

Music for love, not money

BY LIAM LACEY
"I used to be pure as the driven snow, but then I drifted."
— Mae West.

AMO, AMAS, amat. I love, you love, he loves — which is where our word amateur comes from: one who does something for love. The trouble is, nobody loves being an amateur, and whatever sort of apple-cheeked and down-home cachet folk music may have once had, most performers currently on the amateur circuit would happily take cash for their love affair with music. Mark Ripp, a guitarist-singer who plays regularly at Fat Albert's and Scallywag's Cafe, two of the regular spots, is a case in point.

"I'll sell out to anyone anytime, sacrifice any principles and go anywhere," Ripp says. "Don't imagine the people who play these places are a bunch of Bob Dylan clones or Neil Young copycats trapped in some kind of dinosaur sixties trip. We're not like that. Many of the people here are very bright, and writing good music and lyrics, but it just doesn't happen to suit what these bar managers think will sell right now. Bar managers don't think in terms of art."

Neil Young was terrible then

Twenty-two, tall, with his close-cropped hair sprouting up, and dressed in neatly pressed clothes, Ripp is definitely no sixties leftover. He lives at home, works part time at an LCBO outlet and spends his time and money on music. "I guess," he says with resignation, "you could say I'm obsessed."

Ripp was a mere 8-year-old in 1966, the year that Fat Albert's, the longest running coffee house in Toronto, was born in the basement of Bloor Street United Church at 300 Bloor St. W. In all, amateurs can play three nights a week in this city — Mondays at Harbourfront, where Steve Pritchard is the host of the Rhythm and Rhyme series that alternates singers with poets, Fridays at Scallywag's Cafe in the Church Street Community Centre at 519 Church St., and finally, Wednesdays at Fat Albert's.

But the nights at Harbourfront can be decidedly slow. On one recent Monday, three performers and a half-dozen spectators showed up — even though the place now has a bar. Scallywag's doesn't bother staying open for half the summer, but its shows resumed last night. "Some nights we close up at 9:30 and everybody goes bowling," says coffee house manager Aldo Misseo. On good nights during the winter, however, all three clubs have packed in audiences of more than 100.

And then there's Fat Albert's, or Fatal Bert's as the regulars call it. Here the clientele and performers are so regular that at the worst of times, the performers show up anyway and play for each other. The host is a man who is a folk legend himself among musicians, Ray Heap, an amiable 50-year-old truck driver who has been working as a volunteer in coffee houses for 20 years and has developed an idiosyncratic wise-cracking patter on almost any folk-related subject.

Back in the sixties, he started with the Whistle Stop, where he saw a line of up-and-coming stars. **Joni Mitchell**, for example, he remembers as "always very good. She was into that Greensleeves type of thing, old English tunes, except that she was Joni Anderson then until she married Chuck Mitchell. Whatever happened to Chuck Mitchell? Maybe he should have changed his name to Anderson."

"And Neil Young used to play here too. I didn't know what he looked like until I went to see that Last Waltz film. Then I remembered. Geez, he was bad when he started. He did all these songs that were about five miles long and they started nowhere and went nowhere with no chorus in between. A lot of people were doing that kind of thing then, though. You know — the My Life Story kind of numbers."

The enigmatic Leon Redbone also played at the current coffee house for about three years before reaching stardom. In those days he was with a group known as The Polkups, and Heap remembers that "he was real mysterious even then. used to drive him home sometimes, but I never knew where

he lived because he'd get out at a different corner every night. The only place you could get in touch with him was in the pool hall in the Bloor subway station."

The major change recently, he says, has been the introduction of New Wave influences on folk performers. Sara Spraken is one Heaps cites as a "dynamite performer." She has moved from Fat Albert's to The Cabana Room in the Spadina Hotel. Scallywag's Aldo Misseo also remembers Spraken's introduction to the amateur circuit as something of a surprise: "She had black leather pants and black hair and sang songs about her period and stuff like that."

Posters for all the past feature artists (who earn \$10 for the night) are taped to one wall of the church basement. Most were unknowns and still are. "These are all about three years old," Heap says. "You see the tape they make today isn't as good, so the more recent ones fall off."

