

the scene

BENT NIGHTS

by Vern Hester

Last September, I accidentally saw a band called Woolcott. I didn't expect much, but the shocker was that it turned out to be one of the best shows I'd seen all year. Their CD, *All Aboard*, is a gem in itself, but neither that nor last year's show could explain why Woolcott stayed with me in a nagging way. It was kind of like saying "bye-bye" to a single fun date and finding that you just might be in love six months later.

Woolcott's gig at the Metro March 10 was better than last year's show by a country mile. Billed as the "soul" show, the band was augmented by a full horn section, a cellist, and a trio of back-up singers. Though the band's bent is midwestern alt-rock, for this show they resembled a soul review straight out of the Apollo Theater in Harlem in the early '60s.

Lead vocalist Ryan DeYoung is not Wilson Pickett, Teddy Pendergrass, or Otis Redding, make no mistake. He's not even Beck. Shaped like a pencil with "no-hips-to-hug" jeans and ragged red Converse All-Stars, on first sight of him you would have to say, "Lord, what a skinny child." But from the opener, "Can't Stop Body Rock," he threw all heart and soul into his singing. Jumping up and down like a 6-year-old on a pogo stick, flinging his arms open wide with abandon, professing his love with incautious sincerity, he rewrote soul with an emotionally daring carelessness. The last time soul music got this kind of workout was on Elvis Costello's record *Get Happy* (1979). Though DeYoung and Costello have little in common (they both wear glasses), both of them take soul as a sincere attitude versus a mannered style. Oddly, Costello's *Get Happy* was a brutal open wound of desperate pursuit—a 21-song album of breathless sweaty neediness and complicated sincerity that was not only dazzling in its pop craftsmanship but scary in its nervy dysfunction. (I'll write more on Get



Woolcott's Ryan DeYoung (above) and Love Chaos. Photos by Hester

Happy when Rhino re-releases the remastered version later this year.) DeYoung has that complicated sincerity, but he doesn't (thankfully) have Costello's fangs or lacerating self-loathing. As Woolcott's mouthpiece he's fascinating because he puts his whole heart on his sleeve knowing full well that it's going to come back bloodied.

It's a risky, unpretentious, scary performance—so blatantly uncynical and sincere that it defies everything we've been taught about love and rock and roll in these times. You look at DeYoung with a wisp of stringy hair sweated onto his face, arms open wide, exhausted and panting, and you see what the twentieth century has done to romance and our expectations of it. Romeo in blue jeans? DeYoung makes you believe it.

Better still with DeYoung as a centerpiece, bassist Ben Mollin and lead guitarist Eddie Jones make Woolcott a three-ring experience. Neither one can dance—but they do it anyway and make you like it. Mollin, with his



trademark horizontal afro, still stomps with clumsy fury, blows a mean sax, and isn't above cornball clowning. He went so far as to "faith heal" a member of the audience, with holy roller theatrics, backwoods preacher drawl and all. Eddie Jones was something else altogether. Still smoking non-stop with a sweetly goofy smirk pasted on his face, he pretty much had a wet dream with his guitar. The best part is that I don't think he has a clue as to how sexual he looks. His graceful embrace and tango with his axe is its own dreamy experience in itself (and oh yeah—he played the shit out of it).

It made perfect sense for Woolcott to nearly close the show with Sam Cooke's "Bring it on Home to Me." Who says romance is dead?