

Safety Last's rock 'n' roll gets people dancing

By Danny O'Kane

Listening to Safety Last this past weekend at the Drumstick, it was impossible to tell that this was only their 10th gig since reforming Last September. This Minneapolis-based rockabilly band can really move people onto the dance floor. Their style is deceptively simple, as they churn out rock 'n' roll classics by Carl Perkins, and Gene Vincent, along with a good number of originals.

As a three piece they strive to capture the basic elements of rock 'n' roll, which have been lost amid walls of sound in recent years. This is highly danceable music, which only affects those parts of your body below the neck.

You may recall that Safety Last first appeared at the Drumstick a year ago as a four piece. Since then, guitarists Tim Manseth and Sprague Hollander have left and been replaced by Gary Louris. All agree that as a trio, the sound is much better.

"With a three piece there is more open space, and it becomes a part of the music, as important as the notes we're playing," Gary says.

Indeed rockabilly provides a good skeleton for studying rock 'n' roll. It's restrictive in form, and much like the blues, relies on the delivery for much of its power. As Rusty Jones puts it, "rockabilly requires a good deal of input from the crowd." There was plenty of this at the Drumstick.

The band gets much of its energy from the not-slightly-balding Jones. His age is as questionable as his hairline, but his musical tastes are unvaried.

Same music

"I've been listening to this same music since high school," he says.

Besides lead vocals, Rusty provides the all important bass line. As one of the founding members, he has written most of the bands originals. He says Carl Perkins has been his greatest influence, and one can sense a little country in his voice.

Jim Tollefsrud plays the drums and sings backup vocals. He is perhaps the most animated on stage, with a rather contagious sway, to go along with his strong backbeat. Jim was impressed with the receptiveness of the crowd at the Drumstick.

"People get up and dance here, not because it's fashionable, but because it's good music," he said.

Gary Louris is the newest member of the band. His guitar playing is surprisingly clear and crisp. There is very little distortion on his Fender Strat, and he will often bend a few chords with his vibrato arm. The best thing about this band is that nobody overplays their instrument. Louris lately has been sharing the song writing duties with Rusty. About writing he says, "Most of my experience has been in the pop vein, but I'm enjoying the transition — the hardest thing to do is write a good easy song."

Recording contract

The band has a recording contract with the Minneapolis-based Twintone Records, and will soon be promoting an EP recorded a year ago with the original band. Twintone has rapidly gained national recognition as one of the best of the small labels. Its biggest success has been with the Suburbs, who have recently landed a contract with a major label.

According to Rusty, "Twintone is perfect for us, it's a chance to get on vinyl — not to make a million bucks, but to be heard." Gary adds that Twintone is dedicated to

the Minneapolis music scene — nurturing bands for larger audiences. This is unique today, in an industry geared for platinum.

When asked about the recent rockabilly craze, Rusty said it's "a rediscovering of roots, and this is always going to be happening. I think this is the fifth time I can remember it making a comeback."

The band seems to agree though, that because of its historical context, rockabilly will not be the next big thing in music. Still, Safety Last is confident in its musical direction.

The band seems unimpressed with the new "cat" bands, such as the Rockats, and the Stray Cats. Says Gary, "They tend to put fashion before the music, and their playing is not the greatest."

The band plans to record an album this summer, and then promote it by going on the road. They are also thinking of adding a female vocalist.

"Yeah, she's beautiful, and she sounds just like Wanda Jackson too," Gary Louris said.



Photo by D. Eric Kircher

Jim Tollefsrud, Gary Louris and Rusty Jones — members of the Minneapolis rockabilly band Safety Last.

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