

IN APPRECIATION OF ... LOCAL MUSIC

STORY BY BRET SCHULTE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANE HICKENBOTTOM

The Millions toured Europe with Sheryl Crow; Mercy Rule has shared stages with Coolio, Hum and Mike Watt; Zager & Evan's single "In the Year 2525" topped the charts in 1969.

Respectively, they have earned such titles as eclectic pop ensemble, power-balanced trio and even the definitive one-hit wonder. But there is one title they have all shared at one time or another: Lincoln band.

"Lincoln residents are lucky that the bands are so diverse," said Bernie McGinn, owner of Lincoln label Caulfield Records.

"There are a lot of totally crazy hard-core bands like Armatron, and then there is the goofy stuff like Self-Righteous Brothers and bluesy bands like Baby Jason and the Spankers."

Over the past 15 years local bands have labored in clubs, toured the country in dilapidated vans and cut albums in other people's basements — all in relative obscurity.

But they have received plenty of notice elsewhere. Having toured extensively in the United States and once in Europe, Lullaby for the Working Class has been invited to several national music festivals, released two albums and produced a video played on MTV and VH1.

Band member Mike Mogis said the lack of local attention is a bit frustrating.

"We played two shows in London, and we were the headlining band," he said. "They were both sold out. And in no other city in the United States have we done that — including Lincoln."

"It would make sense that because we're from Lincoln we'd be popular there, but it's not the case."

Lullaby for the Working Class is not alone. Mercy Rule packed clubs in New York last fall, and the now-defunct Kid Quarkstar impressed a crowd at the famous San Francisco venue The Elbow Room.

For the past few years, Lincoln has boasted several strong and highly diverse acts — a scene that is just starting to receive more recognition.

The Self-Righteous Brothers is a lounge-parody act that has consistently packed the Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St., since 1996. Its album "Taste" is currently sold out at the downtown Homer's location.

Richard Rebarber, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln math professor, is a songwriter for Floating Opera, a densely and symphonically structured all-star group comprised of G.I.O. (ex-Millions) vocalist Lori Allison, Larry Watson of The Return and the complete lineup from Mercy Rule.

The sense of community among local musicians is quite rare, Rebarber said,

especially when one gauges the depth of the Lincoln talent pool.

"From my point of view the town is almost perfect because there are a lot of talented people who are doing it because they love music, not for money," Rebarber said.

Rebarber said members from rival

L. Kent Wolgamott, Lincoln Journal Star entertainment writer, sees audiences shrink away from local acts.

"They think if it's not national or on a major label, it's not good music," Wolgamott said. "That's inexplicable to me. Over the last 10 years Lincoln has had as many good bands as anywhere in the country."

He cited Mercy Rule's 1994 release "Providence," which won the band a slot on Rolling Stone's top new band list.

Wolgamott cited several top-quality Lincoln bands, including the now-defunct groups Charlie Burton & Rock Therapy and 13 Nightmares along with current projects such as The Sissies, the Self-Righteous Brothers, Mercy Rule, Shithook and Lullaby for the Working Class. Most of these have toured

nationally and have released albums.

"These are all bands that people might not give the respect they deserve because they're from Lincoln," he said.

As local rock acts continue to diversify and expand, artists hope that local audiences will start to pay more attention.

"For a town as small as Lincoln it has a surprisingly high percentage of good bands," Mogis said.

McGinn agrees. "Quit being so stingy. Three bucks for two live bands? You won't get that anywhere else in the country."



ERIK THE RED, a relatively new local band, is made up of musicians from more recognizable groups. The lineup includes (from left) Chris Palmquist (formerly of Eamon), Rich Higgins (of Sideshow) and Shane Aspergen (formerly of Lullaby for the Working Class).

bands frequently assist each other's efforts. They create art work, contribute to records and publicize each other's concerts.

"People here are remarkably un-mercenary," he said. "I remember there was a time when Harry Dingman (G.I.O., The Millions) did artwork for Floating Opera and Ron Albertson of Mercy Rule did artwork for The Millions."

The strong music community has left many bands yearning for more attention from audience members, however.

THE PLAYERS

The following is a list of only a few of Lincoln's most promising acts accompanied with the title of one of their releases. Homer's Records is Lincoln's best retailer of local music and currently carries most of these albums.

Baby Jason & The Spankers

This blues/rock three-piece has released two albums, toured nationally and is slated for a show at the House of Blues in Chicago. Locally, they have appeared at the Zoo Bar and have inspired a new sandwich: "The Spanker Special" at M & N Sandwich Shop, 2643 Rudolph — a pastrami burger topped with chili. Last year they released "Dreamgirl" on Buttsmackin' Blues Records.

Cursive

A local success story of the Saddle Creek Records phenomenon, the sonically chaotic rock group follows the label's pattern of Omaha/Lincoln fellowship. Recently the group recorded "Such Blinding Stars for Starving Eyes" on Crank! Records.

