

This Circus has Flamin' chemistry

Vancouver sextet pull away from the Jazz City pack

By PETER NORTH

Like a subversive guerrilla group, one hears that Vancouver's The Circus in Flames have shown up in the vicinity, kidnapped a few ears and moved on without a trace. At least that's the way it was the last time this sextet of four string-pluckers, a drummer and an accordion player came to town.

If I have any say in the matter, it will be a whole lot different the next time frontman and principal writer Doug Andrew and his band of cohorts head toward Edmonton.

As one of many onlookers who was totally taken last Saturday night with the music and presentation of The Circus In Flames at the Windsor Bar and Grill, it's hard to know where to begin when describing this band. Looking as though they had just rolled out of a van after a long road trip—because, well, they had—the thrust of the Circus is evident by glancing at their equipment before the group hits the stage. A mandolin, an accordion, lap steel,

banjo, acoustic guitar, upright bass and a small drum kit indicate that The Circus in Flames might owe more to a country/folk sound than possibly... oh let's say Green Day or Van Halen.

Sure enough, that was the case as the group snapped into traditional tunes as well as originals, some from the group's '97 self-titled disc. It took no time at all for the crowd of university students and Windsor Park residents who frequent the pub to forget about socializing for the moment and focus all attention on the stage.

A smouldering ember

If the first couple of songs of a set weren't enough to grab you by the collar—which they certainly should have been—Andrews's charismatic appeal was. Looking like he could be Harry Dean Stanton's brother and armed with a voice that resembles that of Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Andrews is a smouldering ember on stage. He delivers his own tunes like the macabre "Dancing on a Dead Man's Chest" and the image-laden "Middle of the Night" with an energetic thrust that falls just shy of reckless abandon.

Instrumentally, the rest of

The Circus in Flames is right on his coattails, spitting rhythmic flurries, occasionally at break-neck speed, from start to finish. Most impressive were mandolin player and backing vocalist Brian Barr and upright bassist Bernie Addington who, through an average sound mix, came across as the glue that helped keep the wonderfully careening cast between the ditches. Barr spun a couple of tasty solos in the pot and the embellishments of a wheezing accordion from Rodney Wawryk and banjo and lap steel fills from Mark Brichon made for a full-flavoured sound.

Other highlights came in the form of a crusty cover of Ian Tyson's "Someday Soon" that gave the classic a whole new charm, and respectful versions of Hank Sr.'s "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It" and Jimmie Rodgers's "Waitin' For a Train." Andrews also delivered a passionate plea on "Blow Wind Blow," taken from Tom Waits's songbook.

To say this band has something special is an understatement, although it wasn't captured to the same degree on tape as it can be in a live setting. Chemistry, a unique but rooted musical vision and character all in one band is hard to find these days. Catch The Circus In Flames at all costs. 

