

LIVE!

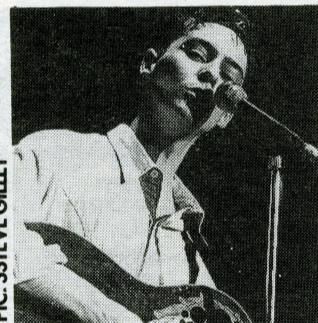
**SENSELESS THINGS/
MILK****POWERHAUS, LONDON**

IT seems a peculiar notion billing the philosophical emotions of Milk's guitar ridden rock alongside the dynamism of Senseless Things' guitar pop. It's cool if you can switch moods during the interval and proves worth it, because both these bands are the cream of their crop.

Tonight Milk are ready with a whole batch of new songs and full of a "wham, bam, how's that?" attitude. Seething. Which is just fine. Their funeral march tempos shudder like monster blubber. Their rhythmic clusters are a savage surge of pain. Anyone who can't stomach it is a fool, I say. If anything, Milk are hinting at becoming a British Thin White Rope. And if life were a series of movies, this is one you'd be a damn fool not to get into.

The Senseless fans have no energy left, having queued this long summer evening to get in, and rock woeefully to Milk. But the Things have enough to spare for everybody. They storm through their rich repertoire like boys on bicycles saying, "look, no hands". In this size venue the sound is hard and vital, the power it allows irresistible, so they go on, and on. And on.

Suddenly bass player Morgan is itchy. Guitarist Ben seems smiley and thoughtful. Vocalist Mark, is of course, his usual pretty self. His smile is genuine and his eye lids are half shut. But the eyes still sparkle, hinting at the forthcoming wonder that is "Hanging Out With My Ex", an uncharacteristically long song with a jazzy dribble, and a hip beat. A classic with youth on its side, no less. The kind of nostalgia that's right.

NGAIRE**RODDY FRAME &
EDWYN COLLINS
MARCO'S LEISURE CENTRE,
EDINBURGH**

THERE must be a gag somewhere about how fitting it was for Frame and Collins to play The Fringe but I'm too busy coming down (hey!) from this great night to hunt for it. Perhaps irony is more in order. Long gone are the days when Roddy and Edwyn wore their chin-skirting follicular appendages like Roger McGuinn's. *Tempes fugit*, and all that but there hovered the horrifying possibility that tonight's all-acoustic canter through two equally formidable back catalogues might be the final, dodderingly-driven nail in the coffin of Postcard's memory, the Sound Of Prematurely Greying Scotland chorusing on "Those Were The Days" and hitting the road in time to get the kids to bed. Turn on, tune in, go to the office late on Monday.

Not a bit of it. Frame and Collins have irony coming out of their ears, and while such a qualification might not always guarantee gripping entertainment, it sure keeps boil-in-the-bag nostalgia at bay. Tonight was an exorcism and celebration of past glories on a par with The Velvet Underground in Paris last year, a wide-eyed wander through the leafy willows of yesteryear and a thumbnail sketch of things to come. Things like a new Frame composition, "Spanish Horses", a melodic tumbrel of Catalan motifs and spiralling harmonies that preserves in aspic the cool romantic

aspirations of Postcard at its finest. Frame described it as "a cross between avant-garde and, uhm, art...", which is fair enough, despite the line about "running a red light through Gaudi's soft confusion".

Really it was fabulous. I wish you'd been there. You probably were actually. Oxygen was at a premium in this low-ceilinged prefab common-room as the pair took a song each in turn, swapped some dodgy Vic Reeves repertoire, hammed it up rotten during the guitar solos (a practise, incidentally, now as cliched as the Quo-wank it parodies) and generally gave the impression this was something they might do more often.

The hits kept coming - "Oblivious", "Consolation Prize", a "Down The Dip" that paid tribute to Dylan with its twisted scansion and segue into "It's Alright Ma", "Birth Of The True" and "Simply Thrilled Honey" with ex-Joseph K man Malcolm Ross adding squalls of feedback to one of Collins' feyest, limpest anthems to androgyny-as-a-way-of-getting-girls. As Edwyn might have said, it was rockin' good news. Really, life wouldn't be worth living if this was a once in a lifetime event.

