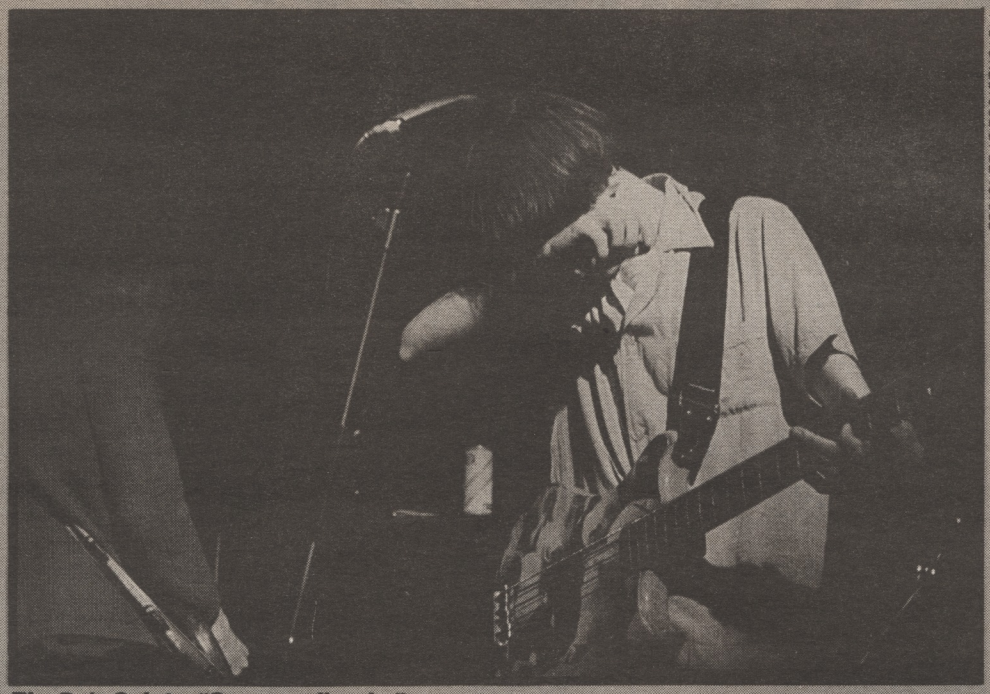
SAINTS AND SINNERS

FIREHOSE
THE PALE SAINTS
LONDON SUBTERRANIA



PICTURES: JULIET SENSICLE

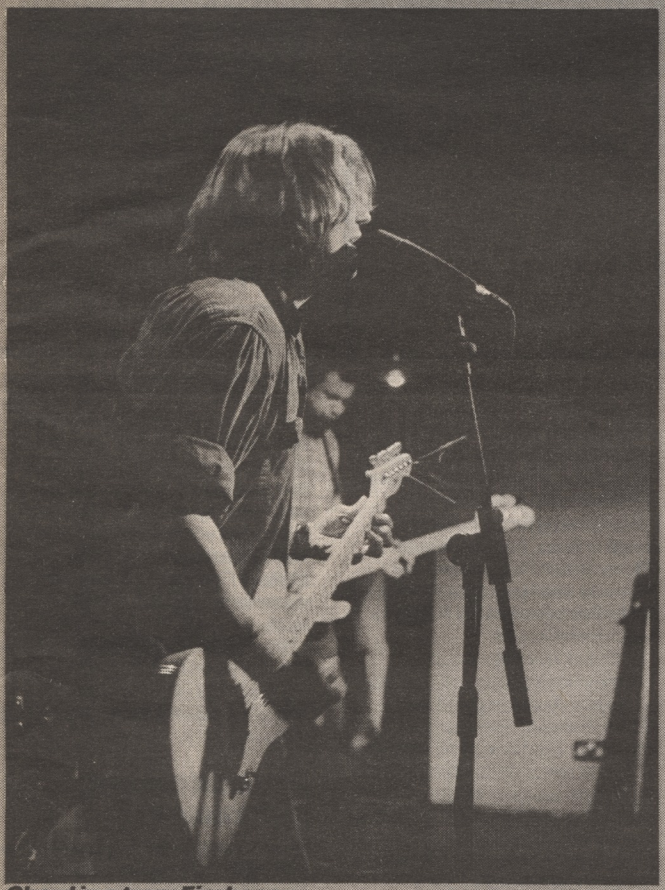
The Pale Saints: "Go away, I'm shy"

