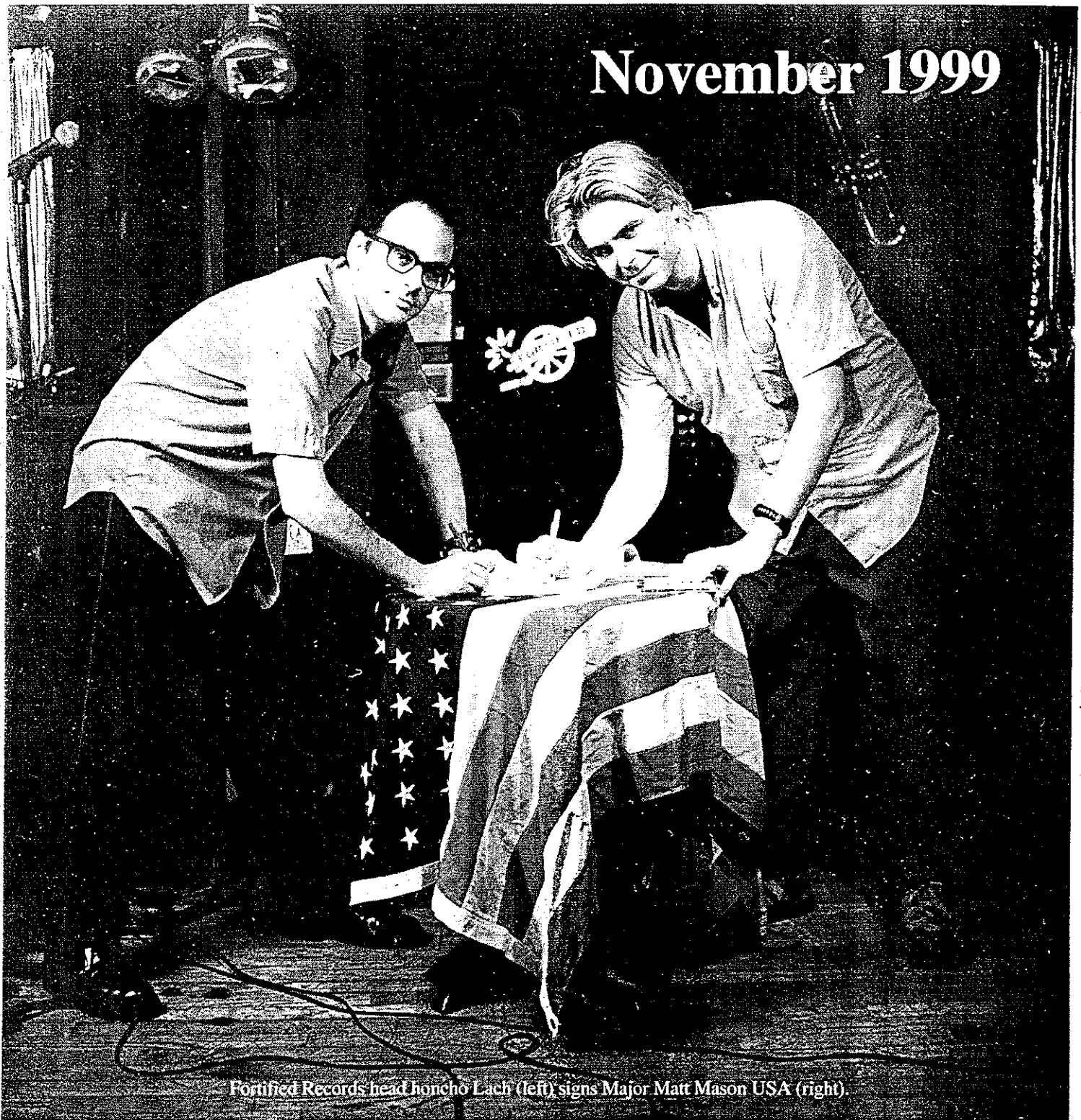


November 1999



Fortified Records head honcho Lach (left) signs Major Matt Mason USA (right).

New Releases! Full Throttle Aristotle
Featuring: Hamell on Trial

John Zecher on the band's new friend

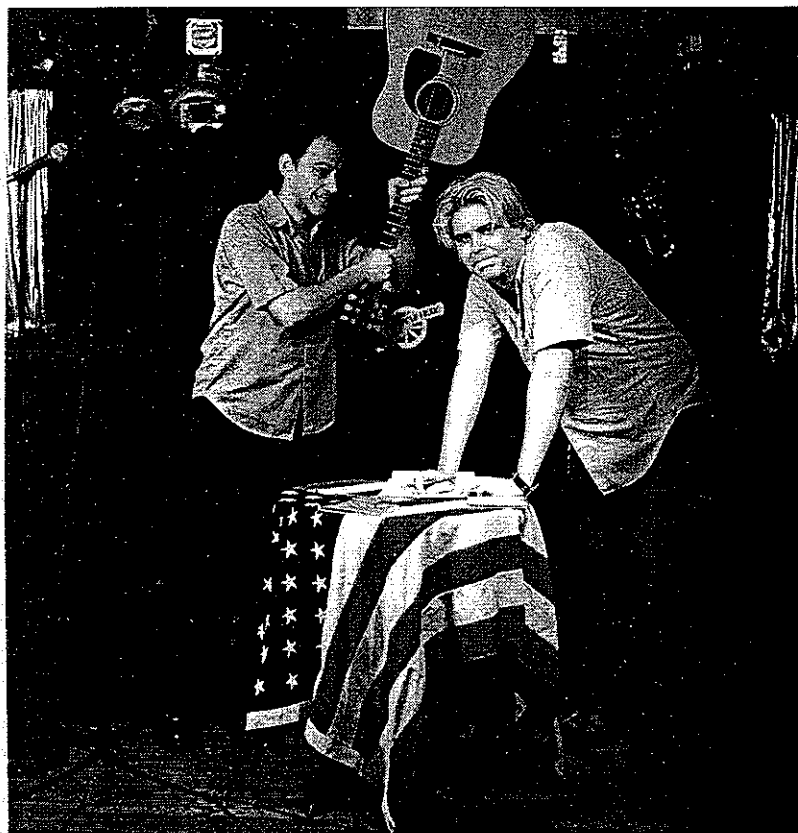
Major Matt Mason USA!

AntiMatters

CREATORS

Chico Bangs
Joe Bendik
Jonathan Berger
Peter Dizozza
Laurel Hoffman
Egils Kaljo
John Kessel
Dan Kilian
Jeff Lightning Lewis
Major Matt Mason
Gustav Plympton

Arbiter of Justice in All Things
Jonathan Berger



WHY WE DON'T SUCK (The readership responds!)

Egils Kaljo

As I sat back to read the latest issue of AntiMatters, I was quite surprised to read on the inside cover that I (and most every other

AntiMatters reader) suck. And this message was brought to me in big bold letters, no less. Public consensus on the issue previous (the infamous "Puppet Issue") was not positive. However, I think saying that "We all suck" is a bit extreme.

First, I don't expect to share the same opinion with all the other AntiMatters readers, nor do I intend to speak for them. These are my own simple thoughts, as my orbit, being a strange elliptical one, takes me to Sidewalk for a few weeks at a time, and then takes me to other distant places for the next few weeks.

I must say that I enjoyed the puppet issue. Though strikingly different than previous AntiMatters issues (and I've been reading AntiMatters for about a year and a half now) it still had that unpredictable and humorous feel to it. Though low on actual scene content and happenings, it still was a very entertaining read, after suspending disbelief about the fact that most of the issue was about, well, puppets. I liken it to when (insert artist's name here) releases an album that sounds completely different than the previous album. Once the listener gets over the fact that it's completely different, the listener might actually enjoy it. Same with AntiMatters.

But I can understand that the majority of the readers did not approve of the issue – which is fine! We cannot expect that every artist releases consistently brilliant product (well, besides Journey, of course) so if some release is less than genius, we voice our disapproval, but we don't abandon it. I should hope that few people stopped reading AntiMatters due to one Puppet issue. I disagree with Jon when he says "Did you contribute to the last AntiMatters? No? Then shut the fuck up." Besides being somewhat hostile to the readers who pay \$1 per issue, I don't think it is reasonable to say that. That's like saying I can't criticize the latest release from (insert artist's name here) because I didn't write any of the songs. Are we not allowed to hold and express opinions? I don't think we should just blindly accept each issue of AntiMatters and dare not offer our opinions on it – what fun would that be? As Jon says, "You know the community, right? You?" Yes we are a community, and, as a community, we have a right to express dissatisfaction when something is not to our liking. Some of us aren't meant to be writers – so we leave it up to people who can do it well (like Jon and the rest of the AntiMatters regulars).

To finish up this long winded rebuttal, I would agree with Jon when he says that he should be happy to know that his readers are so involved as to let Jon know when an issue isn't up to snuff. If AntiMatters stunk on a regular basis, then nobody would say anything! Besides, the issue after the puppet issue was yet another great issue – so no harm done!

My apologies for going on for such a great length and for wasting your time – I will return to my regular silence now. Thanks for reading!

Egils

Report from the Fort

October 7th, 1999 – Sidewalk Café

The problem was worse than it even usually is, and some nights it's pretty bleak. The talkers in the back half of the Fort were pretty overpowering, all but drowning out Mo, who soldiered through a fairly subtle set for the listeners in the front, & even Al Lee Wyer with his four piece racket and Morton Downey Jr. - inspired lyrics barely made a dent in the (and I hope I'm using the proper terminology here) ignorant pretentious pricks who couldn't be bothered to go to the talking rooms to expound to their so-called friends on whatever the hell they thought was so damned important.

But then John Kessel went on, dressed like he was the Last Goth In North Dakota, with a gentle eyeliner & a matching toque & zippered sweater getup that wouldn't have looked out of place in either a small town hockey arena or the runways of Milan, whichever.

