

A Spy in the Van of Rock

by Stephan MacLeod

THURSDAY AUGUST 9, 2001

Sydney's Rock Ranger and Slowcoaster arrive in Charlottetown late on Thursday to play at Baba's Lounge. Both bands are roommates in the famed House of Rock, located somewhere between the Tar Ponds and Holy Angels Senior High School for girls in downtown Sydney. The House of Rock is home to a rag tag group of artists and entrepreneurs hell bent on turning Industrial Cape Breton into a cultural Utopia. Steve MacDougal, the lead vocalist and guitar player for Slowcoaster, leaves little doubt that they will succeed in their mission, but first they must worry about how they can afford to pay the rent. Jay Smith of Rock Ranger once went six months without electricity last year. Until recently these musicians played all their shows on borrowed equipment.

The House of Rock made Charlottetown the first stop on their tour of the Maritimes. They encounter a few problems early on in the tour: The van, which Mike Morrison – drummer for Rock Ranger – traded his motorbike for, made strange sounds on the highway, and the steering could go at any moment; they barely arrived in time for the last ferry to Prince Edward Island from Pictou, Nova Scotia; and Rock Ranger's bass player is missing. Luckily Mikey LeLeivre from Slowcoaster has filled in on bass for Rock Ranger in the past, so, like a pair of underwear in the House of Rock, Mikey will be shared by both bands tonight.

Actually, Dan Baldwin, the bass player for Rock Ranger, is not missing. He's camping with his girlfriend. He was unable to join Rock Ranger because he has an important meeting on Friday which he could not miss. Slowcoaster plays up his absence during a spontaneous performance of "Amazing Grace" at Baba's, near the end of their set. While Mikey plays the hymn softly, Steve requests the audience's support



"Put your cock into it."

in getting Dan out of jail.

Switching gears from Rock Ranger's ballsy rock jams to Slowcoaster's laid-back, funky soul would be a challenge for most bass players, but Mikey has no difficulty. I doubt that anyone could tell that the last time Mikey played bass with Rock Ranger was over a year ago, or that he is unfamiliar with the many changes in their songs. Making grimacing faces and stomping away on the hardwood floor like a madman, Mikey easily fits into the Rock Ranger line up.

While the bands sound like they are from two completely different planets, there is an energy in their performances, a dry sense of humour, and an attitude that link these Cape Bretoners together, yet allows them to go in distinct and separate directions musically.

After Slowcoaster finishes their set, they join Rock Ranger at the bar for a marathon of beer and tequila. When the bar is ready to close, the guys are jumping around while chanting "Buzzies! Buzzies! Buzzies!" Their cheer is in honour of Steve Buzzy Balderson of the Tuesdays who is throwing a party in his apartment. So the band pays their \$160 tab, and we are off to Buzzy's place.

Buzzy lives in a beautiful old apartment building in downtown Charlottetown, a short walk from Baba's. He throws parties every week-

end and invites whatever band that happens to be in town over to jam. Jay loves playing with different musicians and will grab whatever instrument is lying in front of him to join in on a jam session. The rest of the guys also enjoy performing in living room parties – the House of Rock hillbilly supergroup The Squatters was a joke born out of such circumstances – but tonight Mike and his girlfriend Jody are avoiding the crowded living room, Devon Strang, the drummer for Slowcoaster, is wandering aimlessly around the streets of Charlottetown on a ten-speed he found in Buzzy's garage, and Steve is explaining some of the House of Rock's plans to solve Sydney's Tar Pond problem to me. One involves moving the entire downtown several miles outside of town, across from the campus at the Universtiy College of Cape Breton.

At the party, a lot of people are talking about the big Guided By Voices show taking place in Halifax the next day. Jay is particularly excited about this concert. I ask him if he's familiar with their music, but he only knows one song, "Glad Girls." When he croons it on electric guitar, I instantly recognize the melody, and I begin to share Jay's enthusiasm for this band that I know nothing about. I mention to Mike how my brother got a free ticket to the show for me, but, since I have no money and no way of getting to Halifax, that Jay can have

it. Mike tells me to keep the ticket, and to join them on the van trip to Halifax the next day.

FRIDAY AUGUST 10, 2001

In the wee hours of the morning, I'm driving Mike's van, since I'm the only one who didn't drink. The sun is coming up, and Steve wants something to eat. We find a Subway that's still open and everyone orders food stuffed with toppings that they know they shouldn't eat at this hour of night, but cannot resist. Mikey performs some gymnastics in the lineup for sandwiches, then yells foreign obscenities at the cute French girls leaving the restaurant.

After eating our subs in the parking lot, Steve tells me that everyone has decided that we need to go to the nearest beach immediately. I don't know much about the beaches in Prince Edward Island, and the nearest one that I actually know how to find is about twenty minutes outside of town. So we go to that one.

By the time we arrive at Brackley Beach, it is 6:45am. Everyone's still a little drunk or hung over, but a quick splash in the water has remarkably sobering effects. I borrowed Steve's extra pair of swimming trunks, and almost everyone has found appropriate clothing to adapt to the beach except for Mikey. So Mikey undresses on the shore and slowly walks into the ocean buck naked. We are not alone on the beach; there was at least one couple of senior citizens enjoying a beautiful morning walk on the beach, but they are gone now. I have little doubt that it had something to do with the big naked guy. Jay chokes on salt water while laughing at Mikey. We are a sea of bobbing heads giggling and yelling about how awesome the water feels this early in the morning.

On the drive back to Charlottetown we are listening to one of Cape Breton's most puerile punk bands, The Unwanted Guests, sing a song called "Abortion Bucket."