Floating Opera

Consisting of what may be Lincoln's most talented lineup, Floating Opera employs members from Mercy Rule, G.I.O. and a medley of other artists. In February, the group played for NETV's (Channel 13) concert series "33rd Street Sessions." Critically acclaimed and highly touted, its -ismist Recording release, "Everybody is Somebody's Monster," continues to sell since its release in 1996.

Lullaby for the Working Class

If this were high school, Lullaby for the Working Class would probably get voted "Most Likely to Succeed." Fronted by the owners of Saddle Creek Records, the diverse

instrumentation and soulful delivery of Lullaby spurred the bands success at the SXSW and NXNE festivals among others. Its latest release, "I Never Even Asked for Light," is on Bar/None Records.

Mercy Rule

Legendary for both its energy and longevity, the power-ballad trio has long held a special place in the hearts of local music fans. The group encountered a host of problems trying to release its latest (and greatest) album, "The Flat Black Chronicles," which was finally produced on MCA Records but is now carried by local label, Caulfield Records.

Radio King

These long-time Lincoln musicians finally followed their true rockabilly calling to become one of the city's best bar bands. Snappy dressers and nimble musicians, the hard-driving four-piece has rattled Lincoln venues with dance, drink and a damn-it-all attitude for little more than a year. Their self-titled release was self-released last fall.

Self-Righteous Brothers

Arguably Lincoln's favorite local act, this unholy mix of lounge parody and Scottish-rock sarcasm is the tightest live act in town. Lyrically irreverent and hilariously acrobatic performers, The Self-Righteous Brothers have captured their insanity on the recent release "Taste."

Shithook

Although Shithook is most known for its live-karaoke gigs every Thursday night at Duffy's, 1412 O St., the seasoned band has a remarkable history all its own. Comprised of former members of Charlie Burton's group, these guys have opened for the likes of ZZ Top and The Replacements. The self-released "When a Boy Scout Gets the Blues" intentionally hints of admiration for classic rock acts such as the Rolling Stones and The Who.

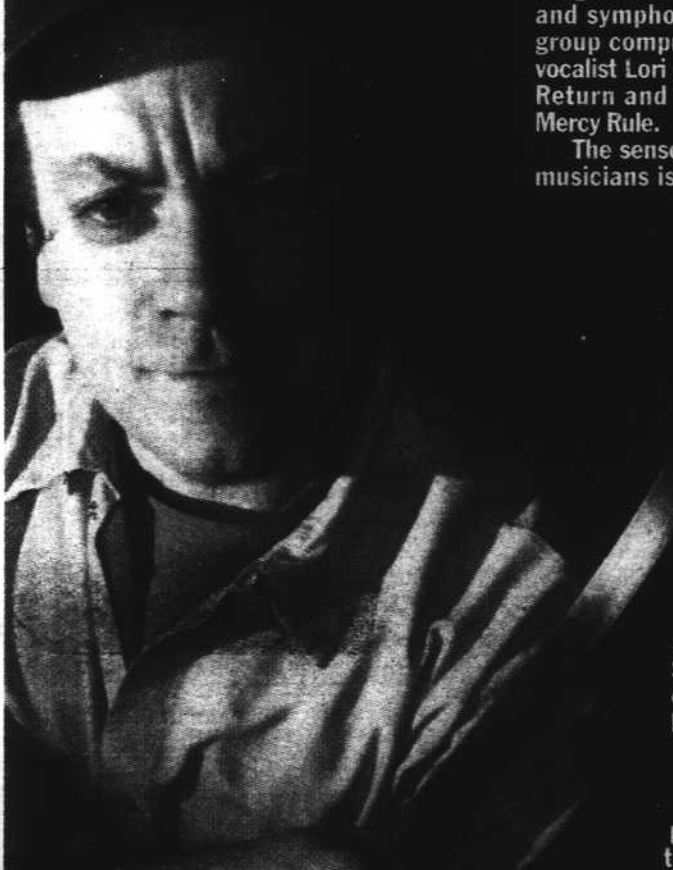
THE PLACES

The local music scene would be nothing without a roof over its head. Local venues have come and gone, most notably The Drumstick near 48th and O streets, which served as the city's premier rock venue for decades and once supplied a stage for REM. It now continues serving the public as a McDonald's.

Local venues:

The Brass Rail, 1436 O St.
Cheerleaders Sports Bar, 5560 S. 48th St.
Club 1427, 1427 O St.
Duggan's Pub, 440 S. 11th St.

Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St.
Knickerbockers Bar & Grill, 901 O St.
The Royal Grove Nite Club, 340 W. Cornhusker Hwy.
UNL Culture Center, 333 N. 14th St.
Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St.



PHIL SHOEMAKER is the frontman and guitarist for local legends Shithook. The group, which is best-known for its weekly karaoke gigs at Duffy's Tavern, released "When a Boy Scout Gets the Blues" in late 1997.