So Kessel, with no introduction, played his urban folk blues real quiet, sliding the toons together so tightly that applause might have drowned out an entire song. His off-key voice matched his off-key guitar like I'd bet Howlin' Wolf's once did, and suddenly I realized the back room was starting to finally, finally quiet down. Then John took his guitar off & sidled into "I Thank The Lord I'm A Country Singer" like he was singing the National Anthem at Game Seven of the World Series or something, letting every reverb-wet line resound into the walls and absorb into the soft, thick skulls of the (and pardon me if I'm getting too clinical with the terminology here) self-important jerkwads in the back, turning a three minute stomper into a freakin' opera. Right into the middle of the henhouse he stalked, taking every inch of the mic cord to get as far into these onanistic dicknoses' personal yakyakyak and circle jerk space as he could, which was pretty damned far. And those who didn't shut up left (of course), and as he led the slightly smaller but infinitely more fervent remainder of the crowd in the closing "yodelay-heeeeeeee"s, he put the mic down and wandered out of the bar, like some hipster hillbilly exorcist driving the chatter demons out the doors and into the street, to be run over by stoners in Beemers with cell phones of their own on Avenue A.

I don't know who that masked man was, but I'd shore like to thank him. (*Chico Bangs*)

October 27th, 1999 – Raven Bar

If you looked closely (meaning: if you're a nosey motherfucker) at the sign-up list at the Raven's Open Stage, you could see a relatively early number given to a four letter word. Lach was # 11, or some such. At his own open mic at the Fort at the Sidewalk Café, Lach usually gets # 0, and whatever other number he may want, but maybe he doesn't pull that kind of weight at the Raven.

Of course, he probably does. The Wednesday night event at the Raven is an ancillary event to what goes on every

Monday at the AntiHoot. Many of the same unusual suspects hit both clubs to ply their musical wares. Joie/Dead Blonde Girlfriend runs the Raven's Open Stage, and is one of the most religious attendees of the Monday Night AntiHoot. Is it any wonder, then, that the spirit of the Raven on Wednesdays is so similar to that of the Sidewalk on Mondays? And no wonder then, that Lach, seemingly absent around sign-up, got a number that put him around prime-time... say, eight thirty.

Lach had, in the four plus months of the Open Stage's existence, not come down to experience the wonder, the majesty, the glory of the little brother scene. Having until recently run sound on Wednesdays at the Sidewalk for Rick Shapiro and other various/sundry acts, Lach had never had the opportunity to come out and play.

But with schedule changes and a leather jacket on, Lach hit the Raven around seven forty, ready to do whatever it was he was ready to do.

Which was read. When he approached the non-stage, an empty space with a couple of mic stands straddled by pole-vaulted speakers, Lach held not the guitar he often wields, not the lyrics to new or ancient songs he'd worked out for piano (just as well, since the Raven has no keys to open such tunes), not anything but words. Lach was going to read poetry.

Which is strange. One of the pull phrases that Joie throws around for the Raven is "Do what you want – except comedy." Poetry, another spoken medium, particularly as performed at the Raven, always smacks suspiciously of the comic. Would Lach pass muster?

Well, of course. He opened with an invocation.

"This is not an open mic," he read, stentorian-stylee, and went on to tell us what else it was not. It's a piece about being an artist and what you can expect from your community building, artistic experiences. It is the kind of thing he pulls out, every now and again, at his own scene, just down the avenue from the Raven. It also seemed like a way for Lach to credit this open mic as having being bonded to his own. His reading felt like an initiation into a brotherhood.

He went on to read a new piece called "Apple Days," which was a summoning for Autumn. Very short, but compelling.

And he read something new, at least, to me, about '82, describing all that was going on for the author those seventeen years ago, all the hopes and dreams, some of which were clearly dashed, some subverted, and some easily achieved. It, like "Apple Days," had a melancholy spirit. It smacked of twilight, and was a new, vulnerable kind of art for Lach. Not what you'd expect from him on his own turf.

His set was short, his set was great. Lach offered up new art to a new club, and showed how the spirit of his brainchild AntiFolk can embrace the new beautifully and powerfully.

(*Gustav Plympton*)

THE CRUELTY-FREE ADVENTURES OF MR. GUSTAV PLYMPTON

October 18th, 1999 – The AntiHoot was well underway, and I was sitting in my back corner, quietly viewing the proceedings. You may ask why I stick to the back corner, why it's my home away from home, and I might tell you, but not now, not just yet...

The regulars were out in force, but few of them acknowledged me. They knew my name, but my face, it confuses them. Just as well. I'm fine with the few, the proud, the select who can ID me.

That Poet Boy's one of them. He's the one who brought me here in the first place, the one who brought me out of my shell, and, despite our array of differences, I guess I respect him for that. Normally, he comes by my back area with a kind word or two, which I promptly spit back in his face.

But the Poet Boy gave me no opportunity to abuse tonight. He was keeping his distance, sitting alone among the crowds up front, near some of the regulars – the Voices, Kessel, Testosterone Kills, but clearly, was not with any of them.

As he made one of his frequent perimeter sweeps of the club, anxiously scanning faces, I did what I'd never had to do before. I gestured for that Poet Boy to join me.

"What up, G?" he said. PB never tires of that tired crap.

"What up yourself," I asked, "Everything smooth with you?"

"S'all good, all good," he replied, never lighting an eye on me,

"I'm just maxin' and relaxin', checking out who's around –"

"JB," I said, "You're not from the streets. Give up the jive."

He jerked around, checking the audience again. Normally, in conversation, PB doesn't look at you too often; he's always glancing, hoping to chance upon the Next Big Thing to be coming in. That, or chicks. Better if it's both in one, of course.

"What are you looking for this time?" I said.

"Just waiting for, waiting for my muse to hit the door."

I nodded. I've checked out the Poet Boy's shows. His material comes in spurts, and it often seems to have thematic links, plot links, things that suggest that his source of inspiration is always easily peeping through the fictional cloak it wears. His source material seemed obviously individual-oriented. I wasn't surprised, then, that he used muses. Nor was I surprised that when some short, long-haired cutie hit the entrance, he hit near it right away.

The poet's huge amorphous body shrouded her completely, kept me from recognizing just who it was (I haven't been out that much lately anyway), but that was fine, since I had other things going on.

Small, sandy Duane had taken the chair next to mine, along with Marilee, and, I think, Jack Grace. Duane was right by my side.

"Gustav," he said, slapping my hand, "What's going on?"

"Not enough," I said, "Haven't seen you too much lately," I was bluffing. I hadn't been around much lately myself.

"Been busy at work," he replied, "And, you know, I haven't really been feeling the music lately."

If there was a mirror, I might have seen myself arch an eyebrow. Scrappy little Duane always is into the music. He explains when he reaches the microphone that he performs as therapy, to get out all the bad energy, and to feel good. The

idea of him not feeling his muse seemed inconceivable.

"So what're you doing here?" I asked, but I didn't quite hear the answer. By the entrance, the Poet Boy had ended his conversation with his little cutie, and, free of his typical maniacal jerky gait, trudged back to me.

"Hey, Duane." He said, "Marilee, been a while. Mr. Grace."

They all said hello, and went about their business. The Poet, looking down at the ground, seemed to have no business to get back to. Still, he found somewhere to go after a minute.

"What's with him?" Duane asked.

"Dunno," I shrugged, "So, what's your number?"

"He seems down."

"I guess. Maybe he's just not feeling it tonight. Maybe," I said, "Maybe there's something wrong with him."

"Hm..." Duane said, and I scanned the scene, looking for individuals to inspect.

The Poet Boy kept on coming into my view. He doesn't stay still too much, often distracting the crowds with his loud conversations and his specious attempts to ply his wares. He keeps on moving, which is distracting for my people-watching tendencies. Still, people seem to tolerate him all right. It didn't look like he was performing that night, as he wasn't fiddling with papers, just aimlessly wandering.

Soon enough, Duane hit the stage, wearing none of the extra equipment he so often carries. Just one guy and a guitar.

His first song, "My Time's Gonna Come," is, like so much of Duane's material, reminiscent. It sounds like an 80's "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" kind of anthem. It's not. It's his own, but it has that epic power ballad feel. As he performed, our Poet seemed to perk up, particularly around "I hear his eyes are pretty, and his hair is cute, but that's not enough to be my substitute." PB seemed to be picking up some of his regular spasmodic dance moves for the slow number.

But things really hit into gear when Duane sent out the next song as a dedication, and hit the power chords that start up his Fort hit, "There Must be Something Wrong with Me."

That Poet Boy scrunched up at the front of the stage at the beginning of the number, pacing in his backwards facing chair, until the first lines were sung, at which point he threw the chair down and started jumping around the club like a fucking inmate. Running and twisting and slamming into air, he used the back wall and the front of the club as his own personal rubber-room, endangering all that were in his way. Thank god, I realized, not for the first time, that I prefer it in the back.

"I can't believe the state I'm in..." Duane sang, and then, was joined, from somewhere in the club, by the Poet, who screeched along, "There must be something wrong with me."

It was a horrifying moment, a freakish moment, and embarrassing moment, but a lot of fun to watch from the safety of the corner.

At the end of the song, Duane put out his hand, and the Poet Boy, sweaty, exhausted, lungs pumping, clasped it, and they hugged. It felt like some kind of therapy had been achieved.

And is it too arrogant to take credit for the moment? I don't think so. Just arrogant enough...



Got a question about love, dating, or Kansas? **Ask Major Matt.....!**

"Hey, Major Matt, how does one maintain a long term relationship with someone?"