ALLAN BROWN**LIR****SIR HENRY'S, CORK**

DUBLIN is this year's European cultural capital. Beckett and Yeats are very sweet buzzwords again and there are floating art pieces on the river Liffey. But in the pop-clubs and smelly halls we're celebrating some very dubious cultures indeed. There are hippychicks squatted on the pedestrian streets beading and plaiting hair at a price. There are lots of young art-kids struggling with goatee beards and hippies with long hair and smocks are dancing barefoot in the parks. And that's where Lir come in.

Lir are five young men who sound like It Bites and Marillion and Camel and Led Zeppelin. They're heavily fancied and have had lots of record company pigs to their table. There are lots of American A&R accents at their shows and some of the band look like very young and confused Grateful Dead people. Lir can sardine most of Dublin's pop-pits at the drop of a hat, but we've always had to make our excuses and leave. Tonight we're vindicated.

Lir are away from home and out of sorts. Alright, so they sweat and they're tight and they probably believe in what they do. Fine. They're competent and confident, but they have nothing like a song. Same old story, really.

"Three Legged Girl" is "Purple Haze", all dressed-up but going nowhere in particular, a bit like Horslips various bites at an Irish rock-trad-folk-prog thing somewhere in the dark Seventies. Sometimes we even think that Lir must be jamming, their songs go bump and stop and start again and have different tunes and devious middle-bits and bits that just seem to be there because they sounded alright at the time. The guitarist is stunningly good, though, and he wears a nice half-beard, but his funky and grooved-up and hard-ass stings are lost to enormous melodic voids. And while "Halcyon Days" is their best song by country miles, "Advice To The College Girl" and "Memorial" are just there to take up time and space and energy, like Yes playing Spinal Tap's "Stonehenge". Basically, Lir just never happen.

As we leave, there are two drunks on the street flailing fists and wielding broken bottles, both of them cut to the bone, bleeding horribly. Lir's love, peace and harmony is, I'm sure, all very nice, very nice. But not until the next world.

COLM O'CALLAGHANFRUIT OF THE
GLOOM

P.C. MIKE MORTON

**THE CRANBERRIES
THE UNDERWORLD, LONDON**

YOU haven't heard of The Cranberries?

Welcome back from Mars. Question: what do you get if you whack a smallish non-blonde Irish girl with a voice on soaring terms with Liz Cocteau, Harriet Sunday and Bjork Sugarcube in front of three Kevin Shields impersonators? Answer: every press officer, journalist and A&R person in the kingdom and a whole heap of unruly expectations. You can count the regular Joe/Josephine Public punters in here on the index finger of one hand. For the moment, The Cranberries are very big news in a very small world.

It's a world full of people with power, though, like it or not. So tonight counts. But, as I say, you're not here, we are, so it probably wouldn't go amiss to explain that The Cranberries are four young things from the west coast of Ireland whose demo tape and summer dates with Moose aroused the sort of interest not enjoyed by a new British group since Curve, Lush or The Sundays. It might also be worth stressing for those of you who didn't get that cassette or see those early gigs that The Cranberries have already been compared to the bedsit stuff by the Cocteauss, and that singer Dolores O'Riordan looks set to be the latest heartthrob of every gangling teen neurotic from Rugby to Reading.

Most importantly, it perhaps wouldn't be unwise to inform you that, if tonight's performance is any measure, we really have gone too far too soon this time. In their defence, The Cranberries are victims of such awful technical problems that the sound bears scant relation to the recorded variety. Consequently, the band give up trying to

reproduce the pretty delicacy of "Linger" and "Dreams" in favour of an all-out bludgeoning multi-guitar attack that is more Stooges than Slowdive. In addition, this being the first public appearance of The Cranberries since their major label signing, they look, in the words of one member of the audience, "More terrified than any band I've ever seen."

