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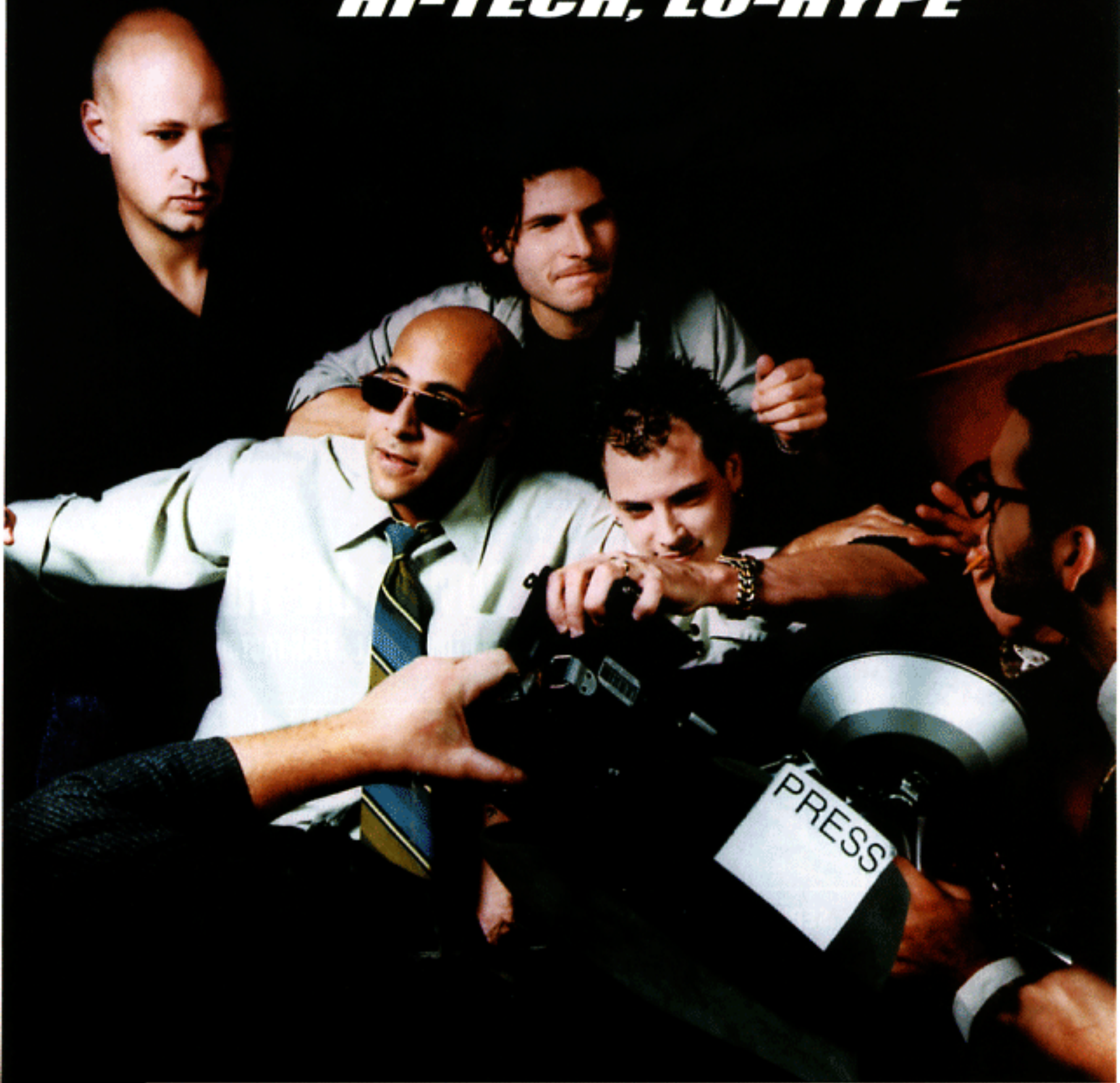
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CANADA'S MUSIC MAGAZINE