Why don't we worry about the longevity of our relationships with animals? Why don't we fear not having our needs met by our favorite little four-legged companion? Why don't we worry that perhaps our cat is not being honest with us? Why don't we fear that some day we will wake up and realize that all of the love and time and compromise that you put into building a strong relationship with our pet ferret, or iguana or bird was somehow not as special as we had originally thought it to be?

Because we know what we want from them and we know what they can give us. We feed them. We love them. We introduce them to our friends. They lick us. They greet us when we get home. They show loyalty.... Okay, this also has a lot to do with the fact that we keep them locked up in our apartments and walk them with chains around their necks... All that I'm saying is that we can learn a lot by taking a closer look our relationships with animals. No, I'm not saying that the next person you see you go up to and start sniffing their butt... What I'm saying is that a starving dog will love a lamp-post if it thinks it will give it some table scraps.

Relationships between people are a little more complex. So, hey why not try getting some help? How about a therapist? It's not just good for you; it's kind of fun. Just act like you're in a Woody Allen movie. Oh, I know what you're thinking. "Therapy? Isn't that for crazy people?" Uh, well, no... not any more than vitamins and minerals are for sick people. Don't think about it like you're going to the doctor... Think about it like your going to the gym. It's exercise for your mind. And I think that if you take a closer look at the process of therapy you just might notice that the people who are most opposed to it are more often than not the ones who need it the most. If you're in a relationship think of it as a really intense date. And if you factor the price of a diner and a movie you'll probably find that the average couple therapy session is not that much more expensive. Anyway most health care plans provide for up to 10 sessions with a real live therapist for just a ten dollar co-payment per session. Totally, cool huh. Look into it! If you don't have a health care provider then there are a lot of therapist who work off of a sliding scale depending on your income. And if you still don't have the money ask your parent's...chances are they've got a little bit to do with the reason you need to go in the first place.

Having a hard time maintaining a relationship? Listen to your mind. Maybe you shouldn't be in a relationship right now. I went for a year and a half once without a single date and I don't think a day went by where I didn't think about it. I thought I was gonna go crazy so I got into therapy. I went to a group with five annoying people who had the same problem as me. I hated it. None of these people made me feel any better. They bored me...everyone seemed so passionless... So, ended my relationship with them and got a new therapist and started going to restaurants and movies alone and reading a lot. And then I really started to enjoy it. And then I started using the telephone a lot more. I called up friends. I organized group outings. I adopted a stray cat.... And uh oh yeah, whadda ya know I fell in love with someone...

----Any more questions? (all questions will appear anonymously)

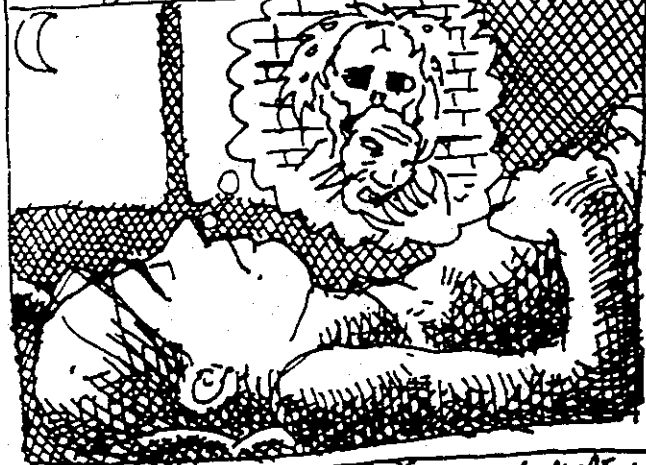
majormattusa@earthlink.net

or write:

Ask Major Matt
C/O Olive Juice Music
P.O. Box 20678
Tomkins Square Station
NY, NY 10009

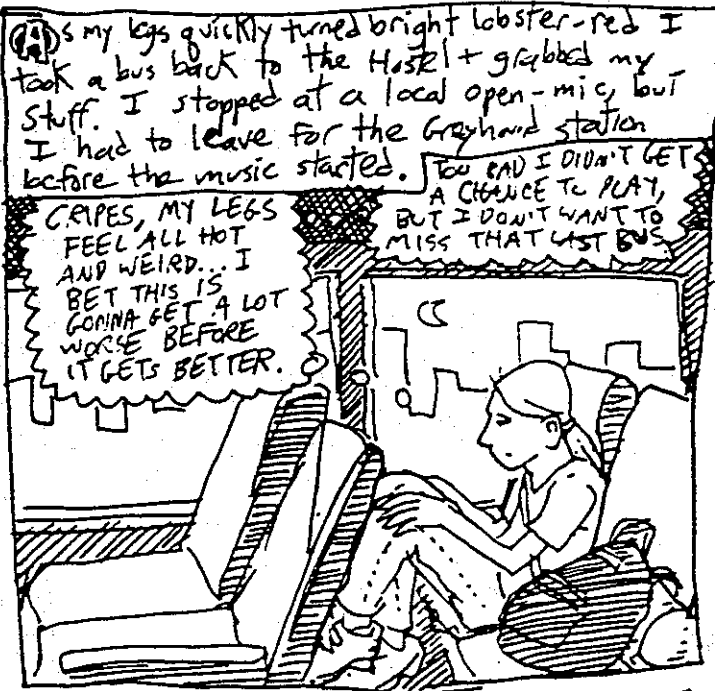
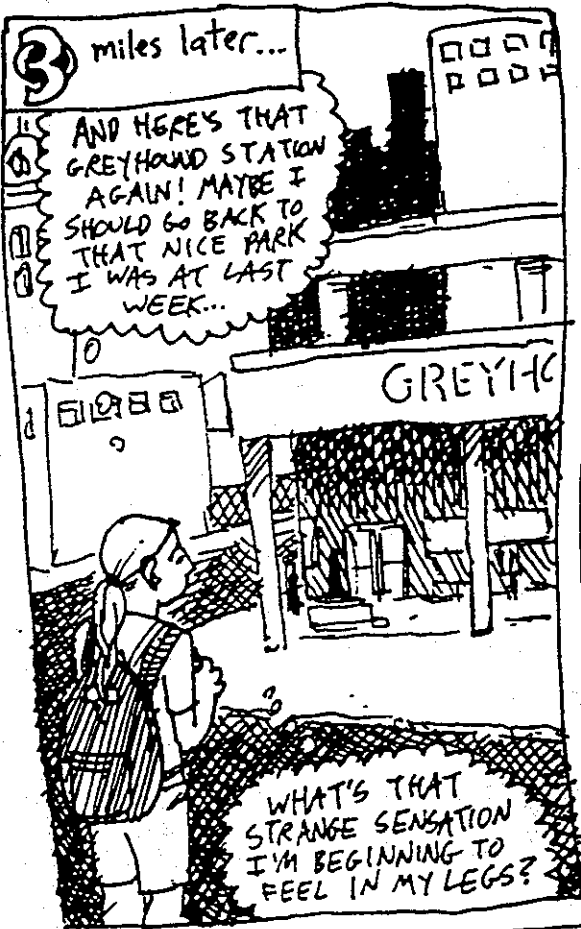


Anyway, that was the other fascinating thing that happened to me that day. I spent the night at the Youth Hostel + met a girl named Judith who knew my old college campus. Then I had a fucked-up dream about a woman who was in prison so long that her face fell off.

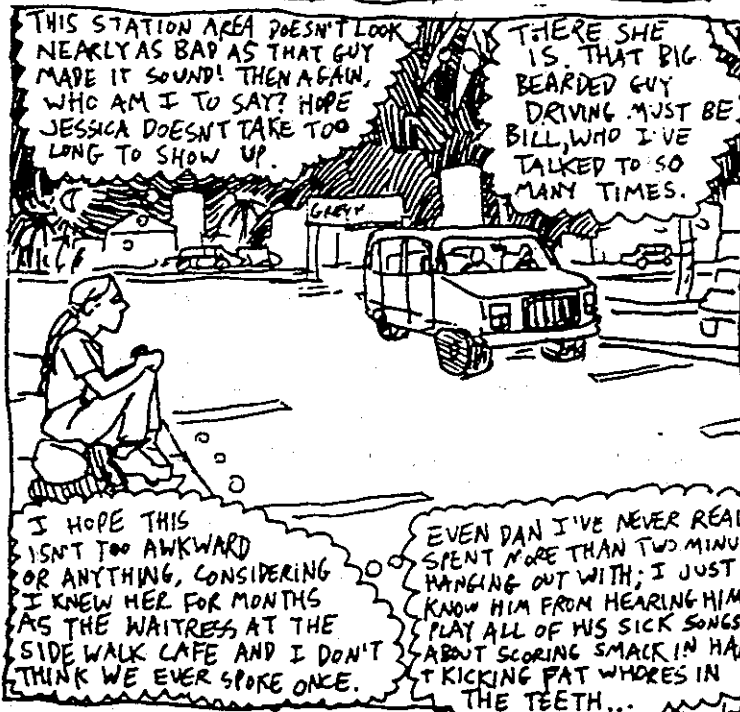


The next day I figured out where I was in relation to the Greyhound station.









Meet Full Throttle Aristotle

It's a strange thing listening to the new FTA album, Meet Full Throttle Aristotle

and not for the obvious reasons. Sure, they're a weird band, quirky, strange, freakish even (all meant in the best possible way, of course. That Mr. Tom Warnick looks pretty mean in his two tone sports coat), but that's some of their appeal. That's not really what makes listening to the curious rhythms of this great 11-song CD so strange.



It's the repetition of it.

Full Throttle Aristotle (Warnick on guitars and most vocals, Anne Kadet on keys and some vocals, and Pete Solomita on drums) is by no means a jazz band. They are

not a jam band, and they are not an improv band. And yet, for every performance, the band's interpretations of their songs vary distinctly from the way they played them before. Led by Warnick's high-energy vocal antics and avoidance of his own guitar virtuosity, FTA seems to never use the same arrangement twice.

