

Highlights



Clockwise from lower left: Jimmy Vaughan, Keith Ferguson, the band en masse, Kim Wilson, Fran Christina and T-Bird guitar which has seen better days.

Dancers, drinkers bop to T-Bird beat

Photos and story by Mark Davis

The Fabulous Thunderbirds, a band from Austin, Texas, came to the Royal Grove Tuesday night with one thing in mind: party.

And partying is what this rhythm and blues band did. Playing a mix of originals and R and B greats, the band members Jimmie Vaughn (guitar), Kim Wilson (harmonica and vocals), Keith Ferguson (bass) and Fran Christina (drums and vocals) tore it up for about 800 dancing fans.

The band specializes in playing for clubs that can hold 1,000 people, Christina said. But even in under-capacity situations, he said, "Clubs would rather have the Thunderbirds and half capacity than a full house with any other band."

Christina said the music they play and the energy they exude on stage creates the atmosphere for heavy drinking.

They played to an enthusiastic crowd for more than two hours including two fan-induced encores. The music showed signs of their Texas upbringing. Rhythmic guitar and screaming har-

monica solos dominated most of their songs, but it was the soulful rhythm that set toes tapping.

Ferguson has a backstage part in the band's performances, but his consistent heart-grabbing bass lines provide the band's dance beat. Playing the "second fiddle" to Vaughan's behind-the-back leads and Wilson's on-stage dancing doesn't seem to bother Ferguson. "It's my job," he said.

The job also has other benefits; it gives Ferguson lots of time to down beer and smoke without worrying about falling down. "I'd rather have it this way," Ferguson said.

Christina, another player on the back burner, provides plebian drum playing for the band, but takes a different approach to his job. Often throwing sticks to the crowd, once almost knocking out a bopping bystander, and intimidating the road crew on the stage wings, Christina obviously enjoys performing before a live audience.

During one bit of on-stage horseplay, Christina fell from his stool and off the stage during one of Vaughan's solos.

Worse things have happened to Christina on stage. At a concert in New York, opening for the

Doobie Brothers, The T-Birds weren't well received. Christina said they weren't on the marquee and the audience was expecting to see the Doobie Brothers come on stage rather than the Fabulous Thunderbirds. On the way up the stairs to the stage the T-Birds could hear the crowd cheering; unfortunately, the audience's enthusiasm was meant for the Doobies.

By the time the band began to play, the audience had become a lynch mob, throwing things and demanding that the band give up their stage for the Doobie Brothers. The band began to leave the stage, but on the way out Christina stood on his stool and mooned 25,000 people.

"It was the only applause we got," Christina said.

The Fabulous Thunderbirds have four albums out. The most recent, *T-Bird Rhythm*, was produced by Nick Lowe on the Chrysalis label. Their next album should be out some time within the year. After that they plan more touring, including a stop in Omaha. A live album also is on the agenda.