AFTER THE luxuriant, nervous tingle of The Pale Saints (of whom more in a minute) Firehose come on and play for about five years proving, half-expectedly, to be Dreary Old American Tosh.

Before the gig I'm assured I'll like them because they sound "like REM if they made an album in one day instead of taking a whole year". This rings true, except the bit about me liking them. I end up not liking them AT ALL. This is because Firehose are seriously, studiously dull.

If you ever wondered what happened to the Long Mac pretention that faded off Rock's mortal coil with the end of Joy Division, then wonder no longer. That bore-ish mentality is back, to revere the 'intensity' of this sort of American king's new clothes.

Judging by the spectacular press that preceded Firehose's arrival in the UK, including the welter of praise for their 'fromOhio' album, I'm assuming that various people – our own Mr Pouncey excepted – are just clutching at straws to find the Next Big (US) Thing, using their own ridiculous perspective to boost their argument, ie Firehose are American therefore they *are* good; they use jazz bass lines, therefore they are innovative. In fact almost anyone who tells you Firehose are good is talking 'credible' bollocks.



Chord in a trap: Firehose

They are little more than hours and hours of taut and tawdry fad-*graduate* rock; post punk judder guitar grunge splattered with free-form philosophy. For every priceless moment of invention there's another TWO YEARS of rampaging, vacuous chord progression (maaannn!).

Anyone who liked The Minutemen, some early Hüsker Dü and bits of American punk from '83/'84 will probably love them. Not me.

The only thing worse than Firehose tonight is a proportion of Firehose's audience. Apart from the Long Macs (honestly! there were Long Macs there) every fourth person Wanted To Be American. Young kids from Hammersmith, with fake drawls, sweat-shirts and a polished up image of a High School Student. WHY?

In contrast to these horrors The Pale Saints play a brave and beautiful set. A fortnight ago I chanced upon their 'She Rides The Waves' track on the German compilation 'Diamonds And Porcupines'. A few days after scribbling the review I find they've just signed to 4AD and have a single out imminently. Down the front for their first major London gig (previous to this they'd only played The Falcon), I find they're gripped by nerves but carried along by their own, spell-binding sense of New Pop.

The Saints (apparently they're from Leeds and they've only done 14 gigs) are very close to brilliance. Tonight the butterflies induced by the large crowd leave a tremor in the vocals and cause a titanic cock-up during 'Mother Might', which makes it horribly sticky.

But elsewhere they're unwittingly poignant and powerful. Pure gold *lust*. Starting with 'She Rides The Waves' (with its appropriate, Saintly "*let it rush all over me*" line) they make tremulous headway against an audience, forgiveably fired up to expect harder things.

The two guitarists thrash, strum and solo; the drummer wears a Madonna T-shirt and woolly gloves; and the singer, too scared to look up, stares at the frets of his bass (the rest of the poor instrument being covered in pictures of pigs! Building up to the PIG bass solo?).

Together they make a surging, crestfallen but crushing sound. The Mary Chain on surfboards. It's fierce then smooth and heated, then faint. You hate them for indulging in phased guitar and then immediately forgive them when they thrive with 'Sight Of You', the forthcoming 45, which glides excitedly into its smothering refrain.

They ARE the first welcome surprise for the autumn. A band with a chilling, innocent freshness . . . The Saints are coming.

Steve Lamacq