And now, on familiar cuts like "Invisible Man," "Into the Sea," and "Giving Me the Business," with the same

three piece arrangements that were constantly innovative, incessantly new, now, there's a standard. Now, there's something familiar and customary to get used to.

This would be a much bigger problem if the sound weren't so good. Produced by former band-member Jason Reese (also including his special guest star saxophone), it's all crisp and good. "Burning Up" rocks, as does "Get Home" – one of the Kadet

originals – and another, "Oriental Nights"

sways along.

There are more songs on the CD than usually

Kadet CD than usually their too-infrequent shows.

Another great thing about the sound: the group's lyrics are not obscured by the wall of sounds the three-piece produces. You can hear just about every word, if not necessarily understand them (I'm told by fuller fans of Full Throttle Aristotle that the lyrics all make sense if you just listen right. Maybe I'm just too left-leaning).

The album, clocking in at less than 35 minutes, flies by like simply no time at all. It's just too short. And, as the versions of the songs get even more familiar, it gets shorter still. (*Gustav Plympton*) (www.mp3.com/fta)

(Lyrics available at <http://www.angelfire.com/ny2/fta/>)

I've often said that when the neo-swingers catch on to the fact that they're making inferior clone music and try to do something unique, they'll already be two steps behind Full Throttle Aristotle. FTA's never done neo-swing, but they definitely absorbed that sense of classiness and style, while playing zippy pop tunes that are their own completely. It's probably too smart for most, with the constant onslaught of overspilling word-gamery, but it's not too smart for me, or for your sharp readers.

Tom Warnick is one hell of a guitar man, with, again, his own style, but he wisely refuses to abuse it, briefly augmenting his clever songs rather than drowning them in technique, and his lyrics are much more direct than one would guess on initial listen; they all tell a story.

While Peter is the comic foil and the drummer, Anne is the even keeled stabilizer onstage, her keyboard surges providing the momentum for Tom to careen off of ecstatically. Always emitting some amused glow and a classy weirdness, Anne's presence is key to the idea of the Band. Like a snazzy Exene, once you get past her hiccuppy vocals, you hear her songs are excellent, symbiotic, yet contrasting to Tom's.

Not just expert songwriters and exciting performers, Full Throttle Aristotle's members are very nice, giving people. Even though they don't really, play the game, you'll find they have many allies in the scene who count them as dear friends. I am proud to consider myself one.

(*Daniel Kilian*)

Carbon Monoxide

Let's get something straight here. You are not the Goddamn messiah. You are not the Voice of Truth. And even if Rolling Stone asks for your opinion, you are not the Spokesperson for Your Generation. You are, and you should have the guts to admit it, an *entertainer*. And if you can't do your job, there are thousands in line behind you who know how to do it better. Now get to work and *entertain* somebody.

One thing I can't stand is a songwriter who thinks they are going to save the world. These people are usually the biggest failures as entertainers, at best a laughing stock and a self-parody. Does the self-righteous sanctimony of being a 3-chord didactic thrill and titillate you? Well, It may help if you expand your worldview by reading up on current events from more than one point of view, for starters. But if you want to keep my ears on, you better have some different spin on the subject, or at least say it in an interesting way. Politics suck. It's a dirty job done by usually corrupt and dirty people. Basically, you are unequipped with the adequate knowledge to proselytize. Reasons why you are attracted to writing the 'topical' folk or rock song are dubious, but not unclear to me.

The 'Protest Song' genre is attractive to songwriters who have caught on to it as a device to win audiences over, in the case that they are preaching to the converted. It's in many cases, a cynical business ploy. Most protest songs rail against a huge menacing Authority; in other words the singer is basically projecting rage against Mommy or Daddy or whoever didn't let them buy beer when they were 15. Deep breaths, protest singer. Count to ten and punch the pillow.

The roots of the protest song, emotionally at least, derive from a Testimony of Righteous-ness. In other words, a secular church! You radical radicals should just listen to more Gospel! That's good music. But not so good for *understanding human nature*. Protest songs seem to be most popular with young teenage collegiate types who are just emerging from their sheltered existence and discovering, "Hey, maybe the world *isn't* what it may seem?" Drunk with indignant fury, they parrot what the subculture deems the important revolutionary things they can do, which usually means benign, selfish causes (eg: marching for pot, urinating in public, vandalism, etc.)

Self-indulgent whining is not entertaining. It could be, if you learn to write about politics from a personal point of view. It's not about the cops being pigs, man. It doesn't take a genius to know that the police are professional bullies. It's about how you feel. There was some loser on the open mike the other day with a song with a premise about guys who want to act like jerks because he knows a cute girl in a relationship with a fella that he thinks isn't cool. Fine (...dope!) But then he hijacks the song into a 47-minute tirade on how the audience is just as bad as his nemesis, because they are his scapegoats for land pollution, water pollution, air pollution etc. Silly hippie, how about *noise* pollution? Your ideals don't save a bad song. Talk about a failed parable...

Then there was this over-the-hill anarcho-punk duo, both behind the times and their SAT's. A sad cliché of an act, they had a charisma-free rant set to 4 chords; berating the US (which I personally don't have a problem with) and endorsing anarchy. Sure, Einstein, I like that Sex Pistols, too. Did you read the words carefully, though? It's *not* a manifesto. It's a clever pop ditty, using metaphor and personification. And, if Johnny Rotten was an Anarchist, I don't think he would have settled his score with McLaren before a court of law.

A few well-worn proverbs for ya:

Write what you know.

Never confuse movement with action.

Opinions are like assholes. Everybody's got one, and thinks everyone else's stinks.

- **Barry Bliss** doesn't talk to people. He just sits and stares, taking it all in. When this lanky, bald, chapeaued man in black steps up to sing, he rips the enamel off your teeth. The dexterity of his voice is spastically acrobatic. His dynamic devices are not tranquil, they are exorcism. Intense? Oh yeah. Look out for him at the Raven open mike. And talk to him. He'll be nice. Then he'll perform and make your bicuspid feel itchy.

- Love that **Jeff Gaynor**. The kid from New Jersey who's groomed like a playing card King? Watch him rock some McCartney-style ragtime on the piano. Watch him do the 60 mile-a-minute dash to the 12 string for equal prowess. Watch him run back. Now stop watching-LISTEN!

- Did you know that **Peggy Starcastle** rocks? If not, you poor thing. Not that she is a career musician, but she is more talented than you. And you over there, and uh, you too. She is quitting her demanding graphic design job so she can play open mikes more often than quarterly. I think her

first Sidewalk feature comes around next month. All she does is sing and play acoustic, but like, so *intense*, man! I love that, when the chicks rock out? Hey! Do you know who's getting flack for being intense?

- **Jude Kastle**, -that's who. I've heard from people that her enthusiasm is affected. So what? *My* enthusiasm is affected! Are they questioning her sincerity? Maybe they should say her enthusiasm *looks* affected. You think it's the Axl Rose-style dance steps she's doing? They be imitating her when she's a star — you'll see. This Georgia-bred guitarist and singing chick, who does a lovely rendition of a Lach composition entitled 'Beautiful', claimed that she had never played piano before. I mean, it wasn't Rachmaninoff, but she played the keys better than I could (I, who have been playing piano for 20 years — apparently in an inappropriate fashion). I get a sense we have a character on our hands with a public image horse sense worthy of Garth Brooks.

[And it is with this column that I say goodbye. I love you so much that you made me sick. I enjoy so much of the music, the free drugs and cars, the supermodels and the carney folk, but I guess I should have been in it for the money. Any smart person knows that the cabbage is all that matters if you want to live in New York City. So I am leaving all the bands I have sat in with, freeing myself to deal with my eviction and to get a real job. I have failed to make my living, and if I don't make enough cash to move away, you may be able to catch my act on the F train...]

johnkessel@netscape.net

The MAJOR Interview

Major Matt Mason has been part of the AntiFolk scene since the mid-nineties, becoming one of the rising stars that hit the Sidewalk right around the time that the Fort set up residence. Crowned an early king of AntiFolk, selected as one of the artists to stand up and be heard on Shanachie/Fortified's Lach's AntiHoot album, deemed the nicest guy to ever escape Kansas, Major Matt Mason recently signed with Fortified Records to present his epic CD, Me Me Me, to an eagerly awaiting public. At least, they will eventually become an eagerly awaiting public... Finally, in the pages of AntiMatters, in the interview format, Major Matt Mason speaks.

MMM: Hum...

This sort of feels like, to me, when you're like in bed fantasizing about that big Rolling Stone feature on you... when you finally get to reveal to the world you life's philosophy and like guarantee your place in music history. But when it really happens you realize that you just really like the idea of beautiful anonymous women, who don't know you, wanting to have sex with you. Or like the day of a show you think up all of these really cool and funny little anecdotes to say in between your songs. But at the actual performance you get so worked up you're working as hard as you can just to remember the words... And then there's songs about songwriting, props to Jeff Lightning Lewis... or interviews about interviews which this has the potential of being.

AM: Ed Hamell suggested that the interview should just be one word answers, based on your stage persona.

MMM: What Hamell said is very funny... But writing songs and talking about songs are very different to me. At the risk of sounding very cheesy it's like talking about love and making love. It's got to do with clarity. Profound simplicities that tie things together without being contrived. How's that for a deep thought?

One of my biggest fears is becoming a character of myself.

QUOTES

"Brandishing a sharp reciprocal wit, minimalist-folk rock troubadour Matt Roth has landed in the groove and stays there for sixty minutes creating an album that on first listen is just as fresh as repeated turns. Escaping the wimpy indie-pop tag by emphasizing world tested lyrical poetry with a compelling melodicism and expressiveness." - *Green Mountain Music Review* - May/June 1999

It's like that guy Gilbert Godfrey. I met him. He's a really nice, intelligent, polite, quiet guy. He's nothing like what everybody thinks of when they think of Gilbert Godfrey... But he knows what works for the character he plays and he can just turn it on and off. I'm sure that the actor Gilbert Godfrey is a part of the real Gilbert Godfrey, but just a small part that he sort of blew up so that most people could easily understand and remember him by.

