

WEEKLY PLANET

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MUSIC
scott harrell

DETAILS:

Barely Pink w/Soulsystem

Skipper's Smokehouse, Tampa
Saturday, Jan. 12
55, 8 p.m.

Blush With Fame



BARELY PINK: The local rock act aims to please audiences with a high-energy, non-ironic approach to playing music.

You know that point in a lot of movies when the hero seems finished, shot out, kaput? The love interest misunderstood his phone message; the evil billionaire let loose an evil device that's creeping toward his crotch; the big Russian dude's about to punch his face off of his head. Circumstance and character flaw have conspired to bring him to the brink of annihilation, and only the will to succeed can save him. Of course,

you know he's gonna pull through, hit the home run, save the babe — countless variations on the theme have taught you so. But still, it's a cold meat puppet who doesn't get a little white-knuckled when Rocky's still on the canvas as the count reaches eight.

The saga of St. Petersburg power-pop outfit Barely Pink is only about six exposed breasts and seven hundred explosions shy of a screenplay. It has

everything else. Humor. Conflict. A love story. And most importantly, seemingly insurmountable odds followed by a triumph over adversity. In late 1998, after four years, one and a half albums (we'll get to that) and some international cult notoriety, singer/guitarist Brian Merrill was frustrated to the point of giving up music entirely. A revolving-door membership, label woes and the local scene's disaffection had Merrill, an active voice in the music community for more than a decade, considering retirement.

"When things started to fall apart, it was because I was burnt on trying to keep a band together. I wasn't burnt on playing, writing and performing. It was all the peripheral stuff," he recalls. "I was getting really sick of people coming and going. You had to keep starting over again — you get some momentum going and then you lose it all. That was very frustrating for me."

Barely Pink's 1995 self-issued debut EP, *Starduster*, had received rave reviews from the likes of *Billboard* and *Goldmine*, leading to a deal with guitar-

pop-centric independent label Big Deal (Shonen Knife, Blackeyed Ghost). The company released an augmented, full-length version of the EP, titled Numberonefan, which garnered an even larger worldwide fanbase. At home, however, the group found itself struggling to connect with both a local following and the scene itself, and began a seemingly endless series of lineup shifts. Work on their sophomore disc, Elli's Suitcase, was constantly interrupted.

As the record neared completion, Merrill found himself faced with a disturbingly uncommunicative record company. Ultimately, it was revealed that Big Deal was going under. As a final act, the label licensed Barely Pink's non-American rights to JVC/Victor, which eventually released Elli's Suitcase in Japan. "It was ridiculous — I couldn't get any copies of the record," says the singer/guitarist. "It took me months and months to get them to send me some, and when they did, they sent, like, four." He laughs.

The stress of the ordeal, along with Barely Pink's disheartening inability to maintain fixed personnel, prompted Merrill to ponder throwing in the towel. At one point, the band consisted solely of himself and guitarist Mark Warren, then doing double duty in the Leonard Croon Band.

"We considered just doing a Steely Dan type of thing, writing and recording stuff without ever playing out, or even having an actual band," Warren says. But when the Leonard Croon Band wound down, Warren brought bassist Michael Hoag into the Barely Pink fold. Hoag contributed a renewed enthusiasm, and that excitement was compounded immeasurably, everyone involved agrees, with the addition of Stan Arthur, an exuberant veteran multi-instrumentalist who took over drumming duties. The outgoing Arthur had a lifetime's worth of entertainment-industry experience. He immediately set about dissipating the pressures of BP's situation by creating a fun atmosphere that would translate easily to audiences sick of watching musicians watch their

shoes.

"I always loved the band's music, and wanted to be in the band," says Arthur. "But I told Brian that I thought sometimes their presence live seemed sort of detached, introverted. I harped on all of these guys to focus out. It's about love and energy, in that order."

"And we were ready to try something else, because what we were doing wasn't exactly working for us," adds Merrill with a laugh.

Not surprisingly, the quartet's conscious effort to provide an engaging alternative to live rock's current angst-ridden or self-absorbed trends meshed perfectly with their clever and insanely infectious tuneage.

"We're (now) very aware of being entertainers, to some degree. We like to include the audience in our fun," Hoag says. "People want to see a band at least as much as they want to hear the band. We try to put that energy out to the audience. Our stage thing is sort of tongue-in-cheek. We're not afraid to have a good time, be a little bit campy, make fun of ourselves."

"But our tongue is not completely in the cheek," interjects Warren. "It's tickling the cheek."

Barely Pink's first shows since becoming a stable unit showcased an energy and effort sorely lacking from previous gigs, winning converts among scenesters and musicians who'd once dismissed them as a less-than-inspired (or inspiring) live act. At the same time, they began noticing faces from outside the Bay area's original-music bubble. Buoyed by the favorable reaction, they returned to playing out with fervor; the last six months have seen Barely Pink gigging more than in the previous year and a half, and logging more road miles than they did in the five years before.

"You can't just play in St. Pete," stresses Arthur. "We went to Miami, had a show at Tobacco Road that kicked ass. We went to Atlanta, North Carolina, New York, L.A. We're having a ball." The foursome reports that several of the out-of-town shows have been extremely well-attended. While most local bands must contend with indifference on their first couple of tours, the Pink benefit from a catalog of released and recog-

nized material. Barring their now-annual appearances at the power-pop festival International Pop Overthrow in L.A., they've never performed for most of their fans; such a scarcity has spurred a bit of a draw, which the band has vigorously nurtured online. "We totally work the Internet inroads. We've gotten into different Web communities, and a lot of people show up who know us through the Internet," affirms Hoag. So with a new album — and, in all likelihood, another indie deal — on the way, the new, improved, reinvigorated, live-rocking, good-time-having Barely Pink find themselves at the best point yet in their career, not too long after having been mired in the worst. And they're experiencing a taste of just desserts in the local scene, as well; the band that always did better out of town seems to be doing quite well at home these days. Their crowd may not be the same one that haunts edgy Orpheum shows, and they're probably not the coolest thing in the Bay area, but the BP guys couldn't care less. They're perfectly happy playing to regular people, and lots of them. "You look at the big pie-chart of the general public, and the hip snobby people are a tiny slice about this big," says Warren, holding his fingers about an inch apart. "And the rest of the chart is people who just want to rock and have a good time.

"The average minivan type person wants to rock. They really do."