# THE WATCHMEN

HI-TECH, LO-HYPE



story by Sarah Chauncey  
photographs by Richard Beland

paparazzi: Toronto-based comedy duo Frolick & Hopp  
photographer's assistant: Kymen Bank  
selected clothing provided by Montana River, Toronto



# THE WATCHMEN THE WATCHMEN THE WATCHMEN THE WATCHMEN THE WATCHMEN

"I feel like I'm modeling for a Sears catalog," laments The Watchmen's bass player, Ken Tizzard, as he stands in the lobby of Toronto's multi-million dollar Ford Centre For The Performing Arts. And he could be, if it were a hip, funky, spiky-hair-and-tattoos kind of Sears.

Instead, he's being dressed by a stylist for a *Chart* photo shoot in the upscale building, amidst mahogany-and-silver trim, broad skylights and marble staircases. This is where Forest Hill matrons and their stockbroker husbands come to watch *La Bohème*. What the hell are The Watchmen doing here?

Sure, they have a "rock star look," as someone will point out the next night at the MuchMusic Video Awards. Sure, all four of their albums have gone gold (50,000 copies sold) or platinum (100,000). But these are three down-to-earth guys from Winnipeg (and one from Newfoundland) who've worked their asses off for the past ten years to earn their place in the upper echelon of Canadian music.

Their reality is far from glitz and glamour. Their road hobbies include reading, jogging and going to movies; they still get the shitty rooms in hotels; they have no use for groupies, preferring to actually discuss the music with fans after shows. As they patiently endure the make-up application process, Ken and guitarist Joey Serlin lovingly discuss the newest additions to their respective households: A shih-tzu/poodle blend chez Ken and a lab/shepherd mix for Joey. Macho posturing, this ain't.

The shoot ultimately becomes a parody on the whole "rock star" idea. In one shot, Joey leans forward and grabs an extra — dressed as a paparazzi — by the collar, "threatening" to beat the shit out of him. After the flash goes off, Joey dusts off the guy's lapels and straightens his collar, making sure he's done no permanent damage. While the photographer re-loads his camera, Joey and drummer Sammy Kohn play slap-jack, giggling like schoolkids when Joey retracts his hands in fear. Sammy impishly places a dime on top of an unsuspecting singer Danny Greaves' shiny bald pate and waits for him to notice.

What kind of rock stars are these guys?

## THE BROTHERS WATCHMEN

While the photographer sets up the next shot, the four relax over pizza — much more their style — and discuss what to play on Mike Bullard's nationally-broadcast TV talk show, *Open Mike*, the following night. Sammy wants to play "Brighter Hell," a mellow, poignant song that would surprise people who are only familiar with the band's rocking singles. Danny disagrees, saying that the song only works in the

context of a full set. "Something's only dynamic when it's relative to something else," he explains. "It's only down if it's coming from something that's up."

As the pizza disappears, so does Danny, who wanders the acoustically-perfect lobby, singing to himself and listening to the perfect reverb that comes from spending millions on lobby walls alone. The three are left to discuss their relationship.

"It's almost, like, closer than a brotherhood," says Sammy, picking at a last bit of cheese. "I can't even describe it." A sibling vibe permeates the band, a sense of each knowing what the others are thinking before they think it.

"I think if we didn't have the family [feeling], the band would be dead in the water," adds Joey. "In all honesty, there's no way we could get through the shit we've gone through if we didn't have the relationships."

"The way I look at it," Sammy explains, "The musical differences — that's a totally positive thing. And we have that, certainly. Everyone's just fighting to make it better, to grow. Personal differences are just things you have to work through sometimes. That's part of living in each other's pockets for months at a time."

