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Husker Du shifts smoothly into high gear

HUSKER DU - At the Orpheum with Christmas and the Feelies, last night.

By Brett Milano
Special to the Globe

Husker Du has had plenty of chances to sell out. Originally a part of the early '80s hardcore-punk school, they were always at the head of the class: They were among the first to slow down the tempo, to write pop melodies, to dabble in jazz and psychedelia. This year they have a double album on a major label, a commercial-radio hit ("Could You Be the One") and a tour that brings them to larger theaters. But score one for the good guys: They've made the jump with credibility intact.

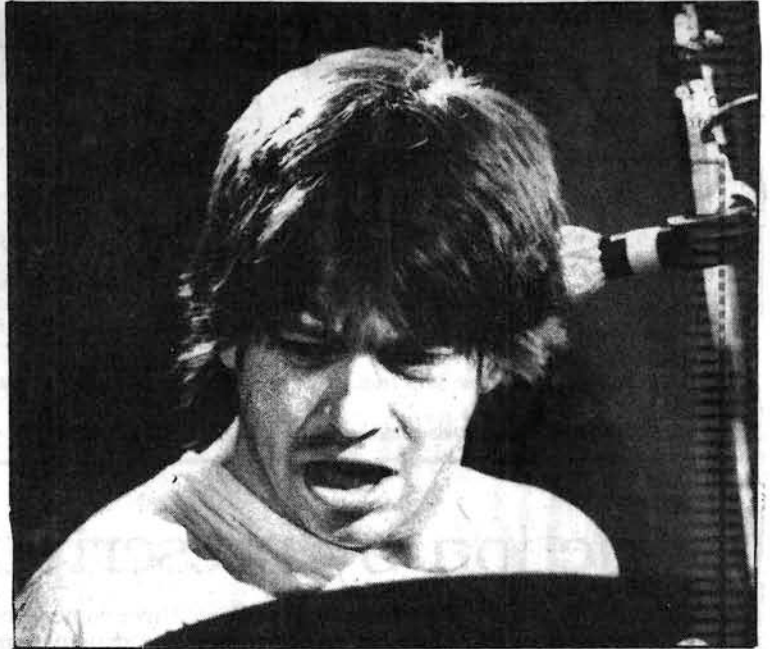
On the surface, the Minneapolis trio has gotten more accessible. The new album "Warehouse: Songs & Stories" is heavy on melodic, mid-tempo songs, without the outright thrash of earlier LPs (or the outright angst of last year's "Candy Apple Grey"). But they're out to prove that a good radio song can cut just as deep as a punk rave-up, and they're succeeding. Last night's show had its painful outbursts and its cooling optimism; there was aggression and warmth. And now that they do less ranting and raving, the emotions come through more strongly.

In a gutsy move, the band played almost nothing but the new album, doing all four sides in

sequence (with only three older songs, and an encore of the Beatles' "Helter Skelter"). Fortunately, the new material had enough color to carry the set. Guitarist Bob Mould and drummer Grant Hart alternated songs and lead vocals, with Hart's pop instincts balancing Mould's more challenging songs. Bassist Greg Norton, usually the quiet one, took a surprise vocal on "Everytime" (a recent B-side), which came the closest to the old three-chord sound.

The show was delayed a month due to the death of their manager, Concord native David Savoy. Appropriately, even the happiest songs had a bittersweet tone last night. "These Important Years" made a probing opener (its message, roughly, is, "If these are the best years of my life, why aren't I having any fun?"). Lighter moods came later, with Mould's reassuring "Turn It Around" and Hart's rockabilly "Actual Condition." But the slower, melodic songs stood out the most - notably Mould's "Up in the Air," with a Byrdsy, folkish sound.

Mould has always been an impressive guitarist, but he's less inclined to show off nowadays: His solos were quick releases of tension. They're obviously most excited about the new songs, but more older material would have been a nice touch: The excellent "Candy Apple Grey" went untouched, as did with 1984's acclaimed "New Day Rising" album. One of the few old songs, Hart's "Flexible Flyer," was rearranged



Grant Hart, the Husker Du drummer.

Globe photo/David Blinder

from a country jangle to a slow, moody ballad; and they might have tried giving more old songs a similar rethink. But at the moment, it seems, Husker Du are too busy growing.

New Jersey's Feelies tend to play great opening sets: Last fall they gave R.E.M. a run for their money at the Wang Center. Last night they were even sharper, building tension and shifting textures with double-guitar leads and double-drum backup. As did

Husker Du, they played one of the Beatles' darkest songs: In their case it was "She Said, She Said," and they keyed in on the nervous lyric and the moody guitar line.

Christmas is one of Boston's more adventurous bands, but sometimes they do too much adventuring. Their recent album, "In Excelsior Dayglow," is half clever, skewed pop songs, and half artsy abrasion. Live as on record, they sound best when they let their pop instincts come through.