

*It's Saturday night in North London and the Salisbury Hotel – a fabulous Victorian gin palace on Green Lanes, Harringay – is filling up. A band called Elephant Shelf will be performing in the back lounge – and just as it's no ordinary pub, this is no common-or-garden pub band. 'The Shelf' are in a class of their own – one which defies definition – and they're getting a name around London and the South East as the best R'n'B band who haven't got a recording deal.*

I've seen them before – quite a few times, in fact – so I know what to expect, but the uninitiated are about to witness a band as unconventional as their name. The line-up can vary from three players to seven (or more with guests), but the key founder member is Miss Vicky Martin, and I introduce myself as the one who'd emailed about writing a feature. While the road manager sorts out the sound set-up, the band's signature décor is laid out on the front speaker – some rather fabulous stilettos in white and cerise, a few feather boas and, curiously, some Scooby-style soft toys, are laid out, and a shop-window torso in a tight, bejewelled red sleeveless top, appears on a side speaker.

Vicky introduces me to another core member of the band, 'Princess' Diana Stone, then we talk briefly and fix a date to meet – but the show is about to begin. Vicky welcomes the audience to the sound of the old BBC radio classic, 'Worker's Playtime', followed by some 'teen-angel' style 50s songs which transport me back to 'Happy Days' and Arnold's burger bar – but this is all a feint – Elephant Shelf are about R'n'B, raunchy, gutsy and delivered with unique style.

## Getting started

They kick off with some familiar classics – Dylan's 'All Along the Watchtower', featuring 'Princess' Di on keyboards and, spectacularly, violin. On to 'Route 66', and Jessie Pie makes her appearance. At first sight, Jessie bears more than a passing resemblance to the elfin, enigmatic Charlotte Rampling in her 'Night Porter' role – until she starts to sing. She has an amazing voice – powerful, clear, with extraordinary range, soaring between a rich sexy growl and clear, jazzy upper reaches – but for her first number she warms up the vocal cords on some harmonies with Martin, the band's road manager. Seems like everyone can get a look in if they've got the talent.

Once Jessie is warmed up, the band moves on to some of their own compositions.

New initiates get the impression that they already know the songs – they sound somehow familiar – but that's because they are in a classic, R'n'B style. The Shelf stamp their character on every number with their own brand of raunchy swing. They rip into 'Snake Bite', 'Wicked World', 'Bed of Nails' (are you getting the flavour?), and some glorious trad numbers such as 'Highway Blues' and 'Walking Blues'. Jessie cranks it up, writhing, gyrating and swinging her mane of thick brown hair in wild circles. The men in the audience are transfixed, spellbound – and so are the women. The band seem to be loving every minute too. Throughout the evening each member gets in the spotlight – but there are no egos evident. They really are 'together', both musically and personally. I look forward immensely to talking to Vicky and finding out more.

## Behind the scenes

At the designated time I arrive at Vicky's flat and am introduced to drummer Terry McInerny, then ushered into the

front room – which is full of guitars, a drum kit, amps, speakers and recording equipment. This is where Elephant Shelf produce their studio-quality recordings and, on their own mini production line, run off their cds. (Did I mention that, for some insane reason, they don't have a recording deal...?)

The band in its current form is around three and a half years old. In a previous incarnation a crisis hit the band and a number of members left, so Vicky advertised for players, and Elephant Shelf was born. Why 'Elephant Shelf'? It stemmed from a misheard conversation – Vicky overheard two people discussing a Gershwin song: 'I only know the Elephant Shelf version', one said. So Ella Fitzgerald became Elephant Shelf and so did the new



*'Really great show, fantastic singing and hugely sophisticated musicians. People were up and dancing before the evening was over.'*

