

Spotlight

Local band Dillon Fence succeeds with 'bent pop'

The college radio scene in Chapel Hill — enigmatic names, young faces, simple chords and underground lyrics. How can a band distinguish itself from the pack?

"Sometimes I think we need Elvis to come back and join Dillon Fence," said Kent Alphin, one of Dillon Fence's two guitarists.

The members of Dillon Fence, not including Elvis, are Alphin; Greg Humphreys, lead singer and guitarist; bass player Chris Goode; and Trent Pitts on drums. Humphreys is a senior at UNC and Alphin is a 1989 graduate.

The band was formed two and a half years ago. "We started opening up for other acts at fraternity parties, and then we got to know Keith at the Cat's Cradle," said Alphin. "He really helped us out."

Alphin described how the group chose the name Dillon Fence. "We started talking about how a lot of our

Marla Lee Band Profile

relatives got married in Dillon, the closest town in South Carolina to the North Carolina border. We kind of wanted to keep the Southern rock tradition with the name, not be (something like) the Eclectic Test Tube Babies."

Rehearsals and concerts are different dynamics for the group. "When we rehearse, we usually work on new songs. Our old songs, we play so much, we don't go over them that much," Humphreys said.

"What rehearsals?" Alphin said. "We never practice."

Interaction between group members during a concert is an important part of the band's shows, Alphin said. "We're real silly. I'm more reserved than they

are. I spend most of my time laughing at Chris. He's a Tasmanian bass player. Greg's the smoothie. We're very different on stage. We try to give each other mean looks if we screw up."

Although the band has started playing engagements other than fraternity parties, Alphin said the crowds at those parties could be positive. "A lot of the time the crowd is less inhibited to throw a beer on stage," he said.

"We really feed off the crowd," Humphreys said. "If there's a good energetic crowd, we really put ourselves into it. If it's a pathetic group we get pretty lackadaisical."

The two agreed the band's best show was opening for the Connells at the Raleigh Civic Center. "Basically, because it was a bunch of screaming teenagers thinking we were some band from California signed on a major label, and we somehow got the same idea in our head," Alphin said, explaining why he

chose that performance as the band's best. "We thought we were hot shot rock 'n' roll stars for a night."

Audiences don't always act so enthusiastically, or even predictably, Humphreys said. "One time we were playing at a club, and a very drunk army guy, enlisted man, was screaming at us to play the (expletive) Clash for about an hour and shaking his fist in our faces. He finally passed out on the stage and threw up."

The band doesn't have a unified "look" for concerts; each member dresses in his own style. "Chris, he's definitely the heavy metal member of the band. He comes clad in leather, boots, cigarettes, and long hair. Greg and Trent are the cool fraternity image — the Duck Heads and a cool T-shirt. I wear plain jeans, a T-shirt, and my Pumas," Alphin said.

But being in a band isn't all games and glory, Humphreys said. "We're

putting out an EP ourselves on our own record label. But it's just been really hard, because we've been having to save all our money. And it's hard to get a sense of organization, to keep your sense of determination about the record, and to keep from getting demoralized."

Dillon Fence members say it's hard to pigeonhole their music. "I'd definitely say we have a pop muse," Humphreys said. "We're in love with the really good hooks you hum in your head. We try to add our own touch to everything we do. One reviewer called it 'bent pop' and I really like that."

Alphin agreed. "It's pop. It's funk. It's funk pop. That's exactly what it is. We've got a real clean sound."

The band has varied musical influences, including Elvis Costello, Jimmy Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, R.E.M. and the Smiths.

Alphin reflected on the group's

songwriting, and he picked "Why" as the band's best song. "It's about love and cars and alcohol," he said.

Humphreys chose "Preppy Deadhead" as the worst song. "It was just a jokey, campy satirical song of rich frat people — nothing meant to last. And now, when we play a fraternity, I'll see a fraternity, freshly-scrubbed guy with a tie-dye on asking us to play that song, and I wish I hadn't written it, because it makes them feel they have a legitimate existence."

The band has very definite goals, Humphreys said. "Hopefully, an EP in the second week of October. We're doing a double release with Satellite Boyfriend and we'll be mailing them out to college radio, selling them in the area."

The group's long term goal is to get signed by a record label, he said. "We would enjoy being able to make a living playing our music."

Juilliard Quartet opens season with outstanding performance

If Sunday night's concert of the nationally acclaimed Juilliard String Quartet is any indication of what is to come, the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild's 1989-90 season will be an overwhelming success.

As the opening performance of the season, Sunday night's concert in Stewart Theatre at N.C. State University was nothing short of amazing.

The four performers, Robert Mann, Joel Smirnoff, Samuel Rhodes and Joel Krosnick, demonstrated such talent for listening to each other while performing that they continuously achieved a beautifully balanced quartet sound at any dynamic level, whether playing classical or contemporary music.

The performers opened with Felix

Gretchen Davis Concert

Mendelssohn's Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Opus 13. From the quiet but purposeful beginning of the first movement it was apparent that first violinist Robert Mann was "in charge." The other performers looked to him for changes in tempo, followed his lead when he used rubato and watched him for all entrances and cutoffs.

Between the movements of the Mendelssohn there was complete silence — all attention remained riveted on the stage. The quartet's playing

demanding intense concentration, because the audience knew if it didn't pay close attention, it would miss something important and wonderful. The music was played with such obvious care and study that every measure was a significant contribution to the overall performance.

