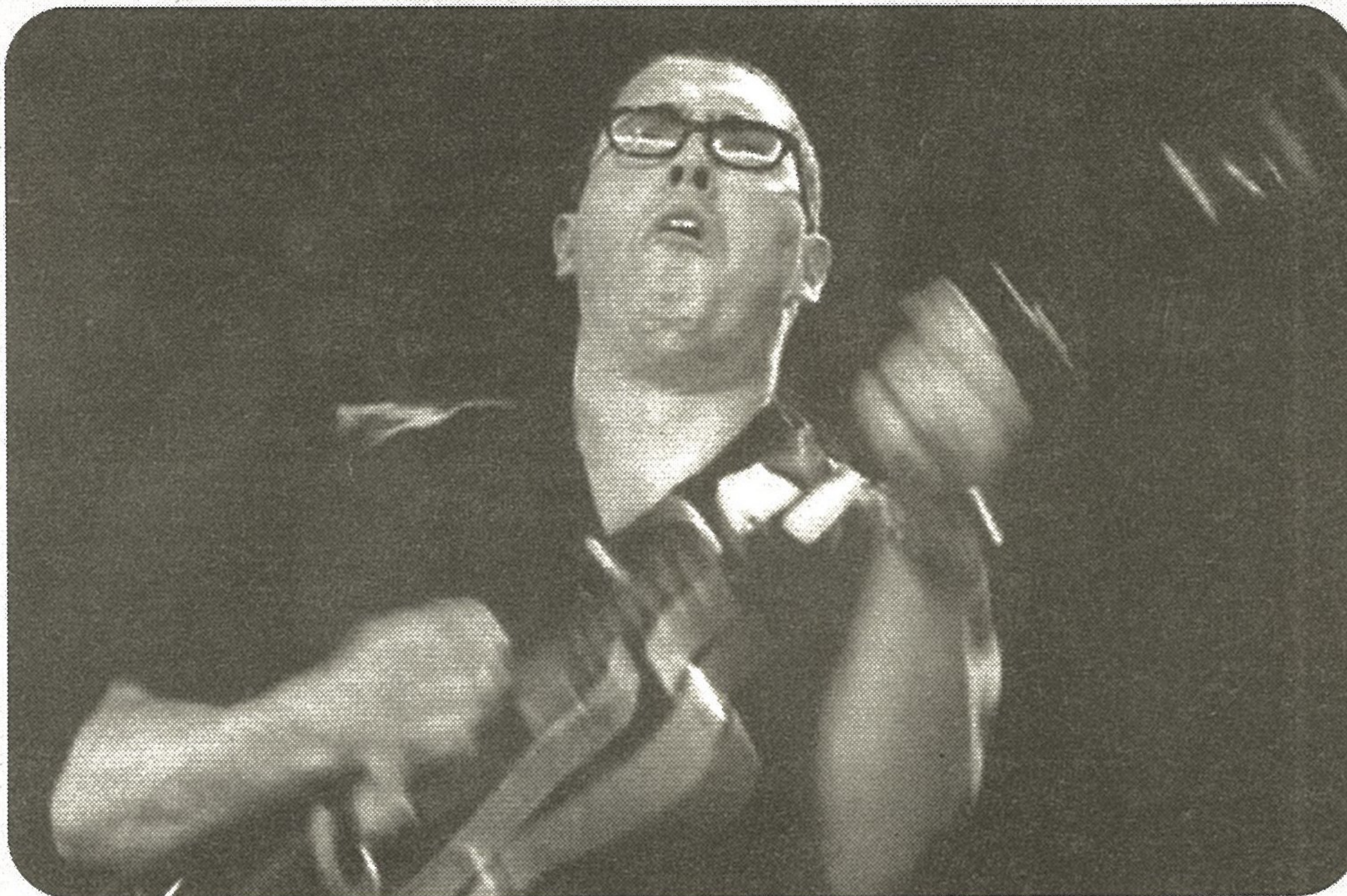


Fun, Fun, Fun

Barenaked Ladies concert rocks the Pond with music and laughter.

Fun, fun, fun. No this is not an intro for a column about the Beach Boys. Fun is simply the most appropriate noun to describe Toronto, Canada's most eclectic and entertaining performers, the Barenaked Ladies. Ironically, the band does cite the Beach Boys as one of their strong influences. Radio friendly, unintimidating and always possessing a sense of humor about themselves, they are a band that works melodious magic through well-crafted three- and four-part harmonies. The boys have built a loyal underground following throughout North America - especially among college students. To set the record straight, they do not get naked, nor are there women in the band.



