

CATCH OF THE DAY

BY TODD ANTHONY

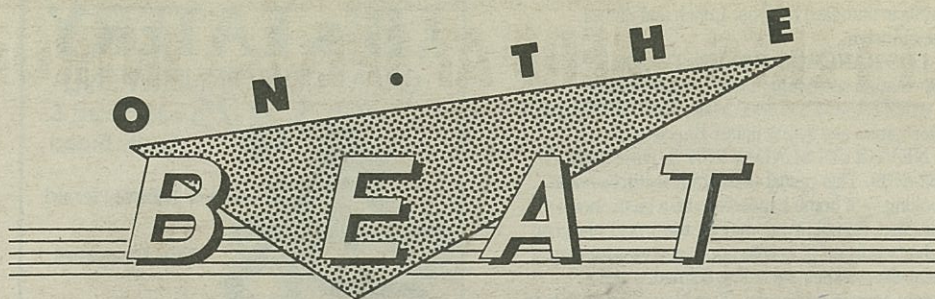
Bonefish Johnny is a fitting moniker for the Groove Thangs' ax man and (ahem) elder statesman. A bonefish, as any old salt will testify, is a particularly scrappy gamer. "The most fightinest fish in the sea," says their guitar-slinging namesake.

For six years Groove Thangs have swum through the treacherous waters of the local original-music scene, and if they haven't always been the biggest fish in the pond, they have certainly been among the most fightinest. They have rocked every venue from Duval Street to Worth Avenue. They've had 'em shimmying in Charleston and shagging in Myrtle Beach. "We love the South," enthuses Johnny, "even if we have to go north to reach it."

Their rep has spread far beyond the confines of the Confederacy. In March they were playing in Bern, Switzerland, when a Swiss fan walked into the club wearing a Groove Thangs T-shirt, obtained from God-knows-where. Fans from Pennsylvania to the Jersey Shore to the southernmost reaches of A1A know them as possibly the best bar band in Florida — a shoo-in for Miller Beer sponsorship.

Therein lies the rub. While the outfit's original intent *was* to become the best bar band in the world, the Thangs have learned the hard way that popularity with live audiences does not necessarily get the juices flowing in the executive suites of the major labels. The kind of band that can attempt a Bee Gees-cum-Led Zep takeoff of "Stayin' Alive" and make it work, or give the Dead's "Shakedown Street" an Ohio Players spin, is too much for the average A&R guy to get a handle on. The fact that audiences love them for it is of little consequence. One industry source close to the Thangs went so far as to say, "You'll never sell units, but if you were here in L.A., the whole industry would be dancing at your gigs."

There was a quickie development deal with Epic Records that got the band into Criteria Studios to cut a few demo tunes, but nothing much came of it, save for the band's opportunity to swap tales with legendary producer Tom Dowd. "We sent the demos to Epic," says Bonefish Johnny, "and the A&R guy comes back with, 'Oh, well, we already have the Radiators.' Like we have something in



It's their Thang: The Groove group tasted the majors and decided to lead an Uppression

common with them. Dissed us big-time."

The Groove Thangs' response has been to launch a counterattack of aggressive indifference. In late 1990 they converted a small warehouse into a private recording studio, and during the first half of 1991 recorded an entire CD of original compositions, entitled *Uppression*, which they released last week under the Neverglades imprint. The purpose, explains saxophonist/recording engineer Jeff "Mega" Watkins, is threefold: "First, to see how many CDs we can sell on our own. We like the philosophy of do-it-yourself independent labels. Second, we got tired of waiting for one of the majors to 'discover' us, and we just sort of figured, why wait? We had plenty of material. This way, if a label catches on, fine. If not, we've still got an album we're really proud of. Third, we felt a need to release something that was more focused than our older stuff. On our earlier releases, the diversity might have been working against us to an extent. Our forte is still playing together live — there's a lot of spontaneity and interaction — but that's not always best for an album or a CD. So with *Uppression* we tried to stick to more of a unified style, like soul/rock."

A listen to *Uppression* confirms they succeeded in the last. Hard-driving funk and hot-buttered soul ooze from the grooves on nearly every track. There are no straight blues tunes here; no reggae, no country, no rockabilly rave ups, Bo Diddley blasters, or wimpy acoustic ballads. Instead there are carefully crafted rhythms that evoke James Brown, and the Ohio Players, as well as Steely Dan and Boz Scaggs.

The CD draws strength from its seamlessness — the musicianship is tight to a fault, the rhythm section never strays far from the pocket, and all ten songs have a soulful edge. One can almost picture the veins bulging in vocalist Down Pat's throat when he stretches his marvelously gravelly baritone through arduous octave-busting on cut after cut. The cumulative effect is similar to that of Was (Not Was)'s breakthrough *What Up, Dog?* LP, but without a "Walk the Dinosaur"-type monster single to put the record over with the unwashed masses. A lot of people, including long-time fans, are not going to get it. The calculated risk the Thangs have taken is that there will be enough new converts to take up the slack.

Lyrically, *Uppression* is a mixed bag of

clever insights and tired clichés. Warmed-over humanism with a dose of streetwise anarchy links nearly all of the songs thematically. Couplets such as, "Your eyes burn like a rising sun/I'm so glad I forgot where I put my gun" and "It's a pain in the ass to stay alive/It's a bitch to survive" have a jarring effect when they jump out from the mix, and they belie the lush harmonies and warm sax lines that precede and follow. Subtlety has never been the Thangs' strong suit. Of course, a case could be made that to pick nits with the lyrics is to miss the point. There are ten strong tunes on *Uppression*, not a clinker in the lot. There are harmonies that call to mind Marvin Gaye's masterful "What's Goin' On?" and snaky, wah-wah heavy rhythm-guitar runs that could have been lifted out of the *Shaft* soundtrack. Would it make sense to fret over the lyrical content of, say, a Barry White song? Would anybody lose sleep over James Brown's overuse of the word "huh!"? Probably not, but then again Groove Thangs don't yet rank with James Brown (or even Barry White).

They are, however, damn fine bearers of the soul/funk torch, especially on tunes such as "Whadayamean?" — which features a Watkins sax riff that walks a tightrope between Average White Band and Earth, Wind, and Fire — and "Storm and Shine," which layers on waves of overdubbed harmonies. Christopher B's bass pumps, bumps, slaps and tickles fervently, and provides a counterpoint to drummer/percussionist Tim Kuchta's minimalist drumming. On "Headcase" the funk gets sticky enough to tar a driveway, as scratchy, jangly guitars cut through a mix of pumping bass and thumping drums while a frenzied saxophone skitters overhead.

None of the tunes on *Uppression* is what Bonefish Johnny calls an "orphan song" — songs from genres that just don't fit together no matter how good they are individually. The hope around the Groove Thangs camp is that *Uppression* will prevent them from becoming an orphan band, one that audiences love for their eclecticism even as the major-label reps rebuff them for it.

"We're not trendy," opines the band's spiritual leader and de facto spokesman. "We're never gonna be the flavor of the month, and we don't really fit the established alternative/progressive scene. We're sort of like the alternative to alternative. It ain't easy being a Groove Thang."

GROOVE THANGS *with the Goods, UTREC, and the Mavericks perform at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Sunrise Musical Theatre, 5555 95 Ave, 741-7300. Tickets are \$10.35 and \$12.50.*