

Aug. 25, 1993

Moods just shouldn't swing like this.

Just past midnight Sunday at FitzGerald's in Berwyn, the Skeletons ripped through an extended set that was a compendium of American music. The band fuel-injected originals as well as tunes by the Ramones, a Huey "Piano" Smith number and even the Rutles' "Livin' In Hope" tribute to the Beatles.

Fade to silence. After finishing around 2:30 in the morning, the Skeletons packed up their gear in preparation for the immediate eight-hour drive back to Ozark country. Drummer Bobby Lloyd Hicks tore apart his set. Joe Terry and Kelly Brown took down their keyboards. They looked tired. No one was talking, there was little to be said.

It was the Skeletons' last Chicago area gig.

The Skeletons will play a farewell concert Sept. 3 in their home club, the Regency Showcase, in what's left of downtown Springfield, Mo.

With hearts in the warm tradition of country music and minds in the improvisational spirit of rock 'n' roll, the Skeletons were my favorite band. I was not alone. The Skeletons played behind acts as diverse as Dave Alvin, Jonathan Richman, Steve Forbert and Boxcar Willie.

The San Francisco Chronicle named the Skeletons' "Waiting" as one of the top 10 albums of 1992. The band was always championed at the South by Southwest Music Conference in Austin, Texas. The Washington Post called them "the greatest undiscovered rock 'n' roll band of the recent past."

Apparently it will remain that way. The raves never translated into radio. "We didn't get any radio response to 'Waiting,'" said Skeletons singer-bassist Lou Whitney on Monday. (WXRT-FM did play "Outta My Way," from the Skeletons' "In The Flesh" compilation.)

"You gotta do something on radio to latch on to anything," he said. "None of us are mad; we just weren't doing the business. We don't want to do it if we can't do it correctly. And correctly means finding a label that understands how to market you. Somewhere there should be an (artists and repertoire) guy who understands how to get Skeletons music on adult alternative radio in between John Hiatt and Ween. That's not that hard of a job."

Whitney pointed out that bands were more profitable during the 1980-84 period he played in the Moreells, a roadhouse outfit with future Skeletons D. Clinton

Thompson on guitar and Bobby Lloyd Hicks on drums. (The Skeletons formed in 1988.)

"You could do two nights at FitzGerald's, a couple nights in Lawrence, Kan., and three nights at the Zoo Bar in Lincoln, Neb.," Whitney said. "There's not a fan base for that kind of thing any more. Now there's so many bands and so many entertainment choices, you have to position yourself for airplay. We can't even tour on the lowest, lowest level."

For example, the Skeletons drove to FitzGerald's in their 1984 Dodge van, which has logged more than 250,000 miles. The band can't afford to have the van's air conditioning fixed. At the end of the road, the Skeletons were staying with friends and loading and unloading their own equipment.

The Skeletons will make a final country-roots record for East Side Digital. Some of that material includes songs from the "Waiting" sessions for Alias Records. Work on the record begins in early October when Whitney's remodeled recording studio is up and running in Springfield. Should the new record find a radio audience, Whitney said the band would consider playing to support the product.

Age also became a factor in the Skeletons' breakup. Whitney is 50. He's one of the few balding rockers who won't wear a hat. "If people hear your songs, you look perfect," Whitney said. "But if you're just another band trying to score, I can see where marketing people might look at us and say, 'Gee, this is going to be a hard sell. These are not faces you can put on a lunch box.' Or that we might have a couple preconceived attitudes about the way things should be done. They'd rather deal with a bunch of bright-eyed guys with knapsacks on their backs who will do anything they say."

The Skeletons went out in a blaze of glory early Sunday. If there was any sadness, the Skeletons did a good job of masking it.

"Sadness?" Whitney asked. "No . . . well . . . yeah . . . driving back, I felt sad. A lot of people don't have a chance to play in a good band. Anyone would miss playing in a good band. I won't miss the bad nights with no money and being broken down on the side of the road. But it sure is fun to set up and play for people."

So come Monday, Terry will begin telemarketing training. Brown has a part-time job in cotton candy and snow-cone machine sales. Whitney will continue to work in his studio, play some acoustic gigs and on the side help Thompson shop his own tunes. Hicks already is playing drums with Bob Davidson and Straight Country, a Springfield-based country outfit. By his own count, this is Hicks' 41st band. Hicks will always play drums.

"But none of us are planning to start a band," Whitney said. "It would be hard to top this. We tried to do it bottom line. And the bottom line was that our job was to go out

and be a good band. And we did our job a whole lot better than a lot of other people did."