But, in the interests of truth and public service (just think how much money you've wasted because hacks never miss an opportunity to exaggerate, or even alter, the facts), what has been trumpeted as the latest and greatest meeting of celestial female vocals and exquisite male noise is, in reality, Sinead-sings-Joy Division/New Order, Everything But The Girl with feedback, Talulah Gosh on the verge of a nervous breakdown. From first song, "The Same Old Story", to the final one, "Dreams", the crowd play a game of spot-the-reference Chinese Whispers that starts at Siouxsie, includes Patti Smith (!) and Throwing Muses, and ends at All About Eve.

It's a mess, basically. We are, at various points, talking folk-rock or goth-grunge when, to be honest, The Cranberries should be aiming for the purity and originality that is within their grasp. "Put Me Down" is as lovely as the Cocteauss' "Pandora", and for once Dolores' voice is given room to roam. And "Pathetic Sense" hints at a winning ability to contrive simply thrilling guitar pop (very Go-Go's, weirdly enough). But that's it. For the rest we're ransacking the Thesaurus for new ways to say "Disappointed".

PAUL LESTER**THE SCREECH OWLS
MEAN FIDDLER ACOUSTIC
ROOM, LONDON**

FOR tonight's performance, mama Owl Debbie Skhow has chosen a straw stetson and a white jacket with extinct amphibians stencilled upon it. Americans, hah! She'd stand out a mile were it not for the type of person who never grew out of rummaging in mummy's dressing-up box; grown women in tutus and saris with blue suede desert boots. Erk. Something to do with the support band apparently. We just don't know how to carry off that kind of flamboyance in Blighty, do we? And first we have to sit through a home-grown chanteuse who reminds us just how drab singer-songwriters can be.

Then Debbie and her chosen Owls of the day - a Japanese accordionist, a woman with a big guitar and a willowy trumpeter - take the stage and show how to do it, how to go beyond your diaries and your adolescent twinges, get deeper and reach further.

Apparently, a few years living in London has turned Ms Skhow into a kind of poet in exile, and a forlorn one, at that. The songs keep returning to desert imagery, barren love-lives and the loneliness instinct. "Pray for love? I may as well pray for water in the desert", the three women sing in wavering harmony on "There Are Those" while the trumpet sounds simultaneously warm and lost. It's a shivery song, dying to be recorded. On "Desert" itself she doesn't sing so much as narrate: "My father lived in a desert of his own making". The words "Patti" and "Smith" spring to mind, a lazy comparison perhaps but they share that mix of poetry and sharp Television guitars. When she's not speaking, Debbie sings in a plangent voice and scrubs awkwardly at a Rickenbacker she tells us she's always wanted to play. She's cheerful and humorous on stage but quickly slips into the dark, godforsaken region of her songs.

There's always room for music this thoughtful and evocative but it's an endangered species. The Screech Owls were quietly thrilling for half an hour and then vanished. Debbie Skhow is without a record contract. **JIM ARUNDEL**

**THE BRIDEWELLS
TRADES CLUB, LEEDS**

IF a week in politics is a long time, a year in pop is an eternity. This time last summer The Bridewell Taxis were fighting it out with Paris Angels and Northside as the band most likely to. They were being hounded by a pack of major labels and they boasted a following to rival that of many League football clubs. Something, somewhere, went badly wrong (starting, it seems, with Mick Roberts' horrific injury in a pub brawl) and the Cabs are now without a deal, without a trombonist and, it seems, without a semblance of their former audience.

All is not lost, though. A clutch of new songs has got the majors sniffing around again and the changes being rung are multiple. Out, along with the much-maligned horn, is the "Taxis" part of their former name, and in comes Carl, a second keyboard player of no small talent and quite possibly their salvation.

It's like starting over, and tonight's set of mostly new material signifies a considerable shift away from the breezy pop of their early singles and towards a melodic space rock. "Moving Fast" is awash with complex synth tinklings, while "Small White Box" is a minor-chord gem and possibly the most sublime song about drug rehabilitation ever written.

If there is a future for this band it rests on one song. "Smile I Still Care" is simply magnificent. Building slowly out of Carl's house piano, it bursts into a chorus of such plangent simplicity it could almost be The Beach Boys up there. It's the best thing they've ever done.

Hopefully, it's not too late. **DAVE SIMPSON**