

## The Arts

Snakes, had left Minneapolis at 3:45 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon (with me and two other "friends of the band" in tow) and landed at Schiphol Airport outside Amsterdam at 6:30 a.m. on Wednesday. The Snakes played the first gig of their tour that same night, a live show for about 100 fans, and we got to bed just before 3 a.m. I soon learned that was an average night. For the next five days, bedtime would never be before 3.

It's a life that quickly makes you ragged, and Alan was leading it in double time, both as captain of the van and frontman of the Black-Eyed Snakes, a loud, rough, punk-blues band from Duluth that includes guitarist Bob Olson, drummer Brad Nelson, and percussionist Justin Sparhawk (Alan's brother).

But this trip was just a three-gig mini-tour that had been wedged into a break in the touring schedule of Alan's better-known band, Low—a trio that includes Zak Sally of Minneapolis and Sparhawk's wife, Mimi Parker. Low became an indie (as in independent from major record companies) rock institution in the early 1990s, with a uniquely slow, quiet, emotionally tense sound, a sort of violent reserve that gradually became louder and less reserved.

Low's most recent record, *The Great Destroyer*, was released in late January to greater acclaim than any of the band's previous six albums. It spent a few weeks at No. 1 on modern rock and college music charts and maintained high ranking in early May, when Alan and Mimi chatted about it on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross.

By the time Alan, now 37, convened the Snakes for this European mini-tour, he'd driven himself and his band mates through more than a decade of masochistic late-night to early-morning hours, and Low had been on tour almost every day since February. While touring is a constant cycle of logistical finagling and stress (and, for a band with the fan base of the Black-Eyed Snakes, a financial break-even at best), it's also a chance to gain exposure to a wider audience. The Snakes were drawing more attention through Alan's success with Low—many Low fans were curious to see Alan perform with such an outwardly expressive group. So when a venue in Tongeren, Belgium, offered the Snakes a chance

to perform, the group booked shows in London and Amsterdam and arranged a mini-tour. After the Snakes went home, Zak and Mimi planned to join Alan so Low could continue to tour in Europe. The two bands were scheduled to maintain a frenetic touring pace until at least late summer.

Alan felt he'd been exhausted forever. "I honestly wanted to cry on the plane ride over here," he said in a rare relaxed moment a few days after the Snakes' Schiphol landing—his fourth overseas trip this year. "I just wanted to be home."

He needed to rest, and eventually he would. But nothing about the Snakes' five-day tour would be peaceful. It was a sleep-deprived drone of smoky rock-and-roll clamor, blurred highway scenery, stoned bemusement, and the perpetual rush of air forcing itself through a crack in the van, whose sliding door just wouldn't stay shut.

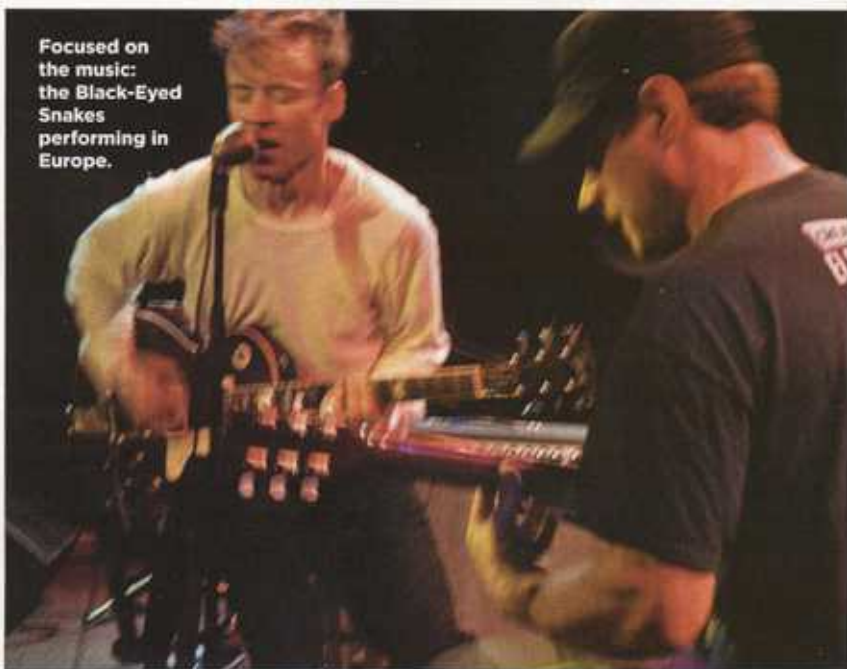
**ALAN SPARHAWK** exudes both social ease and chronic anxiety. He's an insecure geek who is, by far, the coolest kid in the room. He is generous with his time and professional influence, a father figure to many musicians in the Duluth area. He demands control and courts success, yet he resents their obligations. He leads his bands with exacting authority, and he can be harshly

impatient—especially with himself.

Since we'd landed in Amsterdam, he'd been coughing and sniffing. But he insisted on driving while the rest of us read or dozed, and he took responsibility for every logistical and musical decision: finding hotels and paying for the rooms, locating venues and dealing with managers, and occasionally disappearing to conduct long phone conversations about Low logistics and other mysterious rock star stuff.

When we traveled through the Channel over to England, a prim British customs agent dressed down the band for not having the required work permits, which hadn't arrived before everyone left Duluth (yes, the applications probably should have been submitted in a more timely manner, but the process also had been delayed by an Internet glitch that was out of the band's control). The agent was especially harsh with Alan, since records showed that he'd entered England many times as a professional musician—often enough for him to know better. But he negotiated with her and won the band's right to play on. So we slogged through gray rain and traffic in time for the late afternoon sound check at the site of the next gig, a gritty London club called the Spitz. While the rest of us left to eat dinner around 6 p.m., Alan stayed behind to nap.

We returned to the Spitz about two hours later, after DJs had begun to spin



Focused on the music: the Black-Eyed Snakes performing in Europe.