

Downtime

By Stephan MacLeod

Something weird is happening to bar bands in Charlottetown. Cover band standards like the mandatory Collective Soul cover, or other Magic 93 hits are being replaced by more complex, jazz-influenced tunes, obscure tracks, and extended jams of classic rock songs. At the forefront of this growing scene is the tripped out, technical stylings of Downtime.

Chris Buote plays bass and sings lead vocals, Patrick Allen plays drums, and James Quinn plays guitar while conducting an assortment of gadgets and samples. James's equipment could probably be considered the fourth member of Downtime because they provide multiple layers of loops and samples that could not be produced by just three people. Watching them perform is a surreal experience especially when James plays a guitar solo over a guitar riff that he just sampled live. Or when his effects make his guitar sound exactly like an organ, saxophone, or drum, it is difficult to believe that there is not a bunch of musicians hidden backstage somewhere.

The technology is an impressive element of their live show, but the band's ability to perform without it seeming like a gimmick is a testament to their abilities as musicians. Besides their individual talents at their instruments, the biggest asset in a band like this is their ability to hear what fellow band members are doing. With equipment like the boomerang phrase sampler, which can catch a sample live and loop it while the band plays over it, it is important that their playing matches the loop.

Buote explained that it takes a bit of practice to get used to playing with the sampler live. "It's taken [James] a while just to get used to running it all," he said. "When he gets a loop running on the boomerang too, with the bass and drums we got to listen and if it's a riff or something, we got to stay right with it. We got to hear it really well, otherwise we'd get off and it doesn't sound right. So he's gotten used to clicking it off and clicking it back on when we get off a little bit."

Not only do they have to



Chris Buote

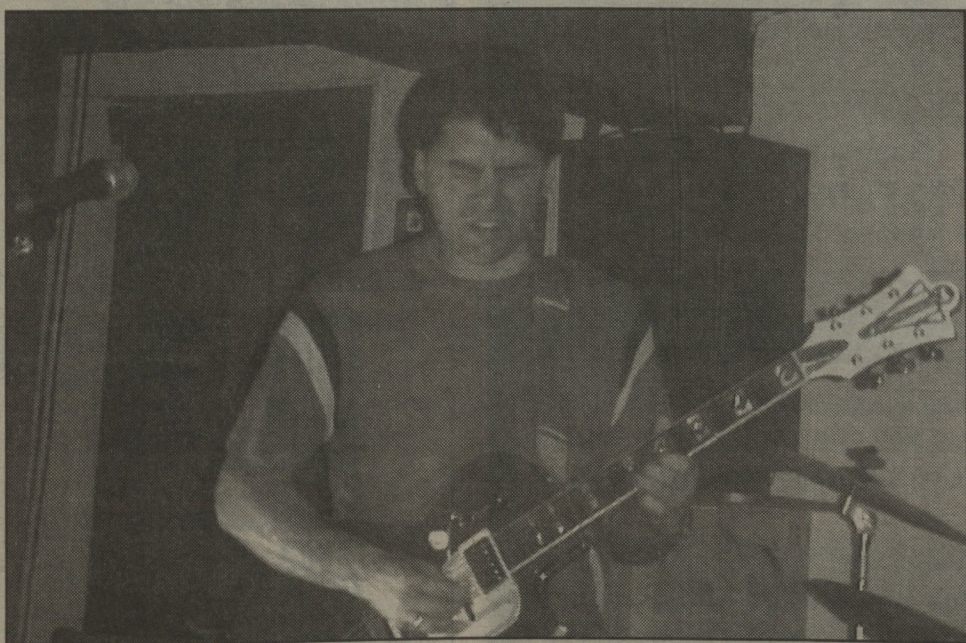
keep their ears open for samples, the majority of their show consists of improvised jamming, so communication is important for the musicians. "We'll take songs or ideas and usually there will be a theme that's the head of the song and we'll always leave a little section that's open where we can let it go and try stuff," Buote said. "A lot of it is just using our ears, listening and trying to react to what's going on and that way a lot of it can be spontaneous."

Their style of music is heavily influenced by jam bands like Phish, Medeski Martin and Wood, and Fly Jimmy Swift. Buote thinks Downtime's success in places like New Brunswick is due to a growing scene for jam bands. While Charlottetown's scene is relatively small, a community of fans that appreciate this kind of music is growing. He thinks the popularity of jam music is encouraging for musicians to develop their talent more because fans of this style are very critical listeners. If fans demand more from musicians, then the music scene will improve.

"Live music has been on the decline [in Charlottetown] for quite a while now, but in general it's coming around a bit," Buote pointed out.

This scene is also open to a variety of styles of music. "All the people that are into the scene really appreciate the different elements," he said. Downtime mix all sorts of styles by doing covers of techno, funk, and classic rock during their live sets.

While they tend to play something for everyone, they have been criticized by fans in Fredericton for not doing their own stuff. Most bar bands avoid doing original songs because typically bar patrons want to hear songs that they are familiar with, but for bands like Downtime, a demand for original songs is a welcome criticism. Instead of pressuring bands to play Tragically Hip tunes, this new bar scene craves originality. Fans of Downtime will be glad to know that the band is currently working on a new album of their own material.



James Quinn