

## Cowboy Junkies play a characteristically s-s-slow show

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Courant Rock Critic

What is slow? I-84 rush hour. A baseball rain delay on super slo-mo. A snail on Quaaludes.

All of these seem to whiz by, though, when compared with, say, a ballad by the Cowboy Junkies.

In a return engagement at Toad's Place in New Haven Tuesday, the Canadian band didn't exactly step up the beat to kick off its new American tour.

On the contrary, it seemed to steep them even deeper in molasses.

Of course, this is much of the appeal of the Toronto quartet. While most bands speed up tunes and crank the volume, the Cowboy Junkies assiduously do the opposite.

Guitarist Michael Timmons jangles barely audible open chords on his electric guitar in an early Velvet Underground mode. Bassist Alan Anton and drummer Peter Timmons follow suit on quiet variations that don't exactly snap a backbeat.

No one would give the ensemble a second notice, though, if not for the Timmons' sister, Margo, who dominates the stage with a dreamy, haunting voice and an ethereal presence that seems to perfectly suit the sound.

Compared with her nervous stage manner last time at the club, she was relaxed and in good spirits Tuesday, bemoaning the fact that she wore the same outfit she wore last time

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(T-shirt, dress, shawl).

And she was in fine voice on the spare songs about missed romance mostly written by her brother Michael. Best known for doing appealing if somnambulist versions of Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane" and Patsy Cline's "Walking After Midnight" (with which she opened and closed the show), most of the 90-minute set was original material, including several new, as yet unrecorded songs.

Margo Timmons was self-effacing enough to introduce the still-slow "Rock and Bird" as the band's "dance tune," which is to say that it has a faint beat replacing the usual fading pulse.

What makes it usually all work in concert are the four sidemen the band depends on almost as strongly as it does the singer. Accordionist Jaro Czerwinec adds a sweet wash on most tunes; and Jeff Bird is indispensable on mandolin, harmonica and fiddle; but Kim Deschamps, hidden in the back of the stage, is the standout on pedal and lap steel guitar.

This time out, the band also had a percussionist, for some reason. Used mostly to jingle the wind chimes, David Houghton is perhaps the first in his profession not to break a sweat during a show.

The band, which sells a T-shirt that says "Sssh!," has a problem exuding its quietness live, especially in a sold-out bar lined with louts who like the idea of being there but have no intention of listening. The constant din seemed to rattle the audience more than the band, though.

If things were noisy for the Junkies' set, they were out of control for the opening set by Townes Van Zandt. As a result, the loutish crowd missed the best-written songs of the evening, as done acoustically by the lanky Tennessee songwriter, best known for his "Pancho and Lefty."

Looking like a latter day version of young Abe Lincoln, Van Zandt offers songs that are honest, precisely drawn and affecting. The indifferent crowd put a damper on the unpretentious troubadour's usual dry between-song humor, however, as he ran through his half-hour set.

There was one consolation, though: "With a crowd like this, you don't have to worry about tuning," he said.

No doubt, things will be suitably more quiet when the show moves from the barroom to a theater atmosphere at the Paramount Performing Arts Center in Springfield Saturday.



Michael Kodas / The Hartford Courant

■ Margo Timmons, lead singer of Cowboy Junkies, takes time out to listen to the band, playing at Toad's Place in New Haven Tuesday.