I'm really not sure how I'm perceived as a songwriter and a performer. And with just the few reviews I'm starting to get on the CD I'm already starting to get an idea of that.

AM: What idea are you getting? Where have you been reviewed so far?

MMM: Jack Rabid from *Big Takeover Magazine* said that Me Me Me is "filled with the beauty of truth." And that's probably the nicest thing that anyone could say as far as I'm concerned. But at the same time it scares me because as soon as you start getting a nice compliment like that and you start thinking about promoting yourself and maybe really trying to put yourself out there somehow the idea of being truthful or genuine has the potential of becoming just another marketing strategy. And then that gets really weird. Like some sort of politician who tries to gain the support of the people by acting like he or she is just like everyone else. I've always been a firm believer in the "common worker." I'm especially interested in the service industry. Like some times it feels really good to serve people. Work is something that brings all people together and pretty much everybody has hated or loved their job at one point in their life. And this is really interesting to me. It's like the same thing that brings you down can also be quite validating at times. The truth is as soon as you try to seriously market yourself to a general audience and you think about trying to do this full time you realize that people aren't really that interested in common things. A lot of people - me included - thrive on the volume and flashing lights to escape the daily grind. I guess I'm not really that different. I just prefer using words and ideas. I actually really enjoy listening to and making music without words too though. I just think that there's so much shit out there you need to really make sure that you're contributing something to the world as well as helping yourself. Anyway, I've already talked to people about how to market



The Major Matt Mason USA Interview

aspects of my songwriting and performing, which is really really weird to me, because up until now I have made some effort to let things happen naturally. This all ties into one of my favorite themes, which is giving simple things that happen naturally a deeper meaning through exploitation and displacement.

But, I think things get creepy when it's the other way around, when things are created to be big and try to come off as something natural. I think that is pure entertainment. And I like that sometimes. But that is not what drives me the most. It's true that simplicity a very important theme for me though...

AM: Fortified seems to be offering support on getting the word out on Major Matt Mason. How'd the deal with Fortified come about?

MMM: I've known Lach for about 7 years now and what can I say? I owe so much to him. He was offering me gigs when I didn't even feel like doing this anymore. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself and I'm forever indebted to him for that. I sort of dropped out for about 6 months and I wasn't really playing out. I was learning how to really enjoy being alone and I got a couple of gigs doing voice-overs for TV commercials. It's like my goofy, white, Midwestern accent had finally paid off for something. It sounds kind of sick but it provided me the cash to make my own CD and start Olive Juice Music. I ran into Lach at the post office one day and I told him that I'd just finished Me Me Me. He wanted to get some more stuff out on Fortified and he had some solid distribution connections with Big Daddy so we struck a deal. It really feels good to be able to contribute to as well as benefit from a scene that I owe so much to. And I think with some hard work and support we can help bring a little more attention to some of the wonderful talent that circulates around this little scene in the East Village. It's really quite special. I know that sounds cheesy but I really

QUOTES

"The beauty of truth fills this CD. Urban folk songs for the disenchanted and the enchantable. This is a very intimate look inside the thoughts and dreams of a young singer songwriter who views the world in a light that faded for most of us too long ago. You can find some connections to the songs of Simon Joyner or Daniel Johnston, but MMM has his own voice, and that voice is like giddy poems written while lost between your heart and your home." - Jack Rabid, *The Big Takeover*

feel this way. There are really some profound voices floating around that deserve to be heard.

AM: Who are some of the voices you think should be heard?

MMM: Mike Rechner Kick ass! Jeff Lightning Lewis, Tom Nishioka!!! John Kessel! Joie DBG! They're all better than three fourths of the shit that's out there.

AM: How'd Me Me Me come about? Are you satisfied with it?

MMM: I feel good about the album. Really good. I was alone while I was making it - alone meaning without a girlfriend - and thinking about how I was going to do it though I didn't write all of the songs the whole process of making it and recording it was therapeutic, and great.

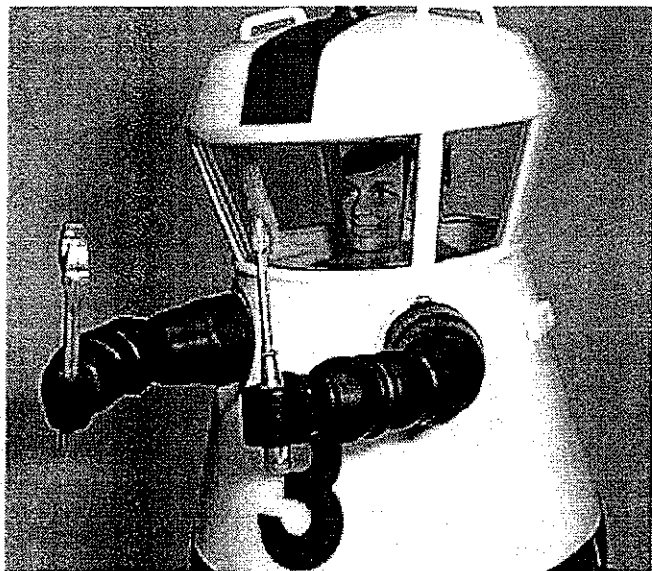
QUOTES

"If Jonathan Richman, Michael Stipe, and Billy Bragg became one super human being, that creation would sound like Matt Mason. I took quite a liking to this album. It represents serenity in the rat race of the music world with all those homogenous bands out there."
- Cindy Wong, *Pop Culture Detox* Vol.2 Issue 6

AM: How were you thinking about recording the album? How long did recording the album take?

MMM: Recording took about two days. Mixing took about three or four days. I edited it together on Pro Tools and did all of the little things in between. The original recording was done on an A-DAT. We recorded 8 different tracks at once with 8 different mics. It was really cool. I'm a sound engineer so I really get off on this stuff. The funny thing is that most people think that it's a slacker low-fi kind of album but we put a lot of thought into how we mixed the 8 different mics for each song. Looking back it may be a little subtle for most people, but Tom and I put a fair amount of thought into figuring out the right combination of mics to fit the personality of each song. I clearly wanted the album to be a more intimate listening experience but I also tried to work within levels of that realm. Since we basically had two elements to deal with, my guitar and my voice, a somewhat limited source of sound, which is how I'd always wanted to do it, we really got into atmosphere of each song. Okay, maybe I'm getting too deep. I never really wanted to put a band behind it. I was paying for it. I'm trying to sell it. Maybe on the next one. But I really wanted this album to be all me. I know that it sounds sort of self absorbed, but it was really a self-empowering thing for me. I play this low self-esteem game with myself quite a bit. And for the past few years I think that I was really starting to believe the guy on my shoulder with the horns a lot more than the guy on my shoulder with the wings. I don't know what it was that got me out of it. Probably a combination of a lot of things, including this album, but I guess that it sort of turned out to

The Major Matt Mason USA Interview



be my sort of "Song Of Myself." Which I'm hoping that others with similar feelings can listen to and relate to and maybe even find some sort of peace in....

AM: Is Me Me Me an album in conjunction with your label, Olive Juice Records, or has Fortified bought them out?

MMM: I own Olive Juice Music. It just gives me more freedom and control over my own music. Of course I'm learning that it's a lot of work, but I think that it's the only way. I'd really like being able to help other people who I like, just as Lach has done for me. And I hope that the success of Me Me Me will help me to do that as well. I'm talking to Tom Nishioka about releasing his latest project Never Louder than Lovely, on Olive Juice before the end of the year. It's very exciting. And I've been recording some kick-ass stuff with Mike Rechner, lately. It seems only logical that we should all be working together on the business sort of stuff too. There's nothing more frustrating than talented people sitting around just aching to get signed... expecting some rich record label to just take care of them. I know some guys who got signed to a big label, a three record deal with A&M. They got dropped after their second record and now the last I heard one of them is selling drugs to get out of debt. It makes sense to keep it in the family. This is not to say that it's not a lot of work. I'm starting to discover that trying to become a full time musician is harder than any nine to five I've ever had.

AM: How do you write songs? What's your average process? What inspires you?

MMM: Quite often they begin with lines that I overhear in public... just passing people on the street. Living is New York is great for that. I try not to worry too much about writing a great song right off the bat. I like to begin with just coming up with a really good sentence. And then when I have a few I'll write them down and just say them over and over in my head for a while and then if something happens, great! If not, they're in the notebook. It's kind of cool – you build up your own little encyclopedia, so when you have a song that's almost finished and you need somewhere to go, I can go to my little notebook of stuff. I overheard this crazy guy on the F train say six months ago. It's amazing how it all fits together sometimes.

AM: Do you ever work with others as songwriters? Do you collaborate?



MMM: Yes. I put together a band with Nan Turner from Bionic Finger. We're called "Schwervon" and I can't tell you how wonderful it feels. I've played guitar in other bands before but I've never collaborated with another songwriter like this and I think it's really incredible. She's incredible. It's a purely collaborative effort, which started out to be sort of a couple's therapy experiment. But I really feel like it's taken off. We've got about six songs and I'm very excited about performing and recording them. It's more rocking than the Major Matt stuff. It's electric guitar and drums. We do a lot of back and forth vocals and harmonizing. I feel it's a perfect progression for me. My original inspiration for writing Major Matt songs was a way to deal with failed relationships – I think this is pretty clear in the content of my songs – but I see Schwervon, as well as the subject matter of the songs that are coming out of it, as a way of dealing with successful relationships and that can be just as challenging – if not more so...

