

# arts/entertainment

## Snakefinger launches tour in search of America

By Pat Higgins

Phillip "Snakefinger" Latham is best known as an associate of the mysterious Residents, a strange, artistic band that exists on the fringes of pop music. Snakefinger (the band) played at the Drumstick Wednesday night on the beginning of their U.S. tour.

"I'm searching for America," said Latham. "I like this place. This is the real America, not like New York or L.A."

Snakefinger has two albums out on Ralph Records that have gained considerable critical acclaim and the band is surprisingly accessible live, as the jammed dance floor and enthusiastic crowd could attest.

"New music is to rock and roll as rock and roll was to jazz in the early '50s. You take the best elements of rock and roll and build on it," Latham said.

Snakefinger's style has frequently been compared to Captain Beefheart and other esoteric favorites. But he began his career with Chilli Willi and the Red Hot Peppers in England in the early '70s. That band also included Nick Lowe, and future members of Elvis Costello's and Graham Parker's bands.

"That band was more fun than it was musically important," Latham said.

"Although a lot of people think it was the daddy of punk because of the attitude involved, which was a kick in the face to the music biz attitude. Dinosaur rock ruled then and we rejected it."

He moved from London to San Francisco several years ago to pursue his association with The Residents, which consisted of guitar contributions on several records.

"Everything dead is very popular in San Francisco. It's a small town for me after London, which is partially why I like living there," Latham said. "The Residents are as good as medicine for me, although it's not good for my

career. They're the gift of life and the kiss of death at the same time."

"The Residents are very clever. I would put them in the genius category although they aren't pretentious. They don't go around quoting Nietzsche. I write some of my material with them. I think that our records have changed things somewhat, but it is frustrating that they don't sell more," Latham said.

Snakefinger just finished a tour of Europe with Tuxedomoon, another Ralph Records band.

"Europe was fantastic. I'm generally on the left side of society and it was interesting to see how political kids are in Italy, Germany and Holland. There is a political bite to my lyrics, but there is no slogans and lectures included," he said.

Despite the summer of riots in England, Latham said English kids weren't politically motivated.

"The riots happened because everything is very miserable in England. There just isn't enough money to go around. It's a desperate situation," Latham said.

England has been the trendsetter for the world musical since The Beatles, but Latham said there had been some misconceptions.

"There are a lot of Anglophiles in the U.S. who think that English music is always superior, which is not true. The English are fed up with having things stuffed down their throats. The music press there is so fashionably fascist," he said.

Latham said new music's future is unclear. "If anything, music is moving to the right. In New York, people would rather go to a rockabilly disco than listen to new music. However, I'm not dependent on security for my sanity."

"I just try to do my job well just like your farmers out here enjoy doing their jobs well," he said. "I just want to be getting through to more people who'll hopefully encourage me to go even more beserk."



Photo by Mark Billingsley

Phillip "Snakefinger" Latham

## 'The Unreasoning Mask' rehashes space theme

By David Wood

Like most good heroes piloting Earth's proud starships, Captain Ramstan carries on his enigmatic shoulders the fate of humanity — if not the universe and more. He must boldly go where no man has gone before.

It's a dull, typical plot Philip Jose Farmer picked for his latest so-called thriller, *The Unreasoning Mask*. A selfless brute barnstorms across terrified worlds and gets himself in a David vs. Goliath fix. The book ends saying Ramstan has a 75 percent chance for success.

just check to see if it's explosive. Not only that, they can smell things outside the ship as if they're cruising space with the top down.

Another time, the ship makes a 360-degree backward turn. Sure it's science fiction, but why not 180 degrees and save a little credence?

*The Unreasoning Mask* is a perfect description for the slipshod contrivances by which Farmer moves his plot.

Farmer has good ideas, but he's a hack. His writing at times reads like a first draft. The beginning and end of the book seem to have never met.

Logical integrity seems to stand for no more than maintaining interchangeability with a *Star Wars*-like suspension of disbelief. That Farmer is respected in his genre doesn't speak so well of the author as it speaks ill of science fiction.

### book review

The variation on the old theme is that space is short of the final frontier. Space is only the body of God and it is to the mind of God that Ramstan's rescue mission takes him.

The mystical license this gives the author is surely intentional. Farmer treasures his flights into the unreal.

