

Flexibility the key ingredient for Austin band

By STACEY ROBERTS
Reporter

Members of an Austin-based band, Flex, are sure they have the flexibility needed to make it to the top.

The three-member band performed at a local nightclub Oct. 24 and had much to say about music trends, music styles and their plans for success.

Flex's ability to adapt and change is one element the band insists makes their band different from all the others.

Lead guitarist Mark Ross says, "The supergroups survive so many years because of their knowledge of trends and how to adapt."

Drummer Dennis Bruhn agrees, stating their band has already changed since they started in July, although he says it hasn't been a conscious change.

"When America buys the Flex sound there will be no more worry about jumping on other peoples' band wagon," lead singer and bassist Jesse Sublett says. "Although others can certainly jump on and dance on our band wagon."

"Besides, we've got to make it. We're one of the best looking bands around."

Ross says, "Change is an inevitable process for every band, and to be successful at music, a band must be flexible."

Although Flex has only been together since July, many people may know the members from their previous involvements in other regional bands.

Sublett, an Austin native, was once a member of the Skunks. The Skunks performed in College Station several times, packing the Grove with dancing-room-only crowds. The Skunks released more than a half dozen albums and singles during the band's six years and toured all across the country.

After leaving the Skunks, Sublett performed with the Secret Six, which were signed to Electra Records. The group was featured on Electra's 1984 compilation album, *Ten from Texas*.

Ross and Bruhn were members of the Austin band, *Da Da Curve*, which enjoyed large cult followings in Austin, Houston and Dallas.

The two bands had often appeared together in concert and Sublett, Bruhn and Ross were friends. When the two bands dissolved at almost the same time, the three got together and formed Flex.



Austin band Flex members (from left): lead guitarist Mark Ross, lead singer and bassist Jesse Sublett and drummer Dennis Bruhn.

Flex began its nightclub appearances in July, after only three weeks of rehearsals.

"The band knew eight or nine songs for our first gigs," Sublett says. The band now has compiled enough songs to play three 40-minute sets of original songs.

"Our songs are all originals of good dance pop," Sublett says. "It's between dance music and pop, but it's not quite rock 'n' roll."

The band members say there has been a growing trend in Austin toward bands which have a country-rock sound, which is a raw, under-produced style. *Rolling Stone* magazine dedicated an issue to this new music style and so did MTV's *The Cutting Edge*.

Flex is trying to break out of this stereotyped Austin image.

"We are all professionals with experience, not a garage band," says Ross, who has been playing guitar since he was 16.

"Right now, it's cool to not know how to play your instruments," he adds. "I hesitate to admit we have experience, know how to play our equipment and understand musical theory."

Sublett calls the Austin style "new sincerity," a term that has been picked up by Austin critics and *Rolling Stone*. Sublett says the ideology is that although a band can barely play their instruments, they really put their heart into the music to make a solid statement.

"We really put our heart into our music also, but we know how to play music, too," he adds.

Sublett says the band is breaking out of the Austin mold and has a more polished sound than most other area bands.

"We're just doing our own thing, where most other bands are doing what Austin is clicking to," Bruhn says. "We don't want to sell Austin, we want to sell America."

"It's kind of scary that everyone outside of Austin thinks all Austin bands have that 'strum rock' sound."

Flex played College Station for the first time two weeks ago at mc². They played to a medium-sized crowd and received a favorable response from the audience.

Most of the crowd stayed on the dance floor during the three sets and many of the women whispered and wondered about the three handsome members.

Their stage show is simple and unassuming yet conveys a sense of familiarity with the crowd that invites the audience to listen to the words.

Club manager and disc jockey Deanna Mullenix says she was happy with the band's performance and would love to have the band back for another show.

Flex opened Friday in Austin for the British new wave group *Gene Loves Jezebel* but not to as favorable a reception. The problem was not with the band's performance but with the concert hall — an open-air night club on a cold, rainy night.

Club management had expected a large crowd for the two groups, but did not make the last minute arrangements to move the show to an indoor building.

Since the band was separated from the audience by the open-roofed dance floor, there was neither the dancing nor the obvious ogles seen in College Station.

The band enjoys playing Austin and the surrounding towns, but is most excited about getting out on the road to promote the release of their first album.

Between live performances, Flex has been in the recording studio working on a four-cut mini-album to be released in December.

The record is being pressed by a new Austin label, *Future Records*. Included on the release will be "It's Not Breaking My Heart," "The Big Kiss," "All I Want" and "That Was Tomorrow." The songs all have romantic overtones yet are set to a hard-driving dance beat.

Their heavy new wave style that's spiced with a soul sound is explained as each member divulges his musical influences.

Sublett says his favorites include such soulful greats as Al Green, Billie Holliday and Wilson Pickett.

Bruhn's and Ross's tastes are similar, but more progressive than Sublett. *XTC*, the *Police*, and *Echo and the Bunnymen* are among their musical influences.

In their spare time, the band members still work with their favorite passions. Ross repairs guitars, while Bruhn works part time in a drum shop.

The only deviation is Sublett's pastime of writing novels. Sublett has written two new wave detective novels set in Austin.

The first two novels, "Capitol Crimes" and "The Rock Critic Murders", are completed and waiting for a publisher.

For a sneak preview of Sublett's writing ability, the *Austin Chronicle* is publishing one of his short stories in December.

"Writing a detective novel is like writing music," Sublett says, "it's all speculative."

Although the three members work outside of their stage performances, the band is working hard to make Flex a success and believe they have their immediate goals in range.

"My goal is to make music and be able to survive by traveling with the band," Ross says. "I want to concentrate on music, not on odd jobs. Of course, if we make it big, that will be okay, too."

Sublett claims that making music is all he knows how to do and just wants to keep playing music and writing detective novels. □