

BERGEN RECORD

ENTERTAINMENT

MUSIC & NIGHTLIFE

Knockout Drops staying strong

Friday, October 10, 2003

By ED CONDRAN
SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

WHO: Knockout Drops.

WHAT: Pop rock.

WHEN: 10 p.m. Saturday.

WHERE: Maxwell's, 1039 Washington St., Hoboken. (201) 653-1703.

HOW MUCH: \$7.



You couldn't have blamed the Knockout Drops had the band decided to drop out of the music business after its sour experience with major labels. After recording the well-received EP "Nowadays" in 1997, the Manhattan-based band, which formed on Long Island nine years ago, was a much-sought-after act.

The pop-rock band signed with Maverick Records in 1998. Bands crafting catchy, smart rock, such as Fastball and Semisonic, who toured with the Knockout Drops, earned significant national airplay and, as a result, strong sales. However, by 1999, the cycle had changed. Good-natured pop-rock fell out of favor, and so the Knockout Drops hit the canvas.

"It was a rough period for us," vocalist Chris Champion said in a call from his Manhattan apartment. "First and foremost, signing with Maverick was a total disaster. ... We didn't fit in with the major labels at that time."

Over the last few years, the Knockout Drops worked under the radar.

"We never stopped what we were doing," Champion said. "We didn't put out albums, but we were still out there. The perception was that we weren't around, but the reality of it is that we continued to play. We went through some tough stuff, but that has made us better at what we do."

The Knockout Drops not only possess their school-of-hard-knocks sheepskin, they have turned their difficult times into songs. The band's first LP, "Killed by the Lights," was released in June on Circus Clone Records. The disc's dark, sobering odes to the disillusioned are honest and unsparing.

"That's the only way I know how to write," Champion said. "I loathe political correctness. Irreverence is a good thing in rock-and-roll. Being edgy is a lot more fun than following what everybody else is doing. I don't like cookie-cutter music."

"Killed by the Lights" packs an intensity reminiscent of Echo and the Bunnymen and the pop smarts of Guided by Voices. "I absolutely love Guided by Voices," Champion said. "That's one band I'm blown away by."

The band, which has opened for such groups as the Violent Femmes - Femme leader Gordon Gano is a huge fan - Soul Asylum, and Better Than Ezra, will showcase tracks from the LP Saturday night at Maxwell's in Hoboken. Champion is a theatrical performer who is never at a loss for words between tunes.

"If there is a technical problem in between songs, I'm not one of those guys who will just say, 'One-two, one-two, check, check, check.' I'll go off and tell a story or something. I like having fun when I'm onstage. To me, going up there and playing is all about having a good time, and it rubs off."