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They partied like it was 1989

Spirit of Radio show brings back plenty of those 'Old Emotions' Die-hard listeners come to cheer DJs and local bands th



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR

The Spoons rocked the crowd at Government last week as part of the Spirit of Radio show that reunited old-school CFNY DJs and the local bands they championed. "I feel like I just walked into a wax museum actually," said one '80s musician.

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LISA WRIGHT
STAFF REPORTER

Snug, stonewashed jeans hoisted well above the waist. Fishnet stockings. Beat up cowboy boots. Short leather jackets with lots of silver zippers. And enough hockey hair to fill an arena.

Government gave hip hop the night off Wednesday to show its '80s RPM roots — and bring back some of those Spoons-sized "Old Emotions" you might say — for a long overdue reunion of the old CFNY gang, and their die-hard listeners were invited along for the retro ride.

There was no Sex Pistols mosh pit, no pushing, no shoving and no line-ups — just some expanded waist-lines, receding hairlines and lots more laugh lines than usual up in the house that night. (Hey, it's not too often that Government doesn't have to check for ID at the door.)

But it was all good because the Spirit of Radio — the worshipped predecessor to Edge 102.1 — was alive and well-oiled once again for the bash that combined the local vocals of Martha and the Muffins and The Spoons to Carole Pope and Nash the Slash, with appearances by a slew of the old DJs that anchored the 'NY airwaves from 1977-89.

"I'm kind of star-struck. I don't watch movies so for me, this is the Academy Awards," said fan Brian Terry, 45, who gladly paid the \$65 per ticket for him and his wife to wander into the '80s time warp, if only for one brief night.

He wasn't even talking about the bands, who, when you closed your eyes,

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sounded the same as they did when they played campuses and clubs decades ago. They just kind of looked like they never left.

Terry was referring instead to the DJs like Live Earl Jive, J.R., Maie Pauts, Pete & Geets, Alan Cross and Ivar Hamilton, whom he felt he already knew from years of their distinctive voices and song choices being lodged in his memory bank and eardrums.

"This is the cleanest, most conservative looking crowd I've ever seen that's all in black, but we try," he laughed as he looked around.

"I feel like I just walked into a wax museum actually," smirked Gary Quinn, bass player from local '80s rock band Breeding Ground, who leaned up against the bar to check out the cougar crowd.

"At the old industry parties, people were stuffing handfuls of coke up their noses and getting sh--faced," he recalled, adding: "This is nothing like it was."

His band was able to make a decent living in the '80s thanks to CFNY giving them airtime. They even opened for top acts of the day like Simple Minds and The Stranglers.

"What CFNY did for artists was really important. The beauty of it is that they got away with playing bands like us, and I got to tour the country because of it," added Quinn, who now drives Hollywood stars like Nick Nolte around town when they're making films in Toronto.

Everyone on the stage that night — from Pope and her crotch-grabbing antics to Nash the Slash's mummified freak show — performed with the passion of their first gig ever as a way of paying down their debt of gratitude to the Spirit of Radio.

No need to stick a fork in The Spoons either because they're not quite done yet, judging by fan reaction.

"They're playing the extended version of `Nova Heart,'" exclaimed ecstatic spectator Hope Sutherland, 37, as they finished off their set.

The civil servant and mother of three came in from Oshawa with her brother-in-law and partied all night like it was, uh, 1989.

"You rock, Carole," she yelled at Pope after an especially raunchy version of her big hit ``High School Confidential."

The last time The Spoons did a reunion tour was in 1995. Lead singer Gord Deppe, 44, still plays bars and clubs in and around Toronto with his new three-piece band Thread, which starts a regular gig today at Bier Markt on The Esplanade, playing original rock material.

"The whole retro thing just blows me away. I keep thinking it's over," he said after leaving the stage.

"CFNY gave us hope that we could become pop stars. They made us feel like we were going to make it big."

The station started out in a little yellow house in Brampton 26 years ago at a time when songs were played in their entirety rather than sampled to smithereens. This is back when people were careful *not* to scratch their vinyl records because they might want to spin them all the way around again. Over time and with a dedication to stick to its offbeat format, CFNY attracted a cult-like following which continues to this day, and might only be matched by the hordes of head bangers from the Q-107 of that era.

"Q-107 is a bunch of f---ing mullet-heads," said DJ Fred Patterson of the dynamic duo Humble and Fred.

"CFNY was always alternative music but the people were always intelligent and I love that. People here tonight remember stuff I said 17 years ago and that's amazing," said the admittedly inebriated DJ.

The little upstart was considered the most cutting-edge thing out there at a time when mainstream radio was bombarding listeners with Pat Benatar, Loverboy and REO Speedwagon. It was instead playing Simple Minds, the Smiths and Skinny Puppy — plus U2, the Clash, Talking Heads and R.E.M.— when no one else dared to because it wasn't bubble-gum enough for the conservative music industry at the time.

Reunion organizer David Marsden, CFNY's former director of operations and programming for 12 years, is happy he stuck to his guns back in the day since most of the classic material being played on stations like Jack FM was stuff the old mainstream wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole.

He and many others bailed just before the '90s when new ownership suggested a playlist that included, among others, Whitney Houston and Rick Astley — pop anathema to the purists.

Marsden sadly compares most radio stations today to a bunch of Starbucks: "You open one on one corner, and another one on another corner."

"If you build it the right way, your audience will stay with you," advised Marsden, who can now be heard on 94.9 The Rock.

He was thrilled with the turnout of about 500 at the reunion, even if it wasn't exactly a wild wing-ding.

``It was more like a family reunion. People have been telling me all night that what we did changed their lives."

One of those was "40-something" Brampton dad Peter Cristina who pumped his fist during Nash the Slash's set like he was a kid again at his first concert.

"You kind of had to be there. This music had some fun to it. It's not all

guns and gangs," he said.

"Any button you push now it's the same station. With CFNY you knew you were getting something different."

He noted he has to put up with his 16-year-old daughter constantly listening to rappers like "50 Cents — and I don't think he's worth that," Cristina shrugged. (He meant, of course, 50 Cent.)

He wouldn't have missed it for the world, even if he did have to get up first thing the next morning to make it to his job at a sign company.

"I can't do this every night anymore you know. Only once every 25 years," he laughed.

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