

Knight comes calling with acoustic music

By Joanna Young (September 20, 1996)

Florence—Guitarist Keith Knight moved to Raleigh, N.C. in 1994, with plans to start a solo career. He had just parted with the popular rock band Panic Choir in Austin, Texas, in a breakup he calls “a horrible divorce.”

Knight set his sights on the triangle area of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, because it was considered one of the best places for relocation. The East Coast was also ideal for touring, since cities are clustered.

Dreams haven't panned out the same as Knight hoped. Unlike Asheville, N.C. and its budding acoustic folk scene, Raleigh is electric guitar and rock oriented.

And for Knight, it's even more frustrating with his Appalachian and bluegrass fusions. He says traditional folk music is being pushed aside by the media, a major source of influence in the area. Club owners then ignore local acoustic talent and it hurts musicians like him.

“It's really being pushed underground,” the 31-year-old says about the area's acoustic scene. “It's almost a conspiracy to some of us.”

Knight isn't sitting still, however. When he's not at home in Raleigh, he's on the road, playing his fingering-style of acoustic guitar at coffee shops and bars in the Carolinas and Virginia. By early spring, he plans to release his first full-length solo album.

Knight is also considering relocation, possibly to a musically diverse city in South Carolina. On Thursday, he makes his debut in Florence at Apple Annie's. Show time is around 10:00 p.m.

As a practitioner of the fingering-style of guitar, Knight takes a combination of genres and folkifies them with elements from traditional American music. He's melded Appalachian, ragtime, calypso, Celtic, folk and delta blues into hook-friendly combinations that can keep him busy picking and sliding rapidly up and down the guitar. His talents not only encompass 6 and 12-string guitars, but also the mandolin and the dobro, two staple instruments in bluegrass music.

His talents haven't gone without recognition. In Austin, he was named one of the area's 10 best musicians in an annual vote by local live music supporters. At one point, Panic Choir was on the verge of landing a recording contract. He felt the need to quit after coming to terms with creative conflicts.

“I wasn't happy with what I was playing,” he said. “At that point, I was pretty much determined to go solo.”

Playing the music he enjoys was the main reason why he left Panic Choir. He grew up listening to the sounds of Bill Monroe and other traditional pickers. Later, West Coast mandolinist Bob Applebaum took Knight under his wing.

“He [Applebaum] actually took me back to the real roots to understand it,” Knight explained. “He really introduced me to the whole history of music.”

That history is often forgotten among younger players, who focus more on technique rather than soul, Knight says.

“My opinion of bluegrass is not a very optimistic one,” he says. “I think a lot of the young players today, they don't understand the original music. They don't understand where it came from...”