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Halifax explodes!

Pop Explosion lights up the city

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and Rachel Long

Once upon a time, two Brunswicks, two all-access media passes, and a grouchy camera took a trip to Halifax for the biggest East Coast music event of the year. This is a tale of their adventures.

The Weakerthans

Critically hailed and impossible to categorize, The Weakerthans are Canada's best kept secret. The Winnipeg band has gained international recognition as indie rock masters through their first two releases, *Fallow* and *Left and leaving*. Their two performances in Halifax this weekend were packed to the brim.

Running through selections from both albums, as well as a handful of new tunes, the crowd's singing often overpowered that of the band. 'Watermark,' 'Left and leaving,' 'Wellington's Wednesdays,' and 'Everything Must Go' were only a few of the songs that proved the group's extraordinarily extensive range. Melancholy ballads blended seamlessly with pop-punk anthems, while lead singer/guitarist John K. Sansom's lyrics wove in and out of the music. Call them whatever you want: wheatfield punk, prairie soul, post-punk folk, bipolar prairie rock — The Weakerthans are what real music is about. The band has a couple of shows in Quebec in December — it's worth the trip. (SPS)

The Meligrove Band

This fresh-faced Toronto trio took the stage just before four pm on Saturday, an unlikely time unless you're in the middle of a zine fest and slotted in front of Canada's darlings The Weakerthans. The crowd was bustling through the room at the various zine booths, but despite this the band rocked out from the very start, and it didn't take long for a crowd to develop around the stage.

The first three songs were band-described 'bubblegum pop' anthems with the requisite "Bah-ba-bada" and "Bada-ba-ba"'s and lyrics mostly about gettin' and losin' the girl. Above the lyrics, however, the overall musicianship was great and the band wooed the audience with their tight playing, start-stop melodies, tempo changes and flash-freeze poses.

The band's original material was well accepted, as was their cover of Costello's 'Pump It Up', which they didn't attempt to re-interpret at any level, but it got heads nodding and a few people dancing. As one audience member put it, "they sounded like Sloan meets Elvis Costello and the Beach Boys at a party."

The band has produced three full-length albums that are distributed through Sonic Unyon. You can also check them out at <http://meligrove.tripod.com/>. (RL)

Snailhouse

Perched precariously over his guitar, Snailhouse (aka Michael Feuerstack) exuded a sentiment of honesty and sensitivity to his audience. The Wooden Stars veteran's subdued guitar wove among his backing piano, drums, and bass, showcasing songs from his upcoming album, *The Opposite is also True*. In an age where the sensitive singer/songwriter has become a cliché, Feuerstack is a musician who knows where to draw the line between sensitive and sappy. His lyrics capture the basis of everyday life, interweaving bits of conversation and tales of daily life without moving into melodrama. The Moncton native formerly played with punk band the Underdogs before relocating to Ottawa and developing his own material. Feuerstack has been with the Juno-winning Wooden Stars since their inception. (SPS)

Tangiers

Imagine mixing Stevie Wonder, Television, The Rolling Stones, and The Flashing Lights — that's Tangiers. Surely among the best-dressed at the Pop Explosion, Tangiers had serious attitude. Two guitars, a keyboard and drums gave the band a solid swing-rock feel, with an overabundance of flair. Unfortunately, when combining other bands to describe one, it often means the group being described doesn't have a very original sound. Such is the case with Tangiers. They were funky and sometimes engaging, but uninteresting vocals and boring song structures left the audience wanting something more. (SPS)

A/V

The stage was set with Philip Clark's four layers of keyboards and electronics; the room was full with anticipation. A large screen displayed blue, then the one-man band A/V stepped up to the mic. After an introduction of "this is

dance music," the beats began.

A/V is synth with a bittersweet attitude; his second song 'ask your wife' (about her double life, that is) was followed by a short quip about "monotony...I mean monogamy," and a tune about couples who don't have sex anymore. A/V's lyrics read like poetry and most are full of angst, but he also dives into the thoughtful and the imaginative.

A/V was a complete audio/video experience, with a mash of cartoons on the screen behind and Clark dancing and playing up front. The music was so danceable that the crowd couldn't keep still, and it was disappointing when it was over.

Philip Clark has recently produced his second A/V CD *control change*, as well as producing five other Halifax bands, all of which are available through his label at www.swordfight.org. (RL)

Weights and Measures

Sporting bloody operating room scrubs and surgeon's masks, Ottawa trio Weights and Measures started off with a full two minutes of feedback, setting the stage for the ambient jam we were about to enjoy.

This band really grooved. Guitarist Kevin Jagernauth and bassist Samir Khan watched each other closely and often faced drummer Jeremy Gara, anticipating and improvising. The band allowed the music to grow and move, and I sensed that this show was not a well-rehearsed regurgitation but a living entity.

The crowd listened and watched attentively, and enjoying the playful interactions of the band with each other; the guitarist spending a lot of time writhing on the floor and the bassist resting his foot on audience members' shoulders; many times both jumped off the stage and into the crowd.

The Weights and Measures set never really ended. After a few switches, W&M was onstage with the next band, labelmates North of America, and both complete bands were playing together. The crowd was wild with excitement, and the six played together for a few minutes before W&M graciously left the stage.