Shortly after 8:30 on Wednesday night, the first performer stumbles up to the stage coffee house and sits down heavily on a stool. He begins to strum his guitar and hum to himself. He is apparently in his mid-40s, wears a wide-brimmed cowboy hat and has his brown checked shirt hanging out of his pants. Most of the audience — which will swell to about 15 later in the evening — is in the washroom. There are two reasons for this. First, the acoustics there are good for tuning instruments. Second, bad nerves make busy bladders. Someone at a table yells out something that sounds like "Let's go, Lime."

"You know, lime — one of those green things you squeeze?" Ed Matthews, one of the volunteer managers of the coffee house, confirms the name.

After 14 years of working the coffee house, Matthews, a graphic designer, remains blissfully sardonic, despite the company of so many sensitive folkies. Standing at the back of the room next to the coffee urn and the package of Coffee Break cookies, he looks over the evening's lineup. The order is chosen by numbers pulled from a coffee can — except for Lime, who is allowed to go on first. He is also the only performer who goes without an introduction by emcee Ray Heap. Matthews explains, "we don't want to encourage him."

"I don't know much about him but I understand he lives off unemployment insurance. If it wasn't for the welfare state, we probably couldn't keep this place going," he adds.

Despite this rather unpromising recommendation, Lime starts singing, quite well really, what sounds like a Spanish song.

"He's come a long way," says Matthews. "Now, you actually hear a word once in a while."



Performer David Hayes on stage at Harbourfront.

The second song also sounds Spanish, until the chorus. Here the staccato delivery makes the words clear for the first time: "bad, bad, Leroy Brown, oh the baddest man in this whole damn town." Lime is ushered from the stage after only two songs, and number two comes out: Phil Onius.

"Sometimes people change their name every week," Matthews says. "You have to ask them each time how they want to be introduced."

Heap introduces Onius by saying, "Now I don't think this guy's been here in a couple of years." Matthews starts laughing: "He was here two weeks ago. I don't know where (Heap) gets this stuff."

Heap comes down off the stage and stands at the back next to the Coffee Breaks and the urn. "Now Phil here is kind of new wave folk," he explains. "He's a high school teacher, I think. He teaches shop somewhere."

Phil is dressed from head to toe in faded denim; he has puckish, Warren Beatty good looks and an unusual guitar style — all open tunings. As he plays, he swings his head back and forth energetically and the lyrics come out in a complex spurts of words, too fast to catch, but the topics certainly have new wave themes: The Battle of the Sexes, Electricity.

He finishes his set and sits down with a group of regular performers around one of the tables — actually a cable spool covered with a checkered cloth. "What's that you call yourself again?" one of them asks, "Philarious?"

The next performer is a bearded, red-haired man who

wears round glasses, a work shirt and jeans. He has one of those benign, I'm-content-with-the-simple-life appearances that were in vogue a decade ago. He comes from the Ottawa Valley and shows influences of Randy Newman, perhaps with Mendelsohn Joe's guitar stylings. He sings sentimental, folkie songs like "Take me back to the Ottawa tonight," his tribute to the Ottawa River, followed by a song about species that face extinction: "There's 5,000 tigers left in the jungle — there's 6,000 humpback whales in the ocean. . ." and so on. He seems

Tigers and folkies are dying breeds

to identify with these dying breeds.

"It's natural for performers to be competitive," offers Sam Larkin, who isn't playing tonight but wants to see the show anyway. Larkin and a group his friends have been coming to Fat Albert's for almost a decade. "Competition's all part of the coffee house tradition, isn't it? Artists perform in an environment where they're going to be judged by other artists, maybe not in the same field, but they know each other is trying to do," he says.

Larkin divides his time between performing and fixing his sailboat. He has even cut a record, as one friend says, "for a sense of his own posterity" and plays professionally when he can find work. "Let's face it, the most exciting thing going on in music now is the new wave. But it's still pretty expensive to get together a band, so a lot of us still play solo," Larkin says. "The biggest place I ever played was once when I was hired for the Eaton Centre."

