

Guitarist sees thriving music scene in Triangle

By Alan R. Hall (February 2, 1997)

Chapel Hill—Keith Knight is a firm believer in the not-so-old saying, “Home is where the art is.” He also sees the Triangle as a solid source for the secondary (read “live”) music market. “I sincerely believe that the Triangle has all the elements to make it a successful secondary music market,” Knight said. “I mean a thriving live music market, with a multitude of venues featuring a wide variety of music. The Triangle, especially Chapel Hill, can be another Austin, Chicago, or Seattle in terms of live music.”

Knight, master of the “fingerstyle” form of playing guitar, makes his home on the eastern seaboard, but not too long ago he was a denizen of the City of Angels.

The singer-songwriter, who brings his multiple talents to the Cave Monday night, has been performing since 1989, when he first took up the “fingerstyle” form made widely known by guitarist Leo Kottke. He moved his music to Texas in 1993, along with the band he had helped to begin, Panic Choir.

Knight played a trio of instruments for the group (four if you cut both on the six and the 12-string guitar), mandolin and dobro being the other string-and-fret items on his list. The group got ratings in Austin, where they were centered, and they recorded a CD called “Soul and Luna” on the Crystal Clear label that same year which got some pretty solid reviews, especially in the songwriting category.

Knight moved to Durham after only a year in the Lone Star State, to resume his solo career in what was and still is an expanding professional music arena. He is taking his act all over the eastern coast, from as far north as Boston all the way down to Florida. His office and label, Bear Claw Music, are based in Durham, and he has a regular stint at music halls across the Triangle, especially in Chapel Hill.

Knight has very eclectic style, but one that is firmly rooted in traditional folk music. There are Appalachian and bluegrass aspects to his music, which one would think would put him in a big demand around the Triangle, where acoustic venues seem to be gaining momentum.

But while Knight agrees that the acoustic genre is gaining ground, he says there is still a long way to go before it achieves the same stature that electric and rock music now have. Knight has played to large crowds in Asheville which is enjoying a surge of folk-based music that seems to come right down out of the surrounding hills.

But down here, says the guitarist, electric music rules—sometimes to the point that he feels himself in a kind of underground conspiracy.

“The media seems to push acoustic music aside,” said Knight, “for the louder and harder electric sound. The club owners aren’t interested in folk and traditional music because the media is hyping the hard stuff.”

What that might still be true in Raleigh, Chapel Hill is continuing to quietly introduce folk and traditional music to a growing cluster of fans. The coffeehouses are pushing the softer, more complex sounds of a single guitar and voice, and the local Triangle Folk Music Society continues to make more inroads in town for the old pioneers of the genre, like Ramblin’ Jack Elliot and Norman Blake. They have even brought over a Brit who is deeply into the fingerstyle mode of performance, in the almost legendary form of John Renbourne.

Knight continues to work in the traditional styles of music, using the dobro and mandolin of the traditional bands as well as the energetic picking of the fingerstyle. Combining his dynamic speed and complexity with the high tenor vocal, he is breaking ground when it comes to original music in the traditional field.

Knight's own influences are of a wide range of players from Bill Monroe to Leo Kottke and John Fahey, or, in another direction, Blind Blake and Ry Cooder.

"I would like to bring the people who know the folk era of the guitar together with the younger post-MTV music set," Knight said. "I think they have more in common than they know."