and Carter Gaj (bass) treat audience members to an encore song in the smoky downstairs bar at Linda's Bar & Grill.