

The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 1980

Marching to a Different Violin

By PROCTER LIPPINCOTT

ON at least two occasions, Come to Papa, an Island-based rock group, has caught a fleeting glimpse of wider fame than it has yet been accorded on the Manhattan and Long Island small-club circuit that it has inhabited since its formation a couple of years ago.

The first apparent break came late last summer when Infinity Records advanced a modest sum to the group to make a record. Subsequently, the band cut three original tunes in a 24-track studio. Meanwhile, however — amid a general industrywide decline in record sales — Infinity folded.

In February, WPIX-FM's "No Major Label Records Show" featured "Fire-scape," a wonderfully frenetic single by Come to Papa, on three successive Saturdays. As the chosen winner based on phoned-in response, the single reportedly broke a show record for consecutive appearances.

A second single — played on the same show — also topped the phone-in poll just before the station eased into a new format and the show was dropped.

No doubt even these ephemeral flirtations with success are encouraging to the group, which is capable of causing quite a stir on its own. Recently braving the severest snowstorm of the winter to appear at Great Gildersleeves in Lower Manhattan, the group's members thrashed about on the stage for an equally courageous group of cheering admirers as if possessed of the rock 'n' roll grail.

Freezing outdoor weather notwithstanding, Dave Lewitt, the drummer, played hot and shirtless. Mark Wood, dressed in red satin pants, white leather shoes and a soft white shirt opened to the navel and knotted at the waist, sawed away at his homemade electric violin, producing flurries of thunderous chords and wrenching notes that filled the air with a kinetic charge.

Taking cues from such rockers as Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, the songwriter/vocalist/guitarist Nick Padron imbued his lusty voice, guitar solos and classic rock 'n' roll moves with all the intensity his small wiry body could muster. Only Sam Dijan, dressed in dark suit, black shirt and slim white tie, stood relatively immobile as he laid down the steady bass lines that held the rest of the band in check.

Despite the high-powered nature of the music itself, it is Mr. Wood's unusual instrument that arouses the most curiosity. Its basic frame is that of a violin but, being Mr. Wood's personal creation, several unorthodox features have been added. Besides having six strings instead of the usual four, the "violin," as Mr. Wood prefers to call it (in keeping with its assigned role as an aggressive rock instrument) is supported by a neck strap and, extending from below the tail piece to the player's chest, a model of a man's arm, lacquered red and wrapped in black fish-net stocking.

An equally red hand with partially distended fingers juts out from a silver-studded black leather bracelet, appearing to push away in revulsion from the player, but actually serving to stabilize the playing position of the instrument.



Procter Lippincott

Mark Wood of Come to Papa playing his homemade electric violin

The purpose of the visual extras, according to Mr. Wood, is to bring "the seediness of rock 'n' roll to an instrument" that, by rock standards is "considered wimpy and conservative."

"I want to put the violin into rock 'n' roll," he explained. "If I just played a regular violin, people would think I was either going to fiddle or jazz around. With my instrument, people feel something strange is going to happen."

Through trial and error, Mr. Wood has created several variations of the basic violin that serve his purposes. Apparently there were numerous false starts along the way, however.

"I have a graveyard of 20 instruments that never made it," he said.

Mr. Wood comes from a family of string players. His brother is a symphonic cellist. He himself went to Juilliard but, ultimately, he said, "I couldn't handle the classical music syndrome."

"I wanted to rock 'n' roll, which involves a totally different technique," he said, "and they didn't teach that."

Although a couple of other violin players, most notably Jerry Goodman — late of the Mahavishnu Orchestra — and Jean Luc-Ponty, have broken new ground in the rock idiom, Mr. Wood believes the real rock breakthrough for the violin is yet to come, and he hopes to make it. For models, he turns not to violinists, but to guitarists like Jimi Hendrix and Eddie Van Halen. He is as interested in chordal fills and "grooves" as he is in improvised solos.

Mr. Padron, born in Cuba 30 years ago, was 8 when he heard the school marching band "playing something weird."

"I said, 'What is it?' and someone said, 'That's rock 'n' roll,'" he recalled. "I thought, 'Wow,' and I've been addicted ever since."

Most recently, he's been trying to get Bill Graham, the rock impresario, to back an opera he has written based on Carlos Castaneda's books.

Mr. Dijan, who works as a commercial artist, was inspired by early Ventures records and became a musician "to be part of what was happening." Mr. Lewitt, at 19 the youngest member of the band, has, according to Mr. Wood, "chops to burn."

"His drumming holds me up and kicks me around, which is what I like," Mr. Wood said.

In concert, Come to Papa's sound might be characterized as a hybrid mix of Led Zeppelin, Bruce Springsteen and the Electric Light Orchestra.

The group's next appearances will be at Avolution on West 27th Street in Manhattan, on April 10; and at the Right Track Inn on Merrick Road in Freeport, on April 11. ■