

MUSIC

Soloist adds dimension with band

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Middle-aged musicians often screw things up for themselves. Feeling they have seen too many years, too little money and too little success, they systematically turn an uphill climb into a has-been plateau. As with models and hockey players, the general consensus is, if you haven't made it big by age 30, you probably never will.

Local singer-songwriter Tom Stahl has found a way to bypass that social highway. By beginning his musical career in middle age, the former truck driver has paced steadily forward on a smooth road. Worry about youth passing him by? It already has. Worry about being cool? He knows he is. Worry about giving the record companies what they want? He is himself.

Saturday in Nietzsche's, Stahl shared his independent spirit with a small, early-night gathering. A

REVIEW

Tom Stahl

Solo singer tries life with a band.

Saturday night in Nietzsche's.

solo performer for the last three years, he traveled a new road: Joining him on stage were bassist Paul Joseph Hill, keyboard player Mark Stahl and drummer Gary Kowalski.

"I've never played with a band before," Stahl said before the show. "These are the first guys I've played with."

He picked the best. With his brother on keyboards, his childhood friend on drums and his longtime admirer on bass, he has found a near perfect accompaniment.

A concern when acoustic performers surround themselves with a band is whether the lyrics will still be heard. Stahl remedied the

problem before it arose by keeping the vocal volume higher than the rest. Most times it worked: "Coffee Song" was enhanced by diminishing keyboard and guitar chords, and "Spinning Around" benefited from full instrumentation.

But Stahl is a master at performing slow, earnest tunes, and sometimes the band interfered with this. The typically sentimental "Claire's Wedding" was played louder and faster, divorcing it from its roots, and the happy-go-lucky, Paul Simon-like "What Do Ya Think That Means" became a routine rock ditty.

No one, however, could argue about the validity of his band after hearing "Living Too Long." Replacing Stahl's introductory harp tones with heavy choral sampling, the tune was transformed from a worthwhile offering to a melodramatic future hit.