

PAVEMENT TURNS A CORNER

Album puts band on solid ground

By Jennie Ruggles

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Before Pavement even finished recording, word filtered out that its new record, "Brighten the Corners," would finally match the band's reputation. Since the 1994 hit single "Cut Your Hair," legions of Gen-X fans waited for Pavement's next move. When the 1995 album "Wooze Zowie" turned out to be less than a masterpiece, the reviews reflected the disappointment.

"I don't blame the music press for slugging 'Wooze Zowie,'" says guitarist-songwriter and band co-founder Scott Kannberg. "It is not really a finished record. It was put together really fast and we were under a lot of pressure to put it out fast. Still, I like

three-quarters of it. Critics do tend to pick one record to slag, though, and I would disagree with them if they didn't like (the new) one."

"Brighten the Corners," now in stores, certainly moves the Stockton-bred band a big step closer toward greatness. But from the moment Pavement stepped on the national stage with the 1992 album "Slanted and Enchanted," the band has not gone very far out of its way to court the millions — although the musicians did make at least one concession in recording the new album.

"We rehearsed for 10 days at drummer Steve West's house in Virginia," says Kannberg, 29. "We never did that before. Never for tours or anything. The songs were always so easy. This record has the hardest songs probably ever."

Kannberg looks subdued, sipping espresso in a Rockridge cafe, relaxed after his two-week honeymoon in France last month. In parka and jeans, he blends into the East Bay neighborhood where he shares a home with his wife; he's the only band member who still lives in the Bay Area.

Pavement is following up the release with small gigs in seven major



Pavement prefers to play small venues around town.

cities, including dates next weekend at the tiny Kilowatt in the Mission District and Bottom of the Hill on Potrero Hill, home to up-and-coming bands rather than famous ones. Both shows sold out shortly after they were announced.

This isn't the first time under-achieving Pavement has practiced on Bay Area fans. The night before the group played for 50,000 people last summer in Golden Gate Park at the Tibetan Freedom Concert, Pavement rehearsed at the now-defunct Formula in Emeryville. Along with a slew of Velvet Underground covers, the musicians that night tried out the song "No More Kings," recorded last year for the "School House Rocks" compilation.

"Our real fans were there," Kannberg says. "It was fun to let loose. Mike D. (of the Beastie Boys) was there. We toured with them in Australia before the Freedom for Tibet thing."

"We want to do smaller shows — bigger shows are so much pressure," he adds.

Pressure is partly the reason Pavement has shrugged off playing large venues, at least in the Bay Area. "It has to do with the Bill Graham Presents thing. Growing up around here, going to BGP shows was always a bummer. Security were idiots working at these places, and that

PAVEMENT

The band plays February 22 at Kilowatt, 3160 16th St., and February 23 at the Bottom of the Hill, 1233 17th St., San Francisco. Both shows are sold out.

made it a bad experience. So when we got to the point when they asked us to do shows, we thought other (smaller) clubs were much better."

Most of the songs are written by guitarist and band co-founder Steve Malkmus, whose pithy and often surrealistic lyrics have become a Pavement signature. Kannberg has worked with Malkmus since 1989, the year of their first single, when they were the band's only members and living in Stockton.

"Steve's songwriting is awesome," Kannberg says. "He's always been that way. It's pretty amazing. I can't do it."

The two have known each other since the third grade. Kannberg is candid in comparing their talents. "A song that's going to be a B-side of 'Stereo' (the new album's first single) is one I've been working on for six years. But Steve, if he was here now, he could just write a song."

"I always write songs, but I'm shy with them," says Kannberg, author of two cuts on the new album. "I finally got to the point where at least they're competent."

Between 1989 and 1992, Pavement was more of a studio band, with the lineup transitory and performances rare.

"We were a studio band all the way until 'Slanted and Enchanted' came out," Kannberg says. "Then Steve moved to New York and met Steve West. They were both museum guards at the Whitney. They had to stand all day and he would think of all these weird things to record."

Bassist Mark Ibold joined the following year. They never shared a "band house," and to this day Pavement members are spread across the country, with Kannberg in Oakland, Malkmus in Portland, Ibold in New York and West in Virginia.

Traces of postpunk modernists like the Fall and R.E.M. can be heard between the lines of Pavement's rather singular indie rock — although the band is not above a send-up of Southern rock.

"There is a Southern rock sound on the song 'Embassy Row,'" Kannberg says. "It reminds me of a cross between the Wipers and the Minutemen."

Fans of R.E.M.'s early records, Pavement covered the song "Camera" as an extra track on the "Cut Your Hair" single and recorded a Pavement original about R.E.M., "The Unseen Power of the Picket Fence," on 1993's "No Alternative" compilation. Mitch Easter, who produced "Brighten the Corners," also produced R.E.M.'s early '80s records.

In 1989, around the time R.E.M. was putting out its ninth album, "Green," Kannberg was a 22-year-old record store clerk and Pavement was about to start work on its first record, the five-song EP "Slay Tracks." Today it fetches big bucks at record swap meets.

"I can't believe it's so collectible!" Kannberg says. "It's ridiculous. I've seen it in stores for \$70. I don't understand it, but that's kind of why we put it on a compilation, so people wouldn't have to buy it for \$70. Most I ever spent on a record was \$45 for an Echo and the Bunnymen bootleg, and it was three records." ■

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