QUOTES

"Along the lines of an on-target, crooning Daniel Johnston, Mr. Mason has the uncanny ability to write songs that require minimal instrumentation but offer unusually striking repartee. Need a break from twee-pop, noise-rock and drum 'n' bass? Hitch a ride with Major Matt Mason USA, and he'll tell you all about Me Me Me without any excess musical baggage to weigh you down." - Splendid E-Zine June 14

THE BARRY BLISS PHENOMENON

by Laurel Hoffman

I met Barry a year ago in Berkeley. My singing partner, Brian, and I had made Berkeley our first stop on our way to New York City. We decided that, at the open mikes, we'd blow in, sing, and blow out again, doing our best to go up first so we wouldn't have to listen to anyone else (West Coast open mikes are not the Sidewalk open mike, by any stretch of the imagination). Our second open mike was at a place called the Bison Brewery. A friendly, long-haired and bearded young man approached us and, noting our new faces, struck up a conversation and gave us a small card bearing the name and number of one "Barry Bliss." He said he sang at this and another open mike at the Starry Plough, and said he hoped to see us there, as well. Our trip was to last 3 days, but the Starry Plough open mike was possible for us, so we said he would. We signed up for the #1 slot that night, sang, and split, to gallivant around the Telegraph area by the University so Brian could check out the coeds and I could immerse myself in the trash.

We saw Barry at the Starry Plough 2 nights later. By that time we'd gotten an in-store show at Tower Records for the following Saturday and Brian had met a girl, so we were due to stay for at least a few more days. We considered perhaps staying that night long enough to watch Barry, but I think Brian and I both kind of had dates that night, or at least something better to do than watch yet another of the endless, barely mediocre "songwriters" we'd seen. So we somewhat gracefully bowed out, but told him of our Tower show. He asked if he could take pictures. We said okay.

When Saturday rolled around, I, at least, had forgotten Barry had said he'd be there; people say they'll be lots of places. But while we were casing the joint and getting ready, I picked out from the fluorescent lights and colours a man in black that somehow looked familiar, and then connected the walk to the name and realised Barry had actually arrived to take our picture!

Barry has a pleasant southern drawl (he's from Virginia) that's fun to imitate. Barry looks like Jesus, the way all men with long hair and a full beard do – I wonder what is hidden underneath. Barry's eyes are open so wide he exposes their pink rims – and he *looks* at you. And Barry did what he said he was going to do.

We inform him we're leaving the next day to continue our journey to the East Coast. He asks for an address where he can send the pictures once they're developed. I give him my parents' address in Newbury Park. We say goodbye after our show and thank him. Later that evening, Brian talks me into staying a few more days.

So we see Barry the following evening, Sunday, at the Bison. Brian has a date, but I decide to stay this time to watch Barry play. He likes me, and I might like him, except when I look at him I think of suicide. I don't know what to expect of his performance. It's obvious he's well-liked in this musical community, but he's so engaging I don't find that to be anything other than as it should be. He plays 2 songs. When he's done, I don't quite know what to say. I tell him the truth – I've never seen anything like it. When Brian returns from his date, I tell him it was amazing. The

underbelly of it is that it was so intense and unusual, I felt uncomfortable watching (I tell Brian this once we're back in our motel room alone), but that it was indeed an experience. I am dumbfounded and I don't know what to make of it.

Sometime in between this night and the next Bison open mike, Barry and I start spending quality alone time together. Our budding romance falters after only a few days, though – he tells me some of the off-the-wall philosophies he's come up with that I just won't swallow and spit back in his face – but there is mutual respect and unadulterated honesty between us that draw us together despite our differences.

A week after my first Barry Bliss experience (I mean his songs!), Brian and I are walking to the Bison and I am lamenting that Barry is not The One and I'm going to have to call it quits. We sit outside and talk of various things. I am facing the building – a window – to watch the passers-by unobserved. Barry walks past behind me and into the bar, but he's changed. He is bouncy! He is smiling! He seems lighter! He is bald! My jaw drops and all of a sudden I fall completely in love with this reformation. Brian watches it happen and knows. Brian stays for Barry's performance that night and has a similar reaction as I had, but, nonetheless, sees the shining genius. Having had time to overcome my initial shock, this night, for me, Barry was no longer uncomfortable. Barry was enthralling.

Barry's music, in general, starts off slow and insinuating, building a surreal yet obviously true-to-life story. He describes characters in sublime detail, in situations that I would never find myself in, yet portrayed so personally, I find myself in them ["Cynthia's standing in front of her antique, full-length mirror/Realizing within that her end is indeed drawing nearer/She's hoping that nobody downstairs on dope can possibly hear her"]. He sets his stories naturally enough, but then inevitably lifts the characters above and beyond a 2-dimensional reality. An uninitiated audience will miss the careful preparation as he quietly mixes his ingredients together. Barry will shock them out of their disregard when he's good and ready, though – his voice soaring to the height of its power, his lyrics snapping even the most banal of us to attention. He begs judgement, offering everything he's got up for examination. He jerks and flows with apparently very little thought to his surroundings, caring only to share his passion with the rest of us. And, rather uniquely in my experience, he pulls it off. His sincerity and genius and eloquence and talent blend into something that is like nothing you've had before – a delicacy of the rarest sort. I can discern some influences – I will occasionally hear Bon Dylan, Cat Stevens or Ian Anderson – but detecting garlic doesn't make dinner any less delicious.

Throughout his tortured tales of clarity, exalted power and pathetically misguided will, he offers a peephole into your own brain, your own version of the ideal, in showing you his. And once he's said what he has to say, the song, the window, the way to another place, is abruptly shut. You can breathe again. And whether it escapes you as a sigh of release, ridiculing laughter, a cheer for the journey, or silent shock, you will be moved.

"There's some kind of force of nature/Pouring directly through."

Reviews

Major Matt Mason USA -Me Me Me (Fortified)

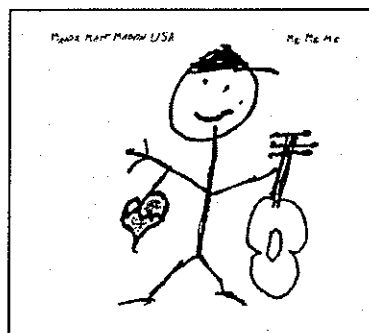
When we pitch all our beans together and decide if we have enough for soup, decisions will be made. What does this CD mean to *me*? Was it merely the best document by a songwriter from the 'AntiFolk' scene originally released in 1998? Or one of the greatest rock albums of the decade? Maybe I am full of beans, you ponder. I may have to elaborate.

This debut album by Matt Roth contains a remarkably original lyrical vision. The songs herein display a sort of philosophical manifesto, where constant absolutes like "always" and "every time" and "the only thing that I can see" spur opposing reactions that are seemingly indisputable, at least until when Matt shrugs, "whatever..."

There is no other voice that is like Major Matt's. If you say Michael Stipe, you haven't been listening closely enough. I think he has more in common with the soul of Steve Malkmus. MMMUSA's plaintive mowl drives home emotions so raw and bold you will be very confused of the motives of his characters. Even as you hear him clearly pronouncing lines like, "I'm sorry/that I didn't get your name /but what is in a name/what I can't get in a number" you are misty and are inexplicably moved to sympathize for the protagonist. Whoa.

Modest Matt is probably the only artist on our scene who has achieved a studio album *that both conveys his live sound and holds up as a justifiably creative production*. All you have here is his guitar and vocal. However, engineer Tom Nishioka arranged about eight different microphone placements on the Gibson acoustic, resulting in many contrasting overtones that get mixed in and out (check out the weird quivering on "Krooklyn"). The results are startling. Magic Major Matt is also responsible for the between song sound design, which basically sounds like he was laying tracks in a crowded apartment or in the middle of a construction site (not to mention the prerequisite backwards masking.)

Despite these broad sonic brush strokes, Maudlin Matt USA retains countless false starts and mid-song glitches that seem like flippancy toward his own material, as if he only wanted to do one take of anything.



Somehow, like those old homemade Daniel Johnston tapes, they become a seamless part of the arrangement upon the second playback.

Oh yes. The fucking melodies, everywhere you turn. Marvelous Matt's lyrics, at first like abstract quipping, get a different layer deeper each time I hear it. I will take this CD to the grave with me, not that I am in a hurry to die. Is it soup yet? (*John Kessel*)

(Olive Juice Music - P.O. Box 20678 - Tomkins Square Station - NY, NY 10009... majormattusa@earthlink.net)

Joie/Dead Blonde Girlfriend:

White Trash Symphonies, Volume II -There's a little of everything on this latest release from AntiFolk favorite son, the continuously ridiculously named Joie... Dead Blonde Girlfriend.



The album starts with two studio cuts, "Burning Bridges" and "World So Small." They're underproduced gems, just a boy and his acoustic instrument (Well, "World So Small" features some ethereal feminine backup vocals that improve matters tremendously, but otherwise, it's the solo thing all the way through), and, particularly with the rarely performed "Bridges," the cuts sound better than live. Joie, by simply pushing **Record** (Though, likeliest, AntiFolk's *wunderkind* producer boy Spencer did the actually button-pushing), has documented his live sound, only it's better. "Bridges" is rawer, more powerful than it sounds in concert.

This could be proven conclusively if it were included in the next segment of the record. Because, on Track Three, Volume II veers left into a live concert from the center of AntiFolk activity, the Fort at the Sidewalk Café. It's the artist's performance from the 1999 Summer AntiFolk Festival, way back in August. What took Joie so long in getting the album out? Who knows? The hours since Joie released his previous limited run White Trash Symphonies, Volume I seems like an eternity ago.