Everyone in The Watchmen has an equal say in everything that happens, on and off the stage. "It's a democracy," Sammy explains, "Because we're all equal, and there's no leader of this band, we argue about everything. But we all have the same common goal. I know it sounds kind of cliché, but it's true... We're a group in every sense of the word."

Those words are put into action later in the day, when they have to decide which of three t-shirts to use for their upcoming tour. Danny tries on all three, and the others compare the weight, touch, neckline and wrist of each choice, eventually deciding on Fruit Of The Loom, the long-sleeved variety. Then they pore over the stage design for the tour, debating which images should be painted on the onstage panels. ►



"We're not just this rock 'n' roll, wanky band; there's a lot of moments and elements to our music that are very quiet, reserved and emotional."  
—Drummer Sammy Kohn



L to R: **Ken, Danny, Joey and Sammy**

Ken is wearing mock rib sweater by C.P. Company, extreme rinse jeans by Big star; Sammy is wearing grey button down shirt by C.P. Company.



Although they operate as a democracy, Sammy explains that Danny is the focal point when it comes to live performance. "We look at ourselves, the three of us, as being competent players, always striving and working at our individual instruments, but Danny, to me, is an exceptional singer and frontman. I think he's arguably one of the best singers in this country."

#### A MATURE, HARD-WORKING BAND

The Watchmen have never been a flavour of the month. From their 1992 debut, *McLarenFurnaceRoom*, to 1994's platinum *In The Trees*, to the 1996 follow-up, *Brand New Day*, and their current album, *Silent Radar*, the band is pure whole-album-rock. Given that the band members listen to everything from Morcheeba to Willie Nelson, it's hard to pin them to any one sound. While a distaste for genre-hopping and hype has perhaps kept them from achieving superstar status, it also means they're guaranteed longevity.

"Nobody can take away the success that we've achieved and the success that we're going to continue to gain," says Sammy, as they wait for another photo set-up, "because we're doing it ourselves, and not with the help of all the other kind of bullshit that is there with bands."

"Because [the success] was such a gradual thing," Joey points out, "...We developed a real sincere and earnest rapport with our fans. We have that core that will always be there with us."

"That's always been the mandate," Sammy adds. "Staying together, growing, writing good songs, keeping things exciting for ourselves." Their goal, he says, is to be a timeless album-rock band. "I want people to have a huge collection of Watchmen CDs."

As they've matured individually, so have The Watchmen matured as a band. After ten years, they're finally comfortable enough with themselves — and consistent enough as a band — to accept that not only won't they always be perfect, but that sometimes, imperfection is preferable.

That acceptance is a luxury borne of many years of intense self-criticism. Ken remembers being terrified by the moments following his first Watchmen show. The minute the band was offstage, he recalls, "Somebody picked up a set list" and proceeded to critique every single mistake of the night. "It freaked me out so big-time, because I'd made a lot of mistakes, and I thought, 'Oh God, they're doing this because of me.' I didn't realize at the time that this was something the band did regularly."

By contrast, Sammy points out, "Now, we come offstage, we have a drink, we look at each other and we go, 'That was good. Next.'"

The intense self-scrutiny "made for some uncomfortable moments," Joey recalls, laughing. "[But that process] got us to that point where we reached a level of consistency live, where a bad night to us now wouldn't be noticeable by anybody in the crowd; it would only be noticeable to us."

#### RADAR RECORDING, HOMELAND TOURING

The new, laid-back attitude followed them to Seattle, where they recorded *Silent Radar* at Pearl Jam bassist Stone Gossard's Studio Litho, with producer Adam Kaspar (R.E.M., Soundgarden).

"The way it sort of appears to me is that after you hit those one or two takes, you're just sort of playing a cover version of that song," says Sammy. "You've already nailed it."

Adds Danny, "I think the beauty of music is the stuff that is impromptu... Because talking about it fucks it up... The things on this record I like best are just the things that we didn't plan on doing."

