

Dream a little dream

Hamilton Place takes local acts out of basements, bars, puts them on main stage

By **GRAHAM ROCKINGHAM**
The Hamilton Spectator

Sometimes we don't realize how lucky we are. In other cities, even hip ones like Vancouver, clubs are pushing the guitar pickers and piano players out the door, replacing live music with the sanitary sure thing of canned DJ music.

Luckily, we're not yet that hip in Hamilton. Sure we have our dance clubs, but we've also got plenty of places showcasing live local talent.

Forlorn folkies and Elvis impersonators, country pickers and big hair rockers, New Age divas, soulful songwriters and '50s lounge acts — we've got 'em all, some good, some not so good. It's all a matter of taste. For a \$20 ticket, it's usually worth a chance.

In the coming weeks, Hamilton Place Studio Theatre will offer up some diverse musical culture in seven concerts titled the Hometown Talent Series.

Few of the featured performers have quit their day jobs. Some have dreams of future stardom, others perform simply because they love to.

"The nice thing about this bill is that no one is manufactured by a big company," says Scarlett Antaloczy. Her March 28 one-woman show *Scarlett Woman* incorporates New Age jazz, soul, Transylvanian folk music and high opera. Her powerful voice and dynamic performance on keyboards and horn is something to behold.

"If you really want to hear organic people, homemade, just come to these shows. I don't think it's going to be L.A. cool ... although I do have a smoke machine going."

Then there's Paul Bentham, "Officer Elvis," who plays the Studio Theatre Saturday. He retired last year from the Hamilton Police after 33 years. Seven years ago, he decided to take his Elvis impersonation off the karaoke machine and onto the tribute circuit. He and his band have been enjoying themselves on the legion hall and county fair circuit ever since.

He fits the series bill perfectly; even his jumpsuits are custom-made by the woman across the street from his south Mountain home. Playing the Studio Theatre is a big step up for Officer Elvis. It's exciting.

"I'm having a blast. ... What a break. This will be the best venue I've played," says Bentham. "My only concern is about filling it, and the last I heard the ticket sales were up close to 200."

Seeing acts like Officer Elvis in a local bar gave Hamilton Place programming director John Elder the idea of providing his upscale facilities for lesser known local talents in town. They don't carry the same price tags as big name acts and the Studio Theatre has plenty of days when it simply isn't in use. So the idea of the Hometown Series seemed a low-risk, win-win proposition for both artist and promoter.

"We're just testing the waters here. Right now it's geared to a two-month period in February and March," Elder said. "But it may lead into something on a more regular basis."

Kicking off the program Friday night is a Willie Nelson lookalike E.J. Cooper. Behind the initials (Eric James), beard and braids beats the heart of a 69-year-old retired interior designer from Waterdown.

About 15 years ago Cooper realized how much he looked like Nelson when he was offered money to perform a tribute to the Texas singer/songwriter. Cooper dabbled in jazz sax at the time and wasn't much of a country fan, but "for \$500 I said I'd be Wayne Newton if he wanted."

So started Cooper's love affair with the country legend. At first he needed a wig, but now the braids are real. He's copied Willie down to the gut strings



Joe Callura, above, best known for his Tom Jones tribute, knows enough 'not to give up his day job' as a chartered accountant. Right is 'Officer Elvis.'

on the guitar and has been able to supplement his pension nicely on the casino and theatre circuit.

More hopeful for future stardom is long-haul truck driver GM Paterson. On March 8, he'll launch his new country rock CD *Overdrive* at Studio Theatre.

There's nothing air-brushed about Paterson. He's the real thing, born on Manitoulin Island, raised in Sudbury and living in Hamilton. He's logged over a million miles on his semi and can boast cowboy credentials as well, having trained and shown quarter horses. He's been playing honky tonks, truck shows and county fairs for several years.

Drawing from influences like George Strait, Tim McGraw, George Fox and Def Leppard, he's written more than 100 songs about aching hearts, lost loves and life on the road. His new CD features a 9-11 tribute called *Hell Came Down*.

Sharing his stage will be Heather Smith, also releasing a new CD, *One Penny More*. A Cape Breton native and self-styled army brat, she just returned from a two-week tour entertaining our troops in Bosnia. Her country lyrics are filled with fast cars, motorcycles, betrayal and better days to come.

Then there's Joe Callura, a chartered accountant in Hamilton for more than 20 years. He joins comedian Victor J. Hanson March 21, for a tribute to the music of the '50s and '60s. "Don't give up your day job," is Callura's advice to himself.

He was offered a record contract by RCA in 1970 while singing for a dance band, Al and the Versatiles, at the old Club Continental on Gertrude Street. He decided to give it a pass and stick to his studies.

"I really hated school, but I knew that if I quit Mac I'd never go back," Callura recalls.

Best known for his Tom Jones tribute, he's played Las Vegas and an occasional "legends" show here in town. His act draws on more than 700 songs, including Neil Diamond, Perry Como, Roy Orbison, Nat



King Cole, Chubby Checker and John Denver.

Over the past decade, singer/songwriter Jamie Oakes has become a fixture on the Hamilton club circuit and a sought-after session guitarist. With two locally-produced CDs to his credit (*Eloquence*; *Shadow Dreams*), Oakes has toured with the likes of Holly Cole and Amy Sky, and appeared with Tom Cochrane. At Studio Theatre he will showcase his soulful brand of rhythm and blues March 20.

Veteran rocker Ray Lyell and his band was to open the series last Sunday but due to commitments at his vocal school, the Ray Lyell Academy of the Arts, he was forced to postpone the show until May 31. Lyell was best known in the early 1990s for the hits *Carry Me* and *Running from Another Man's Gun*.

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Take the link...

The building at 123 Princess Street doesn't appear to have a prince coming to its rescue, or anyone to pay more than \$1-million in back taxes. See *StreetBeat*, page A3.

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