The concert's good, except when Joie opens his mouth sans music. A little bit of editing of the between-song speechifying would be great, or, at least, identifying those as separate tracks to avoid. Far as I can tell, Joie credits the AntiFolk community as being the only place left in New York City - and America, for that matter - where Joie can express truly express himself through constant profanity (I'm certain that's not what he meant, but...). The music's good, with "Me Against the World" and "My Struggle" being cool, hummable examples of Joie's art: Outsider/Loser Struggling Against a World Gone Wrong.

And the audience does what an audience is supposed to, raving with Joie in Village Anthem, "Bleecker Street."

Then, after the nine-song live set, Joie returns us to the studio for some more minimalist production. It's nothing different from what we've heard a moment before, just less

Reviews

clapping and much better sound. Not just the production, which is really simple, but strangely, with no one watching, no appreciative crowds to applaud him, Joie seems more invested in his performances. "Now You're Gone," a song that would probably, for anyone else, a ballad, sounds more powerful than it ever has before.

Putting these two elements, the Live and the Recorded, right next to each other, it's almost as if Joie's offering alternatives as to what his future holds. Joie's been threatening the world with a studio magnum opus for a couple years now, saying he'll challenge listeners with strings and horns and - god help us all - multi-tracking (already in slight evidence on the six included studio tracks). With the hints he's offered in White Trash Symphonies, Volume II, I'd say I'm prepared for the challenge.

Next month, DBG, for Volume III, I expect orchestral arrangements. (*Gustav Plympton*) (joiedbg@aol.com, or the Raven Bar every fucking Wednesday, until the end of time)

Jeff Lightning Lewis: Journey to Center of the Earth -

When there's a dark depression looming in the horizon of the future, just think of Jeff Lewis and everything will be all right. He released a super low-fi EP tape - jam packed with material, it plays for an hour - called Journey to Center of the Earth which he recorded in his father's trailer in Maine on August 29th, 1999. Included within the packaging are the minutiae of his day-to-day existence there, captured in a hand-printed essay and 16 classic graphic panels. Jeff is both a great modern day folk singer, and a great authentic graphic artist, responsible for giving AntiMatters the covers worthy of the best EC comics of the 50's - in case you didn't already know that.

A hypnotic mixture of music and anti-music, Journey opens with an apocalyptic number, "Flood" ("This year's gonna be the year that the river floods,"), in which Jeff evaluates some of the loss. The "river floods" song is followed by "Gold," - and connections abound. Remember the gold rush of '49 followed by the depression of '59? Don't say I didn't warn you...

In "His Name Was Water" he refers to a favorite Dead song, "Farewell to you old southern skies!" (Oh, the Dead song is on their album Wake of the Flood! More connections abound.) He considers the influence of rap in "it mutated the way that he thought" (He Heard a Rap 1 Day). Being in a summer mood, he sings, "Here comes September!" which is, after all, the seventh month, hence the lines "Seven Time Around and I'm back again," - I think... Today's favorite rhyme from the EP is "I'll deal with what they dealt me, even if it's unhealthy." The funniest true life predicament song is "Bite the Bullet (Get a Job)."

He includes his brother Jackson's tape of audio messages to Jeff, recorded during the July 31st Tompkins Square Park AntiFolk Fest, which serves as a reminder of what some of us were doing during that same summer. The EP ends with a cover of Hotel California, modified to reveal surprising parallels with life at the Sidewalk Café.

There's so much density here that I've only touched upon a few items. If you like his Indie-Rock Fortune Cookie album as much as I do, you'll buy his new EP immediately. For those of you who haven't already heard Jeff, then you can follow his suggestion and enter the Center of the Earth by way of the Indie-Rock Fortune Cookie, or be daring, and jump right in and go down down down down... 'til you reach China. (*Peter Dizozza*) (Contact: weja4@aol.com)

Hamell on Trial: Choochtown -

Choochtown is the latest offering from Hamell on Trial. Hamell on Trial is that bald man in black who blazes through the East Village once or twice a month, making your life miserable because he's so much better than you. He's so much better than you because he plays better guitar than you. He's so much better than you because his performance style is far superior to what you could develop. He's so much better than you because his songs resonate more than yours. He's so much better than you because, well, he's so much better than you.

And now, after two albums on Mercury Records that failed to prove Hamell was so much better than you, failed to shower him with the attention he so richly deserves, Such-A-Punch media has released this song cycle, all pretty much revolving around the 24-hour Toddle House diner.

It's a great conceit, and not made obvious anywhere except in a couple of spoken word interludes (The radio interlude "Shoutouts," which introduces some characters in songs to come, and the end of "The Lottery," which refers to some of the figures we've already met in an entirely different context), and it leaves the impression that the songs are more than songs, that this is a thought-out masterwork, that this is a work of art.

And it may well be. Most of the material, road tested by the ever-touring Hamell, is proven, strong, and great. There are three cuts on the album that those familiar with Hamell on Tour might find surprising: "Bill Hicks," "Joe Brush," and "The Mall," are not yet part of Hamell's stageshow. The other 10 cuts are live staples. Just about everything on the album is right, with one or two tiny missteps counted among the forty-five minutes of music and skits. All of the songs are good, and the arrangements, varied.

And there... there's an issue.

Hamell on Trial is a one-man band. In "The Meeting," his declaration of intent on his last album (1997's Chord is Mightier than the Sword), Hamell proclaims himself "One guy, with one guitar," and, as if as evidence, that song is performed solo, like Hamell plays it out. With one hyper-speed guitar and the natural feedback resonating gloriously, it's a sound to behold. There are moments like it on

Continued following **Hamell on Stage...**

10/13/99

Joie/DBG's been opening for Hamell on Trial semi-regularly at Manitoba's, right next to where Hotel Galvez was a year

or so ago. Manitoba's is a pretty hard rock place, a square room maybe the size of your living room. The bartenders/owners play there every now and then. One of them is the eponymous Handsome Dick Manitoba from the Dictators. Very prestigious club. It's really a much bigger place than its own walls can hold. Show's usually start at the club at ten, but Joie does a nine o'clock show, and Hamell takes the stage around ten thirty. That's the usual pattern, and that's sort of what I have to assume happened for this last show, since, soon after Joie started his set (looking like mostly new material, from a glance at the setlist), I saw Hamell and his brother-in-law Ray near the door. I hustled over to them, sat outside on the curb, and started shooting the shit.

"Sir," I said to Mr. Hamell, "I have a request."

Ed Hamell always says he'd do anything for me: detail my car, wash my dishes, eat my cooking... I figured I'd put it to the test.

"I'm trying to put a show together in December," I said, "And I was hoping you'd be on the bill."

"Well," he explained, I have some shows in early December and November. I got a couple of dates with Ani DiFranco."

I smiled. Hamell and Ani. Match made in heaven. I'd seen him first meet the national act at Manitoba's the last time he played there.

"That's great." I said.

"Thanks, so if your thing doesn't conflict with my shows, I'd love to help out."

"I'm hoping to put it together for my birthday, on the 22nd."

"Well, if it's for your birthday, I'd love to be a part of it..."

We talked more, watching people come into the club, hearing snatches of Joie's raw sound as the door opened and closed.

"How's your love life?" Hamell said.

"I'll let you know, soon as I find it."

Members of Hamell's crew came by. I'd met them before, but names escape me far too often. I can recall details of their lives, but not their actual identities. No matter. Everyone focused themselves on the bald man who wasn't me. What I remembered was irrelevant to all concerned.

Ten thirty came, and Hamell reentered the club, with the rest of us in tow.

Soon after, Hamell started his set, playing his solo acoustic guitar louder and faster than Joie, louder and faster than anyone. Hamell, when on-stage, sounds like an army, a German army, conquering everything

faster than you can recognize there's been an invasion. By the time you blink, you realize you're a Vichy conspirator, and you're in for a five-year occupation. Not to say you don't



Hamell on Stage

Attempting to upstage the Master

by Jonathan Berger

appreciate the attack -- maybe it's more like a Central American coup, in and out, like that.

And, as fast as all that, it was over. Prematurely.

Hamell broke a string on his fifth number, I think it

was "Hamell's Ramble." It's no surprise that he snaps strings, what with his machine-gun playing tendencies, but it was kind of early in the set. He changed songs, trying to get through "In a Bar," sans A-string, but then gave up.

"I'm gonna do a little poem," he said, "While changing the string."

"Jon Berger!" I heard someone cry. I couldn't tell who.

Hamell didn't even notice. He was already into "Piccolo Joe," from his first album, Big as Life, a rhyming piece about drug dealers who get theirs -- sort of.

When he finished, and we clapped, he said, "I got so into doing a dramatic version of 'Piccolo Joe,' I neglected to change my string. You'll have to bear with me for a minute."

"Jon Berger!" Someone called again. I hoped it wasn't in my head. But even if it was, it planted a seed.

I grabbed Unicorns & Faeries, and quietly said to the star of the evening, "Hey. Can I rush the stage?" Which I guess makes no sense. You don't actually ASK to rush the stage. You either do it or you don't.

Hamell looked up from his guitar, and said, "Sure! Absolutely."

Then he took the mic while I went behind the bar to pace.

"And now," Mr. Ed Hamell said, "I leave you in the capable hands of Mr. Jonathan Berger."

The people, many of whom were friends of mine -- many of whom were people I'd first introduced to Hamell on Trial -- clapped for me, and, my book in my hand, the hits I was so comfortable with oh so recently, I paced to the microphone and pushed the stand off its steady pedestal. I was ready to take the stage, show these freaks what I was made of.

I started with Peanut Butter and Julie:

"You make me stutter, flustered, mutter when I should speak.

You're the peanut butter of my soul.

No! Wait. Brain! I meant brain!

Oh, man..."

