

The Maniacs' 'Wishing Chair'

By DAN KANE

When the new wave gets old you make the old wave new.

Jamestown's 10,000 Maniacs are the latest and most traditional incarnation of the current return-to-roots rock movement spearheaded by the Athens, Ga.-based R.E.M.

Instead of programming most of the music through synthesizers (if you want to know what that sounds like, just turn on the radio to any pop station), these bands rely on the basics — lots of acoustic guitars plus simple bass and drum arrangements, with forgotten instruments such as accordions and mandolins filling in some of the spaces.

If it all comes together, you've got some pleasant, evocative music that your parents could listen to. On the other hand, you could be bored to death if one major component of rock 'n roll — tension — is left behind.

"The Wishing Chair", the Maniacs' first major label outing, makes a fair stab at bringing out the traditional folkiness of the music without sacrificing the rock 'n roll, but for me it still falls short.

I think the problem lies with the band's lead singer/lyricist, Natalie Merchant. She has written some powerful lyrics for this album, but unfortunately, she doesn't know how to sing them.

For a record which contains such emotional subjects as nuclear holocaust ("Grey Victory"), the workingman's plight ("Maddox Table"), and war ("My Mother The War") — not to mention the feeling one gets when visiting a cemetery ("Lily Dale") — you would think Ms. Merchant would, well, show some emotion. Instead, we get these aristocratic, detached vocals that don't even begin to convey the depth of these songs.

I suggest for the next album, Ms. Merchant get a little angry, or sad, or happy or whatever. You can put together all the wistfully haunting melodies you want, but they'll go nowhere without a warm emotional center.