

# CLUB SCENES

By Johanna Schier

The thought of Ricky Nelson singing Bob Dylan is sort of like Donald Duck taking acid. At the Bitter End, the first two weeks of September, Nelson did just that. He also sang lots of Tim Hardin and Randy Newman songs. With visions of Ozzie and Harriet dancing in my head, I couldn't help but be amazed by the juxtaposition of "Hello Mary Lou" to "I Shall Be Released". Remember that sleepy-eyed look ol' Ricky used to have? Turns out what he was really doing was smoking hash and other precocious activities.

The wholesome Nelson family has given Rick an image that's hard to shake and if you went to see him that incongruity of past and present may be your only impression. But there were also some nice musical things going on. I liked the three part harmonies he did with guitarist Alan Kent and bassist Randy Meisner. Meisner, a member of the original Poco, has one of the fanciest falsettos I've ever heard. The third member of the back-up band is Pat Shanahan on drums. Both he and Meisner are good and solid.

Nelson has a rock-a-billy voice with country clarity that sounded fine on songs like "Lady Came from Baltimore" and "Louisiana Man". With the group he's got now and their 100-proof blended harmonies, the country in Nelson is really coming out. I found a number of obvious influences very interesting. Besides the country, there's the old rock which he's a part of and then there's new rock represented in the instrumental tightness.

Only one R&B song in the whole set and that is one of his own. I liked it the least of anything he did, but it would be nice to hear him write some more, perhaps in collaboration. He has such a musical past that he's bound to have some good ideas. His song was obsolete in today's music world and probably was the first he's written. He sang it like it meant a lot to him; I found myself wishing I could like it. Nelson has a natural sweetness and the sincerity of a happy puppy which makes him a good small club performer.

And lest we forget the impact of the Nelson family on Americana, take the incident that took place after his concert one night. He and his wife and the band went across the street to the Top of the Gate to see pianist Les McCann and his group of string bass, drums and timbales. The group really cooked in the way only jazz groups do and had the whole room flipping with them. There was a table of three of the funkiest black women I've ever seen twitching and humping in their seats. Towards the end McCann introduced his band and the celebrities in the audience -- Junior Mance, Jimmy Smith and Ricky Nelson. True to television, those three funky ladies, almost awed, asked Ricky for his autograph.

Spooky Tooth has a great name and that's about it. I mean the term "great name" in two senses: as nomenclature and as reputation. Of the many channels a group can swim in order to surface, they pop up in the category of best-new-underground-English-hard-rock. You hear how Stevie Winwood hung around Ungano's the whole time they were there. They come across fairly well on records, are handled by some of the best handlers and seem to be spoken of in the tones reserved for class groups. Spooky Tooth is also a fine sounding name, especially in a milieu that comes up with such abominations as Strawberry Alarm Clock while groping for that surrealistic ring.

The Teeth were doing "one show only" for two nights at Salvation two weeks ago. Because of their Beautiful-People-one-way-glass-case-you door and because I don't like unlive discotheques, I'd never been saved by Salvation. Apparently their eyebrows have gone down because I saw some pretty mangy specimens admitted through that snotty door. They even have signs out front now with the name, the hours and the admission price. How vulgar.

Inside, the records were too loud to talk over and none of the people there could dance so I huddled into a back row table and anticipated. The only exciting thing that happened all night was when "Mashed Potatoes" was played. As soon as "it's the latest, it's the greatest" shimmied out the speakers, a huge, Zorba-souled man leapt onto the dance

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floor. Then he Danced. It was one of those breathtaking flings of grace and energy that should have stopped everyone cold and cleared the floor. But of course they all went on doing their uptight little frugs and Funky Broadways.

Meanwhile, on the stage Spanky Tooth began to tune. Now this wasn't your ordinary run of the mill tuning in the back-ground. No, even though the records were above shouting level, Spooky Truth's tuning drowned them out. It was just on the uncomfortable threshold of pain. When they started to play, it actually became hazardous to your health. Whether you can "hear" something goes two ways. Just as sound can be too soft to hear it properly, Sparky Foofo were much too loud to be heard. If you plugged your ears, it brought the music down to a subpain level where listening as a qualitative experience was possible.

Toothy Sparkle have two keyboardmen, one on organ and one on piano. They sat on either side of the stage and shouted stock white imitation soul phrasings back and forth at one another, also managing to play the most muddled, ordinary crap I've ever heard on keyboard. Not one nice phrase, not one beautiful line came out of that distorted black cloud of music. It was hard to tell whether they were any good or not through the pain, but there was lots of keyboard rhythm going on and nothing was happening.

The drummer played your standard straight-ahead Ginger Baker-Mitch Mitchell book. Guitarist Luther Grofvenor stood behind his hair, swaying in the throes of the volume they were putting out. He plays competently with nice intonation but little imagination. There was also a bass player but I don't remember him -- I've had to block it all out.

Snarly Tith specializes in dramatic passages in which they all strike a note in unison and stand reverently with bowed heads while it dies down slowly to a tolerable volume, only to gouge out again with much pain and meaning. This jazzy little technique formed the basis for their version of "New York Mining Disaster."

Very few musicians of any stature play at full volume constantly. A dynamic build is an emotional tool that's invaluable in reaching and holding an audience. Jeff Beck played "Rock Me Baby" at the Scene last summer so softly that the hiss of his amplifier was almost as loud as the music. It crackled with held-in intensity, let out little by little so that the last few choruses were driven at you with a volume at least as intense as Spiffy Toot's. But infinitely more effective. I will gladly endure volume if it does to me what Beck did. But my ears are too important to me to be damaged by imitation, overly-dramatic hard rock. Unfortunately the Teeth are all bark and no bite.