Read more about the band, and listen to tunes from their debut album *Tonight, the Lower Abdominals* at matlockrecords.com. (RL)

North of America

Frantic is a great way to illustrate North of America. They kicked, writhed, and thrashed around the stage during their forty-five minute set, having as much fun on stage as those dancing and jumping in the audience. The group's old-school emo rock music was greatly appreciated by the crowd, who seemed to know the majority of the songs. Aggressive and urgent, their tight starts and stops invigorated the already rocking music. Alternating between silly rock poses and full-out assaults on their instruments, N of A were completely at home on the stage. (SPS)

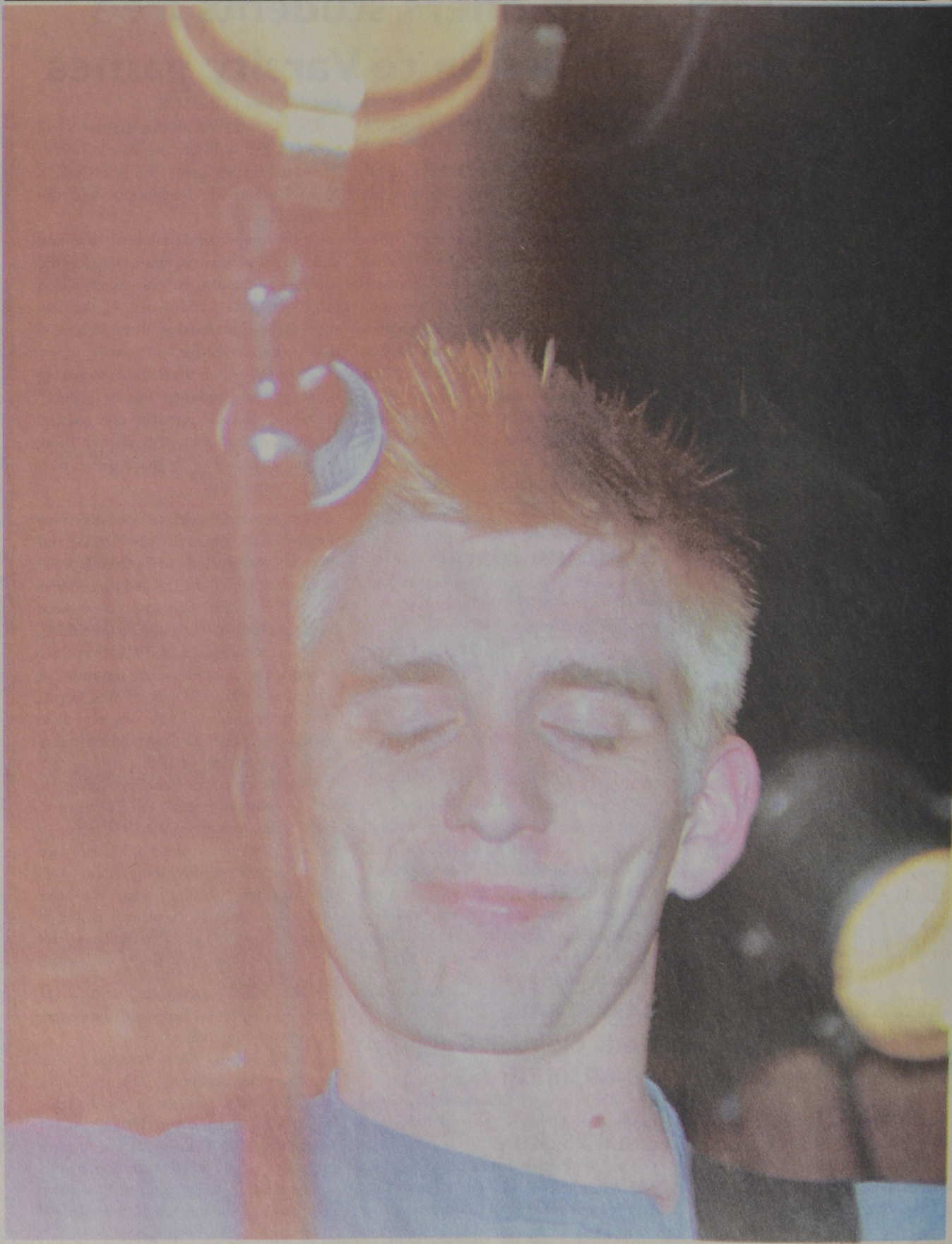
Rockets Red Glare

Rockets Red Glare opened an early Saturday night line-up with an all-ages crowd of about two hundred people. The trio of drums, bass, and guitar grooved in a jam style, feeding off each other and the hundred-odd air-drumming and dancing teenage boys crowded against the stage. Every song followed a general "variations on a jam" theme, with vocals being used not as language but as an instrument. The audience quickly became mesmerized with each tune.

The bass and guitar players were talented musicians, but the star of the show was the drummer who provided the foundation and structure for every tune. The percussion was the main focus and at many points the bass player and guitarist stepped aside while the drummer astounded the audience. This was the loudest, tightest, most athletic and rhythmic drumming I have ever seen, and the audience was stunned to silence for most of the show. (RL)

Neuseiland

The festival described Neuseiland as 'unpredictable melodic psychedelia,' and the band delivered. From ethereal ambience to music bursting at the seams with resounding emotion, Neuseiland's retro rock struck a chord with the eager audience. The keyboardist/singer was the centre of attention for most of the set, the lights eerily illuminating his often stoic expressions. Keep an eye out for this band. (SPS)



Sean Patrick Sullivan / The Brunswickan

From top to bottom: The Meligrove Band, By Divine Right's Jose Contreras, and The Weakerthans' John K. Sansom.