In the early '70s when he was an up-and-coming author, Farmer was notorious for injecting drugs into his stories. Since then, he has drifted out of that theme and into a vague belief in mystical determinism.

In *The Unreasoning Mask*, psychedelia is reduced to asides — titillating glimpses and false leads no more relevant to the plot than, say, the sex teased into *Star Trek*. The godhead Ramstan seeks is no illusion.

Farmer supposes God is the inventory of all things, an almighty born of the Big Bang. It is awakening, dimly aware as a whole, but ignorant of the goings-on of its parts.

Farmer has God at odds with the intelligence that sometimes springs up on its planets. Humans mature faster than a solitary God and invent fancy starships to poke shortcuts through space. They are the divine cancer, killing God in its prime.

Even though the idea is good — or maybe because it is good — the story falters. Farmer fails to pull off the cosmic epic he attempted to write in 293 pages.

His characters are blurry, his focus off-center. Leads are false, scenes misproportioned and justifications skewed. Inconsistencies are cleaned up after they're spilled. Premises are hopelessly gerrymandered to fit his needs.

When Farmer should be turning words to address reasonable doubts, he instead writes about the roots of alien words, quantifying trivial dimensions or bringing up something else only to drop it later.

Anachronisms don't slow him down either. He sticks keyholes in the doors Ramstan needs to spy through. He even puts the ether back in space. Ancient science is oddly mixed up with the hi-tech.

For instance, rather than analyzing a foreign gas to find out if it's toxic, isotopic or infectious, Ramstan and crew

## Change, romance found at Mini Mat

Thursday night — laundry night. My clothes from the bathroom and some scattered about my apartment floor are pulling themselves across the carpet towards the closet; the closet where the laundry bag awaits with open strings.

A few severe casualties cross the floor and head in the opposite direction. They make their way to the kitchen and lie whimpering and whining at the foot of the garbage can, "Please . . . let us iiiiin . . ."

### t. marni vos

I gather up my laundry bag, grab an apple, one textbook — get in some studying — and head for the Mini Mat.

They call it a Mini Mat because there are about eight washing machines along one wall, four dryers along another and two chairs by the front door.

As I arrive, a medium framed, gray-haired figure with a "day's growth" pulls his head out of an empty dryer. He smiles. It's Gene.

"Hi Marni . . . you got change for a dollar?"

I reach into my pocket full of quarters and dimes. "Sure do."

"Can I have it?"

I smile, "Here you are Gene."

He smiles, bigger this time, and makes his way out into the night.

I look into several machines and check for cleanliness. Someone forgot their car mat. I decide to use the three at the south end.

I put my clothes in the machines, (crazy I know) sit down and open my text book. Several minutes pass. A couple comes in; they too put their clothes in the washing machines and then the girl sits on the washing machine and they start to make out. I mean they're all of 4 feet

from me, I look up and this girl is consuming this guy's ear . . . I feel stupid. What am I supposed to do? Act like they're not there?

I think maybe I should go ahead and ask 'em for some dimes. Maybe put their clothes in the dryer. I sit there. I can't concentrate on my studies, so, I read my detergent box — for twenty minutes I read the detergent box — All is putting out an all new low-suds formula. I read the back of this guy's shirt. It said "Rod." My clothes finally spun out.

Well this girl is sitting on my machine. I put the quarters in it and she's sitting on it. Sooooo I go up and tap Rod on the shoulder and say, "Excuse my Rod, if you take Honey off my machine I could put my clothes in the dryer."

I mean I could understand it; washers and dryers have always brought the animal out in me. Sometimes I do my laundry three times a week; sometimes I offer to do my sister's laundry, or the people who live up-stairs.

Rod and Honey move to the last washing machine on the north side and continue to exhaust each other.

I sit down to study. The glass door slowly opens . . .

"Hi Marni."

"Vera."

Vera is an older woman with a lot of spirit and just a pinch on caution. She is always at the laundry mat . . . lint between her fingers, fuzz on the tip of her blue curls and pieces of Bounce and Cling-free stuck to her clothes.

"Gene been in?"

"Yea, you just missed him. He went that way."

"You have change for a dollar?"

"No, but Gene does."

"He went that way?"

"Yea."

"Is that your apple?"

"Yea."

Vera smiles real big. I give her my apple. She too disappears into the night. The dryer buzzer goes off, I fold my clothes, put my text book in my knapsack and head home to study.