What makes Joey proudest are songs that, "while we're working on them, jamming, just hearing them come together, I know we've reached another level of songwriting and maturity." He cites "All Uncovered" from *In The Trees* as one example of such a song; "Brighter Hell," the powerful final track on *Silent Radar*, is another. "Songs like that are really special to me."

In the past six months, The Watchmen have toured Europe and Australia, headlined the second stage at EDGefest and opened for The Tragically Hip in the States. While those have been mind- and audience-expanding experiences, the band is particularly looking forward to this fall's cross-Canada tour with Big Wreck, the "official" *Silent Radar* Tour.

"EDGefest was just a tease," explains Sammy. "A quick little 45-minute 'greatest hits of The Watchmen' thing. This time, it's going to be fans and friends and stuff, lights and sound, a special evening in small theatres across the country."

Sammy's excited about being able to show a more dynamic side to the band. "We're not just this rock 'n' roll, wanky band; there's a lot of moments and elements to our music that are very quiet, reserved and emotional."



The tour will also give the band time to connect with their fans. "When you talk face-to-face with people," Joey explains, "that's when you really get a feel as to what's going on, where they're coming from on the new record, what they think."

The Watchmen always make time for it. "We generally sign things for people and like to talk to them. Anyone that's going to go through the effort of buying your CD, buying a ticket to your show, buying a shirt and then wanting to hang around for an hour after the show — to me, you gotta take the time to talk to them."

#### OPEN MIKE NIGHT

The next night, The Watchmen are the main attraction on The Comedy Channel/CTV's *Open Mike*, with a supporting cast that includes race-car driver Greg Moore, a "miracle bird" named Raja, who has appeared 23 times on *Johnny Carson* (the old *Tonight Show*), and a stand-up-comic-turned-poet.

In the band's dressing room, the four members lounge on a plush maroon sofa, surrounded by glass bowls of water adorned with tiny, floating candles. The topic of the evening, other than the show and the video awards to follow, is what to do now that they have a five-day break in their tour with the Hip.

Everyone votes for going home, but finding the means to do so is a challenge, given that Air Canada's seat sale has sold out just about every flight for the next six months. Ken is the designated "travel guy," and until just a few minutes before showtime, he's busily working a cell-phone, trying to find a way home for one and all.

When the band finishes performing "Any Day Now," the applause continues for several minutes. Even while viewers at home are watching a commercial for laundry detergent, the live audience is still screaming their praise. After Danny's brief chat segment with Mike Bullard, The Watchmen hop into a waiting van and race off

## THE WATCHMEN THEN AND NOW

Singer Danny Greaves' mother and drummer Sammy Kohn's mother are sisters. The two cousins met future guitarist Joey Serlin when they were all in kindergarten, formed The Watchmen when they were a worldly 13 years old, and have been together ever since.

#### DANNY

When Danny was in elementary school, Joey recalls, he played "Puff, The Magic Dragon" on harmonica at a recital. When it was over, Joey remembers, "People didn't really know what to do, so he kind of gave them the old [gestures] 'You can clap now.' And everyone started clapping —"

"He still does that!" interjects Sammy.

"He always had a way with the audience, even back then," Joey continues. "But even then, he was always a quiet, subdued guy who kept to himself."

Danny — he of the shaved head, blue-tinted glasses and powerful-yet-plaintive voice — radiates an ethereal quality, one that seems more a defence mechanism than an affectation. Although the other three credit him with being the person through whom they communicate, that role isn't evident to an outsider. He seems shy.

"I don't think Danny ever likes being the centre of attention, ever," explains Sammy. "Unless he's on stage." For reasons no one can quite remember, Danny's nickname is "Gavin."

#### JOEY

As a child, Joey was "just a bad-ass," according to Danny, "beating people up and stuff."

"I feel bad about a lot of things," Joey admits, offering a blanket apology: "I'm sorry to everybody. I was just wild, you know, I've mellowed out." "He's calmed down," Danny allows, "but he still has a little bit of that."

