

Friday, December 16, 1994

Music

Singer-songwriter Dan Hicks proves he still has the hot hand

With the opening lines "My mother died of asbestos/My father's name was Estes" on the album-opening "Up! Up! Up!" from the live "Shootin' Straight"—Dan Hicks' first new album in 16 years—the Bay Area hipster immediately serves notice that he hasn't lost any of his wickedly sardonic humor in the interim. Hicks and his Acoustic Warriors quartet will perform their special brand of "folk-swing" Saturday at Schubas.

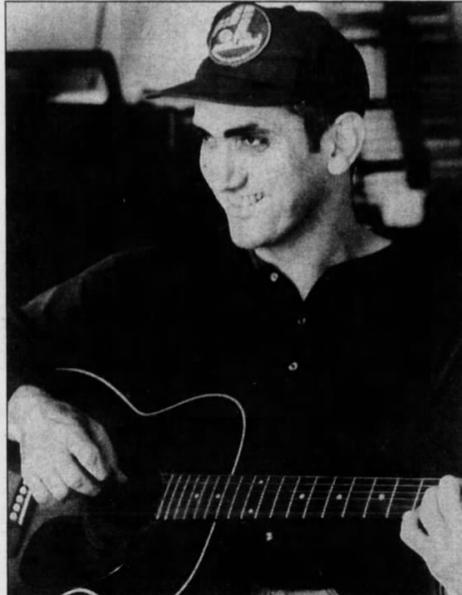
Hicks, whose Hot Licks group

Concert line Dan Kening

recorded a series of cult classics in the '70s, may have taken an extended break from recording, but he's hardly been idle. A star in his homebase of San Francisco, Hicks has regularly played Chicago in recent years, most often at At the Tracks.

"Shootin' Straight" was recorded live at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica, Calif., and released on Private Music's new On the Spot subsidiary. The 14 tunes feature some fine singing from Hicks and dazzling instrumental work from his band, but it's the songs that stay with you. Hicks' droll humor is evident on songs like the aforementioned "Up! Up! Up!," the UFO fantasy "Hell, I'd Go!," and "13D," in which he brags about his girl, "She's a pork chop dinner with a big baked potato and a side of peas." It's not all yuks, though, as "Bottoms Up!" and "Level With Me Laurie" are poignant character studies.

Hicks says the long layoff from recording was not by design, but after being dropped by Warner Bros. Records he found most major labels couldn't figure out how to market his admittedly idiosyncratic music. But regardless of how "Shootin' Straight" fares commercially, Hicks admits the album's release has been a shot in the arm for him.



Paul Kelly writes perceptively about love and the human spirit.

"After all the years of people coming up to me at shows and asking me if I was still recording, it feels so good to say that I am again," said Hicks by phone from his Marin County home. "Hopefully, this album is a springboard to get me going again. I've got lots of songs and ideas left for other records. The way I figure it is, hell, I'm back."

Hicks' musical career stretches back to his folk days in the '50s and a stint with the pioneering '60s San Francisco rock group the Charlatans. But it wasn't until he formed the jazzy Hot Licks in the late '60s that he discovered his musical voice. Then and now, Hicks' music incorporates the propulsive swing of disparate artists

like gypsy jazz guitarist Django Rheinhardt and Bob Willis and the Texas Playboys as filtered through the eyes of a Beat Generation poet.

"If someone asks me what kind of music I'm doing these days, I say that it's got the same flavor as what I did with the Hot Licks," said Hicks. "I still play guitar and have a particular rhythmic style and pretty much use the same acoustic stringed instruments I always have. My favorite music has always been jazz, so I try to keep that core in my music and make it swing."

Hicks says he'll mix in Hot Licks-era favorites like "I Scare Myself" and "How Can I Miss You (When You Won't Go Away)" with new material at



Townes Van Zandt's well-worn voice is a perfect match for the songs he writes.

his Schubas gig.

"It's been kind of a rocky career and I've never quite achieved the kind of success that I've wanted," said Hicks. "But I still enjoy getting up on stage. I may be 53, but I'm not running out of steam."

Opening for Hicks are San Diego wisecracker Steve Poltz and Robert Driscoll, a k a the Rugsburns, who provide plenty of chuckles with their mordant musical wit. On their current "Morning Wood" album they take pokes at muscle-bound jocks, Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder, '90s technology, trailer trash and just about any other subject that tickles their musical fancy. But just when you're about to write them off as hopelessly glib, the Rugsburns surprise you with something sensitive, like their fond look back at childhood on "Holliston Street."

Other concerts of note

Spearhead, Friday at Metro: If you missed Spearhead's opening spot for the Brand New Heavies here in August, here's a golden opportunity to check out one of to-

day's more compelling hip-hop-based acts. Led by Michael Franti, former frontman for Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, the seven-piece group sings and raps about such topics as political empowerment and safe sex on their current "Home" album without ever sacrificing their highly danceable groove quotient. Opening are Ben Harper and the Fugees.

Catherine, Saturday at Metro: Much has been made of Catherine's supposed debt to fellow Chicagoans Smashing Pumpkins (the Pumpkins' Billy Corgan produced their "Sleepy" EP and Catherine drummer Kerry Brown recently married S.P. bassist D'Arcy), but the hard-rocking quintet has been paying its dues on the local scene for several years now. The band's three-guitar attack provides a thick soup swirling around vocalists Neil Jendon and Jerome Brown on their new "Somy" album. Yeah, there's plenty of guitar-noise here, but tunes like the first single, "Songs About Girls," have plenty going for them besides Marshall amps turned up to '11." The occasional melodic ballad provides a respite from the six-string onslaught, while a cover of the Bee Gees' obscure "Every Christian Lion-Hearted Man" is a nice bonus.

