

Once More With Feeling

By Baylis Greene

There's no shortage of fine live music to listen to on our fair island, but what makes Knockout Drops, coming to you straight from the badlands of western Suffolk County, a rare concoction is that the band has a full-length album to its credit that's every bit as good as its risible onstage thrashings. "Killed by the Lights" it's called. It came out last year and the disc is full of the kind of indie rock intelligence and rousing power pop that I, for one, don't expect to sprout from our tuber-rich soil.

If you're a fan of songs by people who have no use for sheet music, you probably have your own theories about it, and don't particularly care whether or not they stand up to scrutiny. One of mine is that American rock bands with something to say come from nowhere. Between 1999 and 2001, I lived in little Ferndale, Wash., and while touring the Olympic Peninsula I once chanced upon Aberdeen, a small, dying lumber town facing a cold, rocky coast and backed up against immense stretches of forest struggling to recover after being cleared for lumber 20 years earlier. Nirvana sprang from that void of a place, and whatever you might think of their music or Kurt Cobain's miserable, pointless demise, the guy, especially on B sides, could get across pretty well a feeling of what it was like to be a long-haired kid in a flannel shirt and jeans with worn knees, eating TV dinners and pedaling a bicycle through the ennui of the mid-'70s - in Aberdeen, Sag Harbor, wherever.

Knockout Drops comes from a different kind of wasteland: the groaning heart of suburban Huntington, which makes me like them all the more. "Killed by the Lights" was recorded in a studio in downtown Roslyn Heights, of all places. I picture a Turkish Delight restaurant in the strip mall across the street, and the concrete -and-glass studio flanked by a driving school and a drycleaner. In spite of cultural desolation, possibly because of it, the Drops successfully translated their exuberance and the emotional force of Chris Champion's voice and lyrics onto a digitally processed piece of plastic.

Even if they're guitar-driven, pop tunes tend to be love songs of a kind, usually banal. But Mr. Champion is too smart for that and, unlike many of his fellow frontmen in young rock bands, his feelings are not those of an emotionally needy vegan, but rather a barfly who likes to smoke and tends toward depression. He's sensitive, in his way. In the ballad "Always Claire" he sweet-talks a wayward lass with "Well now you're a wacky broad/With all your powdered dilaudid/And I think you just caught an S.T.D." Elsewhere, he relates how he "first learned to crawl" at the hands of, if I hear right, a gal who sells Christian books at a mini-mall. It's "The Day I propped My Sword." Thank God, someone who recognizes that failure is the most interesting of life's options.

Beyond getting across a sense that you're not alone, art is best when it tells you something about yourself, and maybe even helps you better get on with things. Anyone who's been even halfway around the block will nod with recognition at Mr. Champion's thoughtful proclamations of loss in the plaintive yet melodic "Wasted," which is about time spent with a woman, not a bottle, and the beseeching "Say Something" - specifically, "that ours was not a waste /Of that rime and place." Where's the redemption, you ask? Try the emphatic "Only Man in The Universe," which is defiance metamorphosed into song as the singer looks for authenticity in a world run by jerks.

Throughout, Mr. Champion's gritty tales are given life by a throaty voice that can dip down to an Iggy Pop growl, as in the title track, which surveys the wreck of a relationship that sees the woman move on and marry a lawyer, while our hero figuratively drowns. Other times, as on "Rage Like the Sun," his voice is cast in the smooth and mannish lower registers of Neil Diamond, which is meant to be a compliment, or it enunciates hard Midwestern R's and comes across hoarse, like Paul Westerberg of The Replacements, a once-great Minneapolis band and likely progenitor of the Drops.

Mr. Champion, who thoroughly enjoys himself onstage, whirling and sweating, is accompanied by the terrific licks of his old pal Tom Licameli, whose guitar moves easily and often between the deep and muscular metallic twang that Paul Weller and Bruce Foxton of the Jam used to produce and the chiming effect of Peter Buck, the REM player who, by the way, three of the four Drops vaguely resemble. (The other members are Brian Repka on bass and Vinny Cimino on drums.)

Happily, the Drops will be back for a third show in as many months at Amagansett's Stephen Talkhouse Saturday night at 9:30. Now if only Long Island's rock station, programmed with appalling lack of imagination, would get hip to some hard-working local boys turning out new music that could get even the fattest D.J.'s blood pumping.