With Joey's shaved head, square stature and piercing stare, one wouldn't want to take the risk of seeing the "little bit" of his "bad-ass" self that remains.

Then again, this is the guy who playfully suggests that, in an alternate reality, he'd like to be Charles Ingalls: That is, Pa, from *Little House on the Prairie*. So how bad-ass can he be?

#### SAMMY

"Sammy was always the pushy kid," Danny offers.

Sammy looks incredulous. "What does that have to do with anything?"

His cousin shrugs, as if to say that some things don't change over time. Sammy, the odd-man-out, taste-wise (he likes art-house movies and old-fashioned country music) is direct and distinctly unwilling to tolerate bullshit. He seems consumed by a passionate but grounded energy and drums incessantly, using whatever surface is available — be it his knees, a table-top, or a half-finished container of stir-fried rice. No wonder he seems to be the momentum behind the band: He's constantly providing a backbeat for their every experience.

A devotee of music and music history, Sammy will "pick a band, and I'll discover their whole history, the fine details of how they work. I just get inspired by bands who've been together for 25, 30 years."

He also enjoys, vicariously, "the whole rock star myth, the Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin thing. I'm fascinated by it, and I read about it, and I'm very provoked by it. But not to say that's how I want this band to be... They're great thinkers, and they change things, and they didn't care about rules, and that's great."

#### KEN

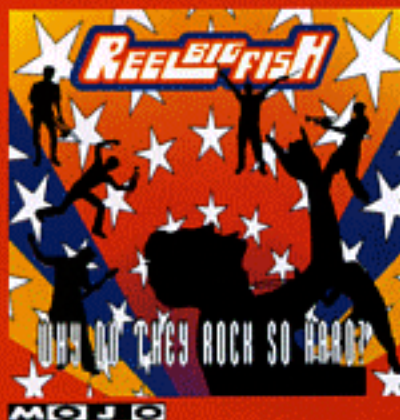
Five years after he replaced original bassist Peter Loewen, Ken Tizzard is still "The New Guy."

"I'll never have the history that these guys have together," he admits. "But as a foursome, we have our own history. And what we do together, and the music we create, is what keeps us alive." During Ken's audition for the band, he began playing a groove that he'd been working on with his old band — to no avail — for months. "By the end of the night," he recalls, "we'd written a song."

A lanky six-foot-four, the St. John's native has the ability to look the most menacing of all The Watchmen, a threat that seems almost ridiculous when he cracks one of his frequent, broad smiles.

"The first time we went to Newfoundland," Sammy recalls, "the headline in the St. John's paper — TV guide! — said, 'Ken Tizzard of Newfoundland makes his triumphant return home with The Watchmen!' His mom had it on the fridge, and we went to her place, and it was just inundated with phone calls, and all the family's there to see us... 'The young boy did good out of Newfoundland!'"