I love the piece. I sensed, though, not for the first time, that the audience did not. I think, no matter how much I like it, people don't get it, not when I read it aloud. On paper, it's easier to see what is accidental, and what is crafted, but to read it right, it sounds like it's just a mistake. I can't get it over to an audience. I couldn't get it over to that audience, anyway. Or maybe I'm thinking too much. They clapped. Rather, my friends, who knew the piece, knew my style, knew the ending, they clapped. The



Hamell on Stage

rest of the audience, god knows what they were doing. I forded on. I have no idea what I did, but I know I did it fast. Working to replicate the style of the man of the hour, I was trying to speed through my material, spitting through poem after poem on the same stage as my idol and mentor in head shaving. I had a need to succeed.

I also had serious competition. I hadn't noticed during Hamell's performance, but the television was on, and it was playing a ball game. The Yankees and Sox were duking it out in pennant playoffs, and, while you couldn't actually hear the audience's attention wander, you could see more and more heads turning towards the game. When Hamell was on-stage, he commanded their attention, or, if anyone dared strayed from his performance, they were circumspect about it. Not so with me.

The performance required more from me, if I was going to win the people's respect. Even my friends, I could tell, were clapping



"Baby, I'd do anything for you. Climb the highest mountain, swim the deepest dessert, drink the darkest draft, you got it, baby, all you gotta do is ask..."

I serenaded this sports guy, obviously meaning to concentrate on the game, and, as I got further into my piece, as I knelt before him, viscerally begging him to be mine, it occurred to me, "I don't know this guy. I don't know this guy, and he's a lot bigger than I am."

When I finished the piece, I quickly got away from him, and I turned, and saw that Hamell was done tuning.

"One more?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. I looked back to the crowd, and read fast, nervous, spastic. I did something about a cat. It ends with:

"I've got to do something to that pussy, before it gets out of the bag..."

"I'm done." I said, and, to the slight applause of an audience obviously ready for the real act, I rushed away from the mic, and rejoined the crowd. I pointedly avoided looking at the sports groupie I'd performed for a minute or two before.

Hamell took over immediately, and the game was soon forgotten for one and all.

An hour later, ending with his one-two of "The Meeting" and Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues," Hamell, a sweaty horrid mess, came up to me, and, shaking my hand, said, "You've got to read a little slower, but you've got balls of steel. We'll talk."

He was right on all fronts. I didn't even think about how gallish it was to try to work on the same stage as that man. My respect for Joie/Dead Blonde Girlfriend, with the regular opening slot, grew. My respect for Hamell, though, probably couldn't.

REVIEWS

Hamell on Trial review...continued...

Choochtown, too. Using a variety of locations and arrangements, Hamell on Trial has numerous songs that are just him and his guitar. "Hamell's Ramble," a rant and rave about whatever's on the artists mind; "Nancy's Got a New Boyfriend," a dysfunctional Chuck Berry kind of number; "The Long Drive," a song noir; and "Bill Hicks," a distant cousin to his earlier "Open Up The Gates;" all are solo performances, or close to it.

The rest of the album expands on his unique individualist vision, or dilutes it, depending on your point of view. Using full band arrangements on "When Bobby Comes Down," "Choochtown," "Judy," and "The Lottery," Hamell creates a fuller sound, a sound he feels is a natural progression for the songs, a sound that services the songs well. But.

But... well...

When Pete Townshend put the Who back together in the later eighties, early nineties, he was pretty clear to compare it to a Beatlemania type project, a Who tribute band. In a way, this feels like it's THE HAMELL ON TRIAL EXPERIENCE, as opposed to what dozens of fans across the nation know to be a unique and powerful act.

More than not, it's a band album, and Hamell on Trial is the best representation in AntiFolk -- in the World -- of what one man can do alone. The album sounds good, but he's not doing what makes him the representative of a medium, and he's not doing what makes him unique. And he's altering the songs. The songs are one guy and one guitar. The songs are the thunder and the fire. The songs are there in the solo performance. These

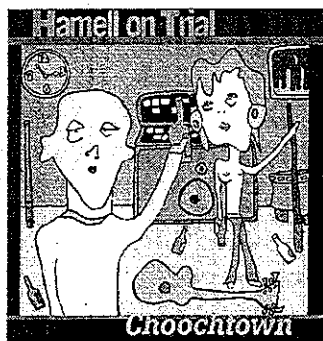
arrangements are cool. But Hamell rocks harder live, I think, than the recorded band does. And, except for the additional menace after "Cool," I don't see the point in the different arrangement of the beautiful "I'm Gonna Watch You Sleep."

While the sound of the minimally expanded

"Disconnected" (which adds, harmonica, and, I think, some electric guitar) is an improvement, most of the changes feel like... changes. Not inherently better, and, really, a lot more work that recording the incredible music that Ed Hamell creates in his solo DIY construct, Hamell on Trial.

I think it's a good album, but it's not what he does. He is something unique and special, and, if he believed in his shows as much as his loyal fans do, he'd have put out a live album. Word is that MP3 features an almost complete live show from New York's Living Room, which is simply incendiary.

Choochtown is great. It's definitely worth owning, and little else has touched my player for the last few weeks. This album is something else. But nothing on it, outside of "Disconnected," and maybe the full-on fury of "Uncle Morris," replaces the show. He should be replicating his strengths. He hasn't really done that yet on album. (Jonathan Berger) (SUCH A PUNCH Media Ltd. PO Box 2452 Middletown NY 10940 -- www.hamellontrial.com)



Fort Schedule

Mon.Nov.1- The Antihoot with Lach.Sign-up at 7:30

Tues.Nov.2-7:30- Dave's Place, 8-Cynthia Hilts, 8:30-Robert Bob Roberts, 9-J J Bones, 9:30-Double Naught Spy, 10-Peter Dizozza, 11-Amji

Wed.Nov.3- Cool Jazz: 8-Pat Donaher Group, 9-House of Pernod, 10-Blonde Sheriff, 11-The NYC Jam Session Inc. (Open Jazz Jam at Midnight)

Thurs.Nov.4- 8-Jen Halpern, 9-Robert Warren (formerly of The Fleshtones), 10- Major Matt Mason USA, 11- Monkey Farm (featuring Howard Fishman)

Friday Nov.5- Lach's Birthday Party! 8-The Voices, 9-The Cucumbers, 10-Lach (With band: Billy Ficca of on drums and Roy on Bass):

Sat.Nov.6- 8-Betsy Thomson, 9-Neon Venus, 10- The Costellos, 11-Joy Zuzulo, 12- The Swimmies

Sun.Nov.7- 7:30- The Subway Serenader, 8-Leroy Montana, 9-Adrian Romero, 9:30-Stoley, 10-Ruthy, 11-Numinosity

Mon.Nov.8- The Antihoot with Lach.Sign-up at 7:30

Tues.Nov.9- 7:30- Hungry Ghost, 8-Chris Chesler, 8:30- Barry Bliss, 9-Kleth Blank, 9:30- Atoosa, 10- Benny Landa, 10:30- Liz Skillman

Wed.Nov.10- Jazz Night: 8-TBA, 9-Destefano and McLeod, 10- Ekayani and The Healing band, 11- Eddie Shapiro Group

Thurs.Nov.11- 7:30- The Stupendous Twins, 8-The James Boggia Project, 9-Robert Warren, 10- Karen Ires of Pets, 11- Jarod Gorbel

Fri.Nov.12- 8-Paul Sachs, 9-Billy Populus, 10- Drew Blood, 11- Testosterone Kills, 11:30- Kenny Davidsen, 12- Mia Johnson

Sat.Nov.13- 8-Mari Lowery, 9-Jen Halpern, 10- Joy Zuzulo,

Sun.Nov.14- 5-8: Muscat's Art and Music Show, 8-Turner Cody, 8:30- Patsy Grace, 9-Mike Rechner, 9:30- Jude Kastle, 10- Dots Will Echo, 11- Brer Brian

Mon.Nov.15 -The Antihoot with Lach.Sign-up at 7:30

Tues.Nov.16-8-Permanent Bubble, 8:30- Gumpy, 9-North, 9:30-Foundry, 10-Paul Kotheimer, 10:30- Christopher Dillon

Wed.Nov.17- Jazz: 8-Blonde Sheriff, 10- Eddie Shapiro Group, 11- NYC Jam Session Inc (Bring yr ax!)

Thurs.Nov.18- 8-John Kessel, 9-Robert Warren, 10-Jessie Murphy,

Fri.Nov.19-Jim Kemp, 9-Johnny Seven, 10-Ubiquity, 11-Joe Bendik and The Heathens

Sat.Nov.20-8-Haale, 9-Dina Dean, 10-Curtis Eller's American Circus, 11- David Dragov, 12-Natalie Flanagan

Sun.Nov.21- 7:30-Randi Russo, 8-Adam Brodsky, 8:30- Andy If, 9-Jim Knable, 10-Regina Spektor,

Mon.Nov.22- The Antihoot with Lach.Sign-up at 7:30

Tues.Nov.23- 7:30-Ethan Wolf, 8-Chris Vincent, 8:30- Nate Borofsky, 9-Scott Edwards, 9:30-Jason Vatter, 10- 976-Dave

Wed.Nov.24-Jazz Night: 8-Pat Harper and The Agro Jazz Quartet

Thurs.Nov.25- Thanksgiving (Stay tuned, we have a special night planned for the Antifolk tribe)

Fri.Nov.26- 8-Fragile Male Ego, 11-Jonas Grumby

Sat.Nov.27- 8-Josh Alan, 9:30- Paleface, 10-The Humans

Sun.Nov.28- 7:30-Adam Wade, 8-Ben Fenner, 8:30-Sean Lee, 9-Alec Ferrell, 9:30- Christian Anthony, 11-Rafi Bartamain

Mon.Nov.29- The Antihoot with Lach.Sign-up at 7:30

Tues.Nov.30-7:30-Huff, 8-Ariana, 8:30-Chris Deckard, 9-The Garden Voyage, 9:30-Joe Bidewell, 10-Jeff Nimeh

Shotgun

De Gallegos

W6 & W7