Velocity Girl, Saturday at Lounge Ax: Velocity Girl is back to headline after opening for Bob Mould's Sugar at the Aragon Ballroom last month. The Washington, D.C., band features Sarah Shannon's sensual vocals over material that ranges from ethereal to pop-ish and pure thrash 'n' roll. The band is nearly impossible to pigeonhole but has plenty of charm on record. Also appearing are Polara and Yum-Yum.

Soulvitamins and Jason & Alison, Saturday at the Double Door: Soulvitamins and Jason & Alison both have impressive new albums out on the local Whitehouse label. The funky trio Soulvitamins ought to appeal to fans of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Spin Doctors with their mixture of fat-bass and drums underpinning in-your-face guitar and succinct but memorable songs. Jason & Alison's Jason Narducci is a first-class acoustic-based songwriter, whose powerful songs on the duo's "Woodshed" album are given a unique spin by the addition of Alison Chesley's sympathetic accompaniment on cello. Also appearing are Who's This Mary and Avocado Jugg Fuzz.

Townes Van Zandt, Saturday at the Lunar Cabaret: Since legendary Texas singer-songwriter Van Zandt played at Schubas in August, he's released his first studio album in seven years, "No Deeper Blue." Recorded in Ireland of all places, the album shows that Van Zandt is still as trenchant a songwriter as ever. New songs like "Blazes Blue" and "BW Railroad Blues" evoke his native Texas' dusty vistas, while his well-worn creak of a voice is a perfect match for his stark story-songs, which weave together elements of country, blues and folk.

Paul Kelly, Wednesday at Schubas: Former leader of the lauded Australian group the Messengers, Kelly went solo and moved to L.A. last year. His new album, "Wanted Man," is full of great songs set against widely diverse musical styles that range from rock to reggae, folk and even lounge jazz. Connecting it all is Kelly's penchant for writing perceptively about the affairs of the heart and the human spirit. This will be a solo acoustic performance.

Music charts

It was a good week for women on the hip hop/R&B tip. "My Life," Mary J. Blige's follow-up to her multiplatinum debut, takes its first bow in the top 10. And with "Creep" holding forth as the No. 1 R&B single, "CrazySexyCool," the new album by TLC, moves up in its second week to No. 15.

Here is Billboard's list of record and compact disc hits for the week ending Dec. 17.

Top albums

1. Miracles: The Holiday Album—Kenny G
2. II—Boyz II Men
3. Merry Christmas—Mariah Carey
4. Hell Freezes Over—The Eagles
5. MTV Unplugged in New York—Nirvana
6. "The Lion King" soundtrack—Various

7. Smash—Offspring
8. Dookie—Green Day
9. My Life—Mary J. Blige
10. Duets II—Frank Sinatra
11. Wildflowers—Tom Petty
12. Big Ones—Aerosmith
13. Monster—R.E.M.
14. No Need to Argue—The Cranberries
15. CrazySexyCool—TLC
16. Crossroad—Bon Jovi
17. Greatest Hits—Bob Seger & the Silver Bullet Band
18. Best of Sade—Sade
19. "Murder Was the Case" soundtrack—Various
20. From the Cradle—Eric Clapton

Top singles

1. Here Comes the Hotstepper—Ini Kamoze

2. On Bended Knee—Boyz II Men
3. Another Night—Real McCoy
4. Always—Bon Jovi
5. Creep—TLC
6. I'll Make Love to You—Boyz II Men
7. Secret—Madonna
8. All I Wanna Do—Sheryl Crow
9. I Wanna Be Down—Brandy
10. You Want This—Janet Jackson
11. I'm the Only One—Melissa Etheridge
12. Before I Let You Go—Blackstreet
13. Turn the Beat Around—Gloria Estefan
14. Tootsie Roll—99 Boys
15. Sukiyaki—4 P.M.
16. 100 Percent Pure Love—Crystal Waters
17. Never Lie—Immature
18. I'll Stand By You—Preterenders

19. Practice What You Preach—Barry White
20. You Gotta Be—Des'ree

R&B singles

1. Creep—TLC
2. Before I Let You Go—Blackstreet
3. Practice What You Preach—Barry White
4. On Bended Knee—Boyz II Men
5. Here Comes the Hotstepper—Ini Kamoze
6. I Wanna Be Down—Brandy
7. Be Happy—Mary J. Blige
8. I belong to You-How Many Ways—Toni Braxton
9. U Will Know—B.M.U.
10. If You Love Me—Brownstone

Country singles

1. Pickup Man—Joe Diffie
2. Take Me As I Am—Faith Hill
3. When Love Finds You—Vince Gill
4. Untangle My Mind—Clint Black
5. The Big One—George Strait
6. Now I Know—Lari White
7. When the Thought of You Catches Up with Me—David Ball
8. If You've Got Love—John Michael Montgomery
9. Not a Moment Too Soon—Tim McGraw
10. We Can't Love Like This Anymore—Alabama

Chicago Tribune Online
INSTRUCTIONS ON PAGE 2, SECTION 1
Complete Billboard charts. F631