

## Best of Cleveland Rock at Plato

By Anastasia Pantsios

On Monday night, March 22, the Plato presented a concert featuring Rastus, local jazz-rock group just recently come into their glory, plus Mushroom and December's Children.

After enduring crushing mobs and vast spaces at places like Chicago's Syndrome (which was just wisely shut down by the fire commissioner there), the Plato seems an ideal place for a rock concert. What a novelty to have room around you and what a relief to be able to see the groups with no one blocking your view, and how nice to see a good crowd turn out for anything short of Grand Funk Railroad or whatever the latest rage is, because that's what causes the problem above. Think when you complain about Public Hall concerts, that they're largely due to mass acceptance of only a few groups and refusal to pay much attention to others. Those few groups then charge enormous sums and promoters have no choice but put them in Public Hall. There is a tendency to blame the promoters; I heard some such grumbling after last week's Black Sabbath and Mountain concert. But remember that they wouldn't sell many tickets if they did things deliberately to make you mad.

The importance of the proper concert hall was shown by the difference in the set December's Children played at the Plato from the last time I had heard them. They had done some dull versions of a not very interesting repertoire of current popular songs. This night they did numerous unfamiliar numbers I assume to be originals as well as some songs by others, repeating 'Gimme Shelter' and 'Suite: Judy Blues Eyes'. But what a difference! For one thing, the instruments did not overwhelm the voices this time, allowing vocalist Alice Popovich to shine. She is a fine singer, one of the few out of the Grace Slick mold who don't sound like a mere imitation, but simply a strong, clear, unassuming singer who doesn't resort to sweetness or raspy, super-gutty belting.

From the opening a capella introduction they used to quiet the audience which reminded me of the first bars of BLOWS AGAINST THE EMPIRE, the group seemed to draw its inspiration from the Jefferson Airplane, though they are anything but a slavish copy. They use the same strong vocals, heavy bass guitar, light, flexible drums and two guitars with the lead weaving up and down somewhat after the fashion of Jorma Kaukonen. Their 'Suite: Judy Blue Eyes' has overtones of the Airplane's 'Fat Angel' in the

ominous guitar rising and falling into the final vocal and the quick, delicate rhythms. The group's originals had the same very clean Airplane feel with occasional country overtones and at one point even an echo of the James Gang's "Ashton Park". The set included a blues number in which Popovich was refreshing in her lack of anxiety — that Joplinesque desperation to be 'earthy'. She is a very polished, poised performer who does not stomp and charge around in the fashion of Joplin and her many followers, like Slick, much more a member of the band than its figurehead or ornament. Popovich also uses extraneous rhythm devices well when she is not singing, something which the Jefferson Airplane and few other bands have been able to master. The only regrettable lapse on her part — and the band's — was in the middle of 'Gimme Shelter' when they chose to emulate one of the less commendable aspects of the Airplane and throw in a bit of shallow revolutionary politicking with some screams of "What's that happening in the street, got to revolution etc". Here unfortunately Popovich seemed to get too shrill, just as Slick does, and the band lost direction. The band's interpretation of 'Gimme Shelter' can stand without that kind of dressing up. The group closed with Dave Mason's "Only You Know and I Know" on which bass guitarist Craig Balzer did the lead vocal. He has one of those currently fashionable 'hick' voices that I don't care much for, perhaps equivalent to Kaukonen's if we must drag out the Airplane analogy, only I find his less appealing than Kaukonen's.

This night, just as before, December's Children came across as a skillful and polished band, but this night they displayed the sparkle and originality which had been lacking when I heard them play before.

Mushroom is the new band of Buddy Maver, former Charade drummer, who looks like a bushy smiling gnome on stage and seemed to be very popular with the crowd. The other members of the newly formed band (this was their second concert - style gig) are Chet Florence on bass guitar and Jeff and Bill Jeric on guitars. The sound of the band is straight rock of the very modern kind. Their set included both originals and an interesting choice of other material such as 'Proud Mary', 'No Time to Live' and 'Stop'. On the first few numbers, Maver sounded like he was going to beat his kit apart before long, but he later showed his ability to tone down when necessary. Particularly interesting was the

group's version of the much performed 'Proud Mary', which owed very little to Creedence. They begin with three numbers of the band harmonizing gradually instead of escalating the song sharply in the expected manner. When the song has built to a high peak, they drop back suddenly and then come back in even stronger with Florence on the lead vocal alone. Florence does most of the lead vocals (with Maver also taking quite a few) and I found his thin, nasal, inflexionless voice a little irritating at first, but it does grow on you to the point where it seems to fit in with the band, though it is not an outstanding voice in itself. I found especially appealing the group's version of Traffic's 'No Time to Live', which captured the delicate, Trafficky feel of the song through use of bell-like ringing guitar and considerably diminished volume. The band has a big, wild sound that is not without its subtleties and intricacies, and seems to owe a lot to Cream's more advanced thing, Led Zeppelin and the James Gang. They did, in fact, play one James Gang number 'Stop' which I failed to recognize because I never thought they would have the nerve to do it with Jimmy Fox in the audience.

Finally the stars of the evening, Rastus, appeared. This nine man jazz-rock group, which has only just begun to attract crowds in their home town Cleveland, appealed to me less than the other two bands, but only in terms of my own taste. The playing of the band can never be faulted, as it is always professional and controlled. But didn't seem to belong on the same stage with the other two bands, not because they were better, but because they were playing on a totally different level. Their music, despite its burliness,

never quite has rock and roll guts. It kept reminding me of musical comedy overtures, grand and pizazzy, full of drum rolls and trumpet fanfares and segues from one half recognized tune into another. I dearly love musical comedy, but they are too even and too calculated to have a place among rock and roll.

The band did display their typical fine form, command of their instruments and excitement of their own low-key variety, playing both familiar numbers from their record and new numbers. Opening with 'Lucy Bluebird', they played 'I 94', 'Warm', and 'Good night - Helda' among others and refused to honor shouts for 'Black Gat' which is a tribute to their taste and integrity. Singer Mark Roman couldn't get over the warm and lengthy applause and kept saying 'That's beautiful, don't ever stop'. (Maybe he didn't want to sing????) In any case, it's good that this city has finally discovered one of its own fine bands.