The dynamic range was exquisite in all movements of the Romantic Mendelssohn. The pianissimo phrases were so gentle and delicate, but still so clear and vibrant, that it was tempting to crane forward or even sit up on the stage just to be closer to it. Every climax and crescendo was treated as though it were the final breathtaking cadence. The performers also played with impressive rhythmic precision in

their bowing as well as their pizzicato. The Mendelssohn ended as quietly and serenely as it began, leaving the audience disappointed the piece had to end but satisfied because it had done so beautifully.

The concert continued with Stefan Wolpe's Quartet, in two movements, written for and dedicated to the Juilliard String Quartet. The music proved the quartet's versatility. The techniques used to obtain the desired effect (such as swooping slides between pitches) were decidedly un-classical. The piece is characterized by kinetic movement all the way through, and it aggressively holds the audience's attention by its sheer intensity. Sunday night's version ended with a single, independent note

held strikingly by the violist.

After the intermission, the performance was continued with Beethoven's Quartet in A minor, Opus 132. This five movement quartet was the centerpiece of the concert, demonstrating beyond any doubt why the Juilliard String Quartet has a reputation of matchless Beethoven interpretation and performance.

The first movement started hauntingly with a sustained cello note and soon grew into a full sound which seemed produced by many more than just four instruments. There was less a sense of Mann being the "director" in this piece; all the musicians seemed equally in control but still amazingly together. The harmonies and the tuning

were deftly handled throughout all the movements — characteristically Juilliard and characteristically Beethoven.

The middle movements were full of varied dynamic ranges, tempo and mood, but it was neither overdone nor mechanically carried out. The crescendos and decrescendos were played with glorious feeling, and the piece built up to the climactic fifth movement steadily and with increasing intensity.

The final movement was of a completely different character: a dancing melody with exquisite ornamentation. The performers handled this transition beautifully and continued on to end the performance with all the triumph and grace expected from Beethoven's music.

Energy, musical maturity highlight Michael W. Smith concert

The colored lights came up on his zebra-striped suit, the black and cream colored horizontal stripes of the oversized jacket clearly delineated on the dimly lit, foggy stage as Michael W. Smith made his way down a ramp with the words of his first song ringing out: "I'll help you find your way."

As part of his *i 2 (eye)* tour this fall, Smith performed at UNC's Memorial Hall Sunday night to an audience who enthusiastically received his Christian rock message — the inherent value and importance of being one's true self.

Helen Jones Concert

Unlike his efforts to concentrate primarily on rock and roll with the 1986-87 *The Big Picture* tour, Smith's present focus is on writing and performing the whole range of music he cares about, from hard-driving rock to mellow ballads and keyboard instrumentals.

Smith's freedom to express himself in many ways, regardless of what's hot in mainstream rock, showed Sunday night in his relaxed attitude toward the audience, as well as in the selections he played and sang.

Still primarily a "music man" who lets his songs speak for themselves, Smith made a pronounced effort to describe what has been happening in his life during the past few years. The music from his most recent album, *i 2 (eye)*, shows an added maturity and a more autobiographical picture than

previous music illustrated by the talented 31-year-old keyboardist, songwriter and singer.

He sang for two hours to a crowd of about 1,500, which was dominated by college and high school students, and he played most of the songs from *i 2 (eye)* and *The Big Picture* as well as a few old favorites from his previous albums.

Concert highlights included a spirited rendition of "Secret Ambition" that ignited the crowd after a set of mellow tunes. The song describes the threat Jesus posed to the authorities of his day and their confusion over his purpose.

Also on the fast-moving side, "Old Enough to Know" caused an explosion of dancing in the aisles, and "Live and Learn" continued the fireworks. Jud-

ing by their grins and energy, Smith and his band clearly were having a good time, and the audience ran with it.

On a more mellow note, Smith and lead guitarist William Owsley ended "Leesha," a haunting melody written out of Smith's grief over the death of a teenage neighbor in an automobile accident, with a unique keyboard and guitar duet. The two instruments blended the melodic line and complemented each other unexpectedly well.

In his introduction to "The Last Letter," Smith described a letter he received from a young man named John, who was about to commit suicide when hearing the song stopped him. In a moving gesture, Smith told the crowd, "I dedicate this song to any other Johns in the audience tonight."

In "Thy Word," a song written by Smith and recorded by Amy Grant, Smith quoted several verses from Psalm 139 during a keyboard interlude to amplify his theme of the individual's worth in God's eyes. Instead of preaching to the audience, he spoke eye to eye to them about his own experiences and involved the crowd by asking it to join in singing the last refrain.

The band members played well together, and their energy and excitement added a great deal to the performance. Keyboardist Mark Heimermann, who sported a Carolina Tar Heel T-shirt, and guitarist Owsley were especially enthusiastic. Guy Moscoso, on alto and soprano sax and flute, turned in notable solos on "Hand of Providence," "On the Other Side" and "Live and Learn."

Renee Garcia, the background vocalist, was also featured in a three-song set in the middle of the performance. She showed a talent for exciting the crowd, which the opening act, Margaret Becker, seemed to lack. Becker played six songs, primarily from her new album *Immigrant's Daughter*.

The show's chief flaw was the 25 minutes needed to set up Smith's keyboards and other equipment after Becker finished, evidence that all the kinks were not yet worked out on this third stop of a 40-city tour.

But Smith's outstanding performance overshadowed the lull created by the wait after the opening act. His confidence, ability to communicate with the audience and newfound musical maturity combined to create a concert with unmistakable depth and meaning.

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