

# LIVE

## Vocal Ease

**The Bobs**

Van Dyck, June 1

Many groups kick off sets with a rousing instrumental to give the audience an idea of their collective chops, and the Bobs' early show at the Van Dyck on Friday was no exception. Except that the Bobs don't play instruments. The quartet's version of "Caravan," a Duke Ellington standard, carried the punch of a good jazz group, but the muted horns and rapid-fire drumming were rendered with voices only.

With 20 years together and 10 recordings to their credit, the Bobs have gained a devoted following in their "narrow market niche," as they put it in "A Cappella Choir in the Sky." That's a song by newer members Amy Engelhardt and Joe Finetti; like "Caravan," it's on their newest CD, *Coaster*, and it served as the evening's encore. Other *Coaster* songs they performed included "She Made Me Name You Earl," developed from a title submitted during a recent contest. Matthew Stull sang lead in a voice of church-choir amiability as he detailed the frustration of having one's phallus so christened.

The group's voices blend so effortlessly, and with such a pleasing sound, that it's surprising to hear how unique they are individually. Longtime fans must have been pleased to hear how well Engelhardt handled "Signs on the Line," a song established by founding member Janie Scott; similarly, Finetti made an effective lead on "Helmet," a signature piece for founder Gunnar Madsen. The Bobs also dipped into other corners of the older repertory: "Johnny's Room," from their second album, featured Stull complaining about his overnight accommodations at his girlfriend's parents' house; "Pounded on a Rock" showcased Richard Greene's astonishing bass voice in a rousing spiritual about love and laundry; and "Rainbird" was a beautiful, close-harmony paean to a lawn sprinkler.

Even with more than the usual amount of originals on the program, we were treated to a lot of newer material. *The Turtle Cycle* is a four-song set of short numbers with a chelonian theme; although Greene sang lead on "That Old Swamp," Engelhardt swooped in at one point with a vocalese worthy of Villa Lobos' "Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5." And "Rubber Girl" gave Finetti a chance to show off his lounge-singer voice as he serenaded a toy turtle.

This isn't simple stuff, although the between-songs banter gives it a very casual air. "Fluffy's Master Plan for World Domination" is an Engelhardt original positing the idea that cats are poised to sweep into control, and she sang heldensoprano lead as the men chanted and scatted through a very tricky backup.

Their close-harmony prowess emerged again in a revamped original, "Cowboy Lips" ("Jack Palance has got a sneer that's collagen-free"), and in a madrigal setting of "Light My Fire" that was peaceful as the original was not. But we got a shot of classic rock with their closer, "Purple Haze," in which Finetti rendered those guitar solos with . . . well, I think of them now as "Hendrix Lips," and he was dead-on with his vocal impersonation.

As usual with this group, the show was musically satisfying and funny as hell.

—B.A. Nilsson