The place was The Pond in Anaheim. Sunday, July 23. Throughout the hour and a half show, skits and antics abounded. It is a pleasant change to see a popular group act as if it is all fun and games instead of taking themselves deadly serious. The songs they performed expanded into a deliriously happy sing-along shouted by an audience dancing in the isles.

With an overall satirical and playful outlook, their likeability, I think, is directly related to their originality and flair. Self-deprecating humor and jabbing at sacred cows go hand-in-hand, as when they sang about the much-publicized woes of Brian Wilson and Yoko Ono.

After announcing that the concert was being recorded for a special on MTV entitled, "Where Are They Now," Ed Robertson, lead singer, took the camera given to him by the company and proceeded to lead a running gag in which the band interviewed each other on stage, making light, it seemed, of the incestuous behavior of the mass media.

Barenaked Ladies was formed in 1988 by Robertson and fellow songwriter, Steven Page. Brothers Jim and Andrew Creegan and drummer Tyler Stewart joined the line-up shortly afterward. They have come a long way since then, all the way from bars on the fringes of Toronto.

Besides achieving success as a touring rock band, they have written music for American films and television, penning tunes for such light-hearted vehicles as "Friends," "King of the Hill," "D3: The Mighty Ducks" and "Ed T.V."

"I think there is a place for all kinds of emotions in music," says Robertson. "Too many people shy away from being witty for fear of not being taken seriously. But it has always been important to me to express what I feel. I think some funny things and some serious things, as well. The beauty is getting that into a cohesive song that is honest. The cheap laughs are in the live situation; we'll go for whatever we can. Sometimes the jokes are absolutely sublime. But I mean, I'll go for a cheap laugh even if it means I have to drop my pants! People who like the funny stuff may be disappointed in the more serious stuff we do, but the comedy aspect doesn't last like the straight stuff. A funny song that lasts is the most difficult task. I'm not a snob about comedy; I don't think it's below my skills - the best comedy is above most people's skills. I'm not trying to write songs for generations to come, I'm just writing them for me - songs that I'll still like in 20 years - in two years, for that matter! If there's going to be humor or jokes in the songs, it has to be

stuff that will make me laugh. We'll go back and say, 'Hey, that's a clever line.' I remember when we wrote that and we laughed our heads off."

"When Ed and I started singing together, we were in the habit of making a big pot of Kraft Macaroni & Cheese and eating it," says Creegan. "We have a song, 'If I Had A Million Dollars,' and the lyric is like 'If I had a million dollars, I wouldn't have to eat Kraft dinners, but I still would.' After we sang that for a long time, people in the audience felt a need to present us with these sacrificial offerings: people would lob boxes of macaroni & cheese on the stage. It started in 1991 when we were doing a show in Toronto, and we thought it was funny that someone in the audience got involved like that. The next night six boxes appeared on stage, then 40. It got to the point that by the middle of 1993, there were 400 boxes flying at the stage at that point of the song."

Why stray from a recipe that works? The same unconventional charm, the dare to be different, sometimes shameless buffoonery that won the hearts of Torontonians wowed the crowd in Anaheim. The Barenaked Ladies are fiercely independent, smart and they have a knack for writing witty pop tunes. It has been

a pleasure to see them rise from whence they came, moving up from hole-in-the-wall venues to filling arenas and stadiums in the U.S.

Why is American success so important to Canadian musicians? The most obvious answer is money. It's very difficult to make a living as a rock band in Canada.

"There simply aren't that many places to play, or that many people to buy your records," says Stewart. "In Canada, you're just not going to sell that many records. I don't know anyone who sells a lot of records, except Our Lady Peace and Moist, and they've had to really earn where they are. There are more opportunities in the U.S. because it's bigger and there are that many more niches that you can find yourself in."

The second reason for heading south is a bit more controversial. Canada is so inundated with American culture and self-celebration, it's hard for Canadians to accept success unless Americans validate it. In more cases, Canadian bands, get more acceptance at home once their Southern neighbors have given their stamp of approval.

Just three decades ago, staying at home wasn't even an option. There simply was no way to make a good living as a rock band north of the border. Bands like Bachman-Turner Overdrive had to venture south to make their rent, not to mention their careers. Neil Young, Joni Mitchell and Gordon Lightfoot are among the others who had to establish a U.S. presence in order to ensure musical survival.

Because of the ground-breaking work done by those artists, Canadian-born singers and musicians who have made their mark can live wherever they choose. Celine Dion maintains a home in Montreal; Sarah McLachlan has been rewarded for constant touring by the ability to make her home base in Vancouver; Alanis Morissette chooses to live in Los Angeles, but her career would probably continue to flourish were she to move home to Ottawa. If this were 1968, the only choice would be ex-patriotism. **ah**

BY TIM MASTERSON