Onius interrupts, "I once played Varsity Arena. It was at night. I climbed over the walls with my guitar and sat in the middle of the field and played."

As might be expected, it turns out that Onius is a stage name — and he isn't about to say what his real one is. "Listen, I teach

students and I sure don't want a bunch of flunkies following me around watching me sing in public."

The next performer is Mark Ripp. Although he sings with authority and a lot of determination, he descends from the stage swearing to himself. "Well, there goes my career," he says. Ripp had borrowed Onius's state-of-the-art, Martin D-35 guitar; unfortunately, it hadn't lost all of its owner's unusual tuning. Then, just to show his career wasn't finished, Ripp retunes the guitar off stage and does a note-perfect version of Van Morrison's hit of a few years ago, Cryin' In The Streets.

Lime, who has been sitting quietly — except for pounding his guitar enthusiastically instead of clapping to each performer — starts singing along in his wordless way to the chorus. Near the end of the song, a string snaps; Ripp curses again.

"You shouldn't swear in a church," Lime chides. "Save that for outside on the street." Ripp looks justifiably disgusted, more so when Onius, in mock horror, repeats the oldest guitarist's joke in the world: "He snapped my G-string. Did you see that?"

Heap begins to turn down the lights. During the winter, shows have run as late as 2 a.m. — tonight they're through by 10:30.

The musicians go their separate ways, except for Ripp and Onius who opt for a beer down the street at Rudy's. Once they get there, Onius lays down his guitar next to the table. "What's good about Fatal Bert's," he says, "is you get to play before an audience and get some confidence. I used to be very nervous, you know?"

As they talk, Ripp reviews the frustrations of trying to make himself a success. The modern musician, he explains, must know marketing strategy as well as his art. Earlier this year, Ripp entered the Rock '80 contest with his band, also called Mark Ripp, which he describes as "progressive." Of the 35 contestants, the group finished third.

"But everyone else in the top 10 were new wave bands," he complains. "And that's the only kind who can get work. I went and saw this agent and he said, 'Keep doing what you're doing, maybe progressive music will come round again.'"

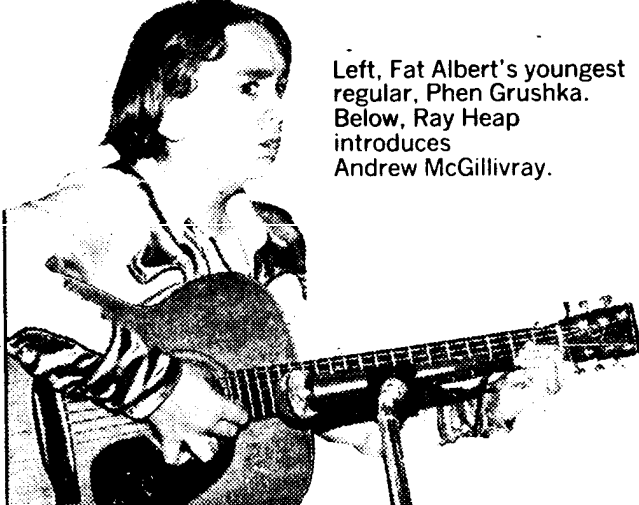
Onius, still high from his own performance, starts riding his own hobbyhorse: open tunings. "I find they inspire me. People talk about lack of inspiration. I'll never understand that. I can get so much just by changing my tuning. Lots of people have used it. . . **Joni Mitchell**, of course, and Led Zeppelin."

"I'll even go way out on a limb," he adds confidentially, "and say that The Beatles probably used open tunings on some songs."

"You know," he muses, perhaps thinking of The Beatles, "I'm glad I didn't become famous early. I mean, that could really hurt your development as a performer and a writer. If you offered me fame on a golden platter, well, I guess I'd take it, but I don't know if I'd actively pursue it."

Glancing up from his beer, Ripp stares at Onius as if he's a madman.

"I sure as hell would."



Left, Fat Albert's youngest regular, Phén Grushka. Below, Ray Heap introduces Andrew McGillivray.



James Lewcun