



BY BELINDA BRUCE

When bands get predictable, they're dead. Same old sound, same political thrust, same dusty hangout in your CD collection. On the other hand, a familiar sound is like a comfy couch - you sink into it and have a great snooze, dreaming about the past. I'm of two minds on the issue, which is just the right schizophrenic brainspace to take in Spirit of the West's latest experiment, *Two Headed*, a stylistically divergent recording with less of the Celtic spice normally characteristic of this five-member, West Coast, neo-folk group.

John Mann and Geoffrey Kelly, their songwriting mélange evident from the way they finish each other's sentences, tell a story about the title track and album concept.

"It's based on an apres show party we had at the hotel," says Mann of an experience that reinforced the band's aversion to being typecast. "We'd had a rough day; our van broke down, and we did a sound check and immediately went on stage. Sometimes those shows can be the best because you're just thrown out there and you make the most of it."

They had such a great time that they invited some of the crowd back to the hotel and proceeded to get quite intoxicated, whereby they ended up "making assholes" of themselves. "Some people were quite amused, and some were quite horrified." From the mixed reaction, Mann, like many a disgruntled celeb, learned that if the group did not tread lightly on the image they had created, they would be seen as monsters. Instead of towing the line, though, they decided to exploit their ambiguity.

Mann says, "You need two heads and two extremes to find the middle. Both left and right are valuable."

"And they both should be acknowledged, accepted and embraced," adds Kelly.

These days, SOTW is more interested in pleasing themselves than the fans. And there will be less ritual massaging of the cerebral cortex for banner-brandishing die-hards who fancied the environmental politics of *Save This House* or the socially conscious rants on *Labour Day*.

Mann admits, "I think we've become three-dimensional, which I don't think we were in the past. That's not to say what we've done before is invalid. Young people are really important for that. They're the ones who get out and do the volunteer work, get up and say those statements that validate other people's opinions so they feel good about their own choices. I think it's the job of people as they get older to see both sides - life on different levels."

Lyrical integrity still drives their songs, although their sound has gradually become harder and less melodic than in their folk-rock past. Where many bands are going for the unplugged genre, SOTW goes for the electric.

"I think we definitely acknowledge that we have folk roots, and we can still hear them in our songs," says Kelly, "and we've always cherished the essence of a good song being a little story. If it doesn't say something, we're not really interested in pursuing it, but revolving around that we feel a lot of freedom to move in different musical directions."

Part of their new sound they attribute to their debut as producers of their own music and to the vision of co-producer Ken Marshall. Marshall has worked with bands like Skinny Puppy, Numb and Pluto - a lot of industrial, dance and guitar bands. *Two Headed* was

recorded live off the floor, in order to capture the band's live energy. Kelly says that the guitars are just more audible, and that's what inspires comparisons of this album with their earlier plugged-in album, *Go Figure*.

"You listen to a song and you can't hear the beginning, just the end," says Mann. "You can't hear the genesis, and I love that. That's what's great about the current wave of guitar bands; you get to hear how it was written while it's being recorded."

He explains further that the music on *Two Headed* deals with more personal themes than before, a reflection of the very real day-to-day issues many of the band members are facing now as first-time parents.

"If I get up on stage and say, 'Clear-cutting is bad,' and the crowd goes, 'Ahhhh,' I feel great for about 15 seconds, but I haven't explored anything. I haven't researched it. I'm saying something that everyone knows, and knowing that I can push that button and get a certain response is just a hollow victory. Now, we're trying to explore a different side of ourselves that we may not necessarily like to be present - the other head, the redneck side of ourselves. You know, the years of programming is hard to avoid. There's a song, 'Pin Up Boy,' that's about paedophiles. Mention paedophiles to anyone in the band, the first thing you want to do is grab a gun and blow the bastard's head off, and that's a genuine reaction, but then we also have a song on the album that deals with our aversion to guns. Both are there inside of us, the need to protect and to defend, and to me that makes for way better writing, acknowledging the other side of the coin."

If taking risks is at the core of every new breakthrough, then in Geoffrey Kelly's eyes, the band may be headed for revelation.

"We enjoy the journey. When it starts to feel safe, we're worried. We don't want to stagnate or rely on a certain formula for our success. That's why every time we have a successful record we move on to something else. We don't want to repeat ourselves."

Some would describe it as just the opposite - safe - as Spirit of the West's sound on *Two Headed* melts into flatter guitar band mode: some British pop influence in songs like "Mildred," some mainstream slush in catchy tunes like "Tell Me What I Think." Perhaps their sense of self-parody saves them. The CD spread shows them in drag on one side (except accordion/bass player Linda McRae who lounges in pink bathrobe) and zoot-suited on the other. Funny guys.

Funny, too, that they are so ahead of themselves right now. Their next album is already recorded, a more acoustic work made in collusion with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. So much for expectations.

What arises from listening to the sometimes brooding and industrial, sometimes British-invasion sounding *Two Headed* is not the urge to burp up your cookies, but to adjust your palate and sample them as something new. Loyal fans whose tastebuds ache for the Celtic folk sound that gave Spirit of the West their unique flavour in the past must don a different head for this taste test. It's like trying spinach again as an adult: there's a good chance that what you spat back on the plate as a child now lingers on your tongue like butter.

"I still feel that in some way they're all folk songs," maintains Kelly. "They all have that storytelling quality, something we'll always carry from our days growing up in the folk scene."