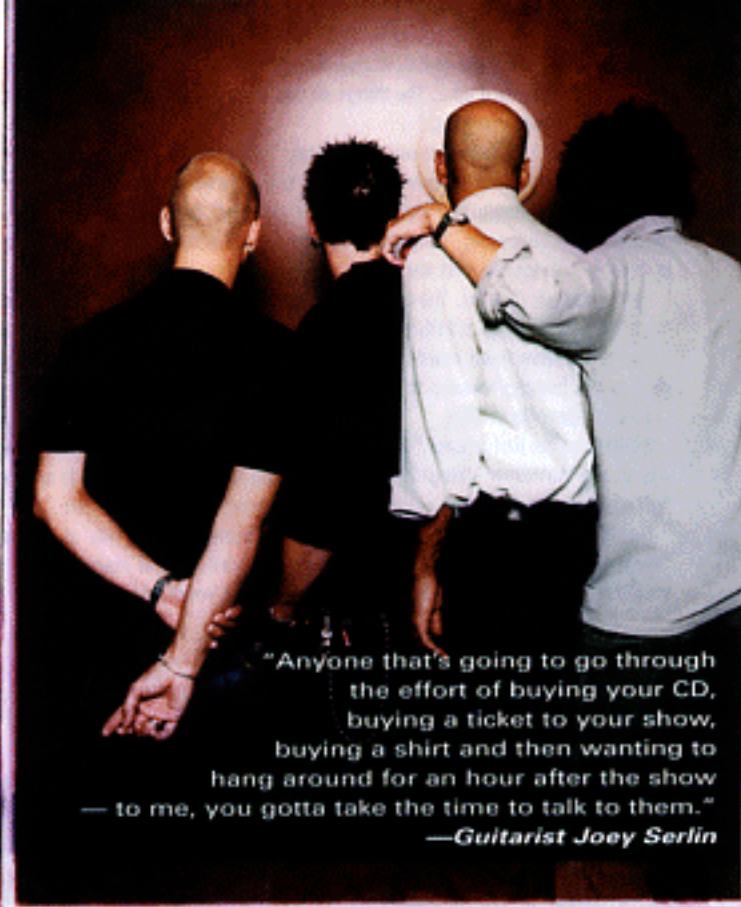
by Sarah Chauncey



## ON TOUR ACROSS CANADA

Nov. 9 Montreal - Le Spectrum  
 Nov. 11 Toronto - Opera House  
 Nov. 12 Kitchener - Metropolis  
 Nov. 13 London - Embassy  
 Nov. 16 Winnipeg  
 - West End Cultural Centre  
 Nov. 17 Saskatoon - Louis' Pub  
 Nov. 18 Edmonton - Rebar  
 Nov. 19 Calgary - MacEwan Hall  
 Nov. 22 Vancouver - Starfish Room

Includes the first single/video  
 "The Set Up (You Need This)"



"Anyone that's going to go through the effort of buying your CD, buying a ticket to your show, buying a shirt and then wanting to hang around for an hour after the show — to me, you gotta take the time to talk to them."  
 —Guitarist Joey Serlin

to the ultra-glam MuchMusic Video Awards, where — surrounded by shrieking fans and television cameras — they'll be presented with the award for New Technology. It's an evening fit for rock stars.

### NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The whole New Technology thing is truly Ken's baby. When he first joined the band, Ken admits, he "didn't even know what the World Wide Web was." He bought some books, "got really into it, and I explained to everybody what it was"; they agreed to put some money into the idea. "We got together some photos, I wrote all the text, and we had a website."

After a few incarnations of a relatively generic site, "I finally said to the guys, 'Look, I want to get everybody involved. I don't want it to just be another Watchmen website,'" he added. "I want it to be more." Using his background at the now-long-defunct Canadian rock mag *Impact* as inspiration, he developed WAG, a full online magazine overflowing with essays, articles and book reviews by the band.

While The Watchmen were working on *Silent Radar*, they approached Toronto-based Digital Renaissance to create a special website accessible only by those who have the CD. While a traditional CD-ROM only allows the viewer to see a static, finite amount of material, CD-Active allows the programmer to continually change the "private" site's contents.

Because all four Watchmen are eager to explore new areas of music, they have unusual ideas percolating about what fans might see in the future.

"Rock opera," Danny says with conviction. "The Watchmen should do a rock opera."

Joey, on the other hand, thinks "a concept album would be really cool. It hasn't been done in a long time, it would be a ballsy move to attempt it, and I think we could do it."

Maybe an album of Watchmen rarities, Sammy suggests. "We could probably fill at least a double-CD with stuff that we've recorded but haven't released." He adds that he wants people to discover the other dimensions of the band's music.

Whatever they decide, three things are certain: It'll be a group decision; their fans will be thrilled; and these anti-rock-stars will continue their climb to hard-earned success. **C**