

# Even though it's April 1st don't fool with Bel-Vistas

Since this is the **Thursday, April 1, 1993** THE TORONTO STAR

by Lenny Stoute

**BEL-VISTAS: Intense, hard-rocking set at Cabana Room indicates these guys could bust out big-time.**

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**T**HE Bel-Vistas slog away at making some of the most intelligent and heart-felt Canuck roots-rock around and the band has a new batch, titled *Pretty Ugly*, ready to go at Clinton's Friday.

Bel-Vistas steer clear of cliché and deliver familiar scenarios that comfort and delight.

If you're a contemporary Canadian band with folk-country influences, it's considered an anomaly these days if you don't have accordion, violin and every other acoustic instrument possible thrown into the mix.

Anomalous Toronto band The Bel-Vistas has opted for a stripped down, two-guitar, bass and drums approach for its debut album *Somewhere Along The Line*. It's a clean, uncluttered sound with distinctive guitar lines reminiscent of early-period Steve Earle, Star Town.

## CANADA, Suite 509,

something very warm about the Bel-Vistas, like your big bro' giving you some well-experienced advice. The songs on their Eureka debut, *Somewhere Along The Line*, are unaffected and honest. No bravado or stone-cold male pride, it's insightful and sensitive to all matters, not just love-related. Vocalist/guitarist Mark Ripp has a gorgeous, shade-of-country voice which melts on openers "Matter Of Time" and "The Ordinary Man," but works just as well on a howling, disturbing track like "Crazy Bill."

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Musically, it's as clean, crisp as from the Charlie Watts; his sparse, powerful approach used to full effect on this release. Coupled with Baxter's full-bodied bass lines, the Bel-Vistas are gifted with an ideal rhythm section; perfect-meter excitement without sounding cluttered. Bob Hamlyn is a tasteful, highly talented guitarist, with a great sense of groove, and a wonderful way of playing around the vocals. He and Ripp's guitars blend beautifully. In the accompanying promo material received with this CD, the group has been compared to Blue Rodeo and The Tragically Hip; however, to do so seems like a cheap shot. What's important here is the lyrical message; this is what gives The Bel-Vistas their freshness. The folk rock approach for these songs is appropriate, and any similarity to other groups is really secondary.

Producer Michael Sak has done a superb job in engineering and mixing of this release. The sound quality is of high calibre, and the group's energy is successfully transferred to the listener. I rate this effort highly; well-written topical songs confidently presented in a familiar format. A very good first release.

## CONCERT CALENDAR

**VISTAS VIEW** Bel-Vistas host Rockers the Cabana Room March 26 at the Cabana Room with openers Manfred John Company. \$4. Says Vista singer/songwriter Mark Ripp, the show finds the band test-driving new material which may surface on their forthcoming second record. The debut, *Somewhere Along The Line*, was released via Eureka/Capitol last year. For fans, the show is a great opportunity to catch evolving new material.

### The Bel-Vistas Somewhere Along the Line Eureka Records

The Bel-Vistas are a four-piece group based in Scarborough, Ontario, and are comprised of Mark Ripp, lead vocal and guitar, Michael Baxter, bass and vocals, Bob Hamlyn, guitars and vocals, and John Toffoli, drums and percussion. All of the songs were composed by Ripp, and they stand as an excellent collection. Each song tells a common everyday language with such current issues as *Other Long Night*, Any new love (*Love On a Matter of Time*), women's liberation (*Times*), child abduction (*Mercy*), and mass murder (*Crazy Bill*). Ripp is successful in choosing lyrics and phrasings that not only tell, they also work very well in a musical

Generally, I think the resolutions positive," says Ripp. "There's enough bad stuff going on and enough reinforcement of where we're screwing up. Maybe we manage to put a few crumbs on the other end of the scale."

The song *Ordinary Man* serves as a motto for The Bel-Vistas: unpretentious, unassuming, with a "do unto others as you would have them do" theme. *Crazy Bill* is based on an actual mass slaying rampage in Florida.

"The cause of most of these things is some kind of estrangement, people without love and nurturing in their youth," says Ripp. "What's scary is it seems to be some kind of permanent condition in society."

The album's highlight is the title track, a passionate song dealing with acceptance of the fact that there are things beyond our control as human beings.

"Every once in a while we get slapped back down on the wrestling mat of life. There's some things we

□ If striving for excellence is something to applaud, then Bel-Vistas at the Cabana Room Friday were the class of the week.

The BVs suffer from "they've been around" syndrome, which leads otherwise inquiring people into believing they know what such a band's all about. Obviously not, or they'd be more noisy about the Bel-Vistas.

The group made its debut last year with the *Somewhere Along The Line* CD, an effort that provided about half the set. The rest was taken up by the always-interesting business of trying out new material.

Over-all impression was of tunes that seemed to rock out more. Songs like "Pretty" and "Never Pretend" had a swagger better suited to Mark Ripp's singing style than the stuff like "The Ordinary Man."

Ripp writes lyrics with a sharp eye for the corkscrew twists of the life game and a colorful way of getting his perceptions across. The chord progressions shared by Ripp and Bob Hamlyn signal a more assertive phase and not a moment too soon.

These guys have nothing to be self-effacing about: Ripp's a convincing and original enough frontguy, Hamlyn dances and flashes just the right amount and the rhythm section of stickman John Toffoli and bassist Michael Baxter rustle up a good pulse between them.

New songs like "Every Day Of Your Life" and "Wake Up Baby, The Party's Over" just might be some of the best post-Blue Rodeo cowpunk yet.

Also worth recording is the BV version of Bob Dylan's "Girl From The North Country." It's that rarity, a cover version that brings something entirely new to a song.

Mike Rothe of Sony Music thought they were prime cuts when he heard one of their songs on CFNY's Indie Can release. He took it to Eureka and dragged Joel Wertman out to see them at the Horseshoe. He was suitably impressed.