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Paul Sanchez, Steve Walters, Fred LeBlanc and John Thomas

Griffith are Cowboy Mouth. Cowboy Mouth back in town

BEN PILLOW Asst. Features Editor

Rockafellas' regular Cowboy Mouth will make its first appearance at Elbow Room tonight at 12:30, as the New Orleans quartet promotes their January release, "It Means Escape."

Made up of Fred LeBlanc on drums, Paul Sanchez on guitar, John Thomas Griffith on guitar and Steve Walters on bass, the band features the unique quality of three vocalists and songwriters. LeBlanc, Sanchez and Griffith all sing and write their own songs, with LeBlanc serving as front man most of the

"We have four distinct characters within the band and all think, act and look at life differently," Griffith said.

This conglomeration of ideas and styles makes Cowboy Mouth difficult to categorize, Griffith said.

Cowboy Mouth came out with their first album, "Word of Mouth,"

in 1993 and in 1994 with a live record, "Mouthing Off."

"We wanted to capture more of the feel of our live performances: explosive, emotional but still concentrating on the main part of any record, which is great songs," LeBlanc

The album was recorded in New Orleans at Daniel Lanois' studio, who is also U2's producer. The project took only two weeks to complete, a good thing considering the band tours about 300 days a year. The band will tour this summer

with Columbia's Hootie and The Blowfish. The band played with Hootie two months ago in Charleston at the Kingship Auditorium.

Griffith describes the band's live performances as intense and energetic, reminiscent of "early punk rock days."

And the end product, Griffith says,

TALES OF A DANCING QUEEN

Offbeat Aussies breathe life into Miramax's 'Muriel's Wedding'

LIGHTSCAMERAREACTION

STEPHEN BROWN Staff Writer MURIEL'S WEDDING *** (out of four stars)

Perhaps the music group ABBA said it best in the '70s with their loopy ode to basking in life's limelight: "You can dance/You can jive/Having the time of your life. Oh, see that girl/Watch that scene/Digging the Dancing Queen." If life could be as good as a bouncy pop song, surely we could find happiness.

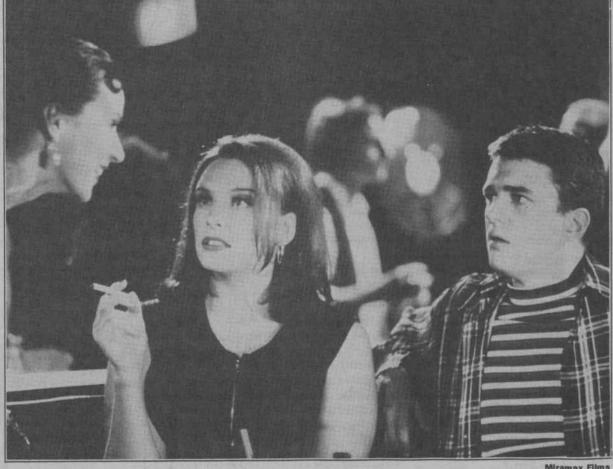
That's the premise of "Muriel's Wedding," a delightful Australian comedy about fulfilling your dreams, highlighted by splendid performances and a catchy pop hook of flamboyant situations and unpredictable events.

Muriel Heslop, played by Toni Collette, is a poor, plump, plain-looking loser from a town called Porpoise Spit. She has bad complexion, crooked teeth and an uncanny knack for compulsively lying. She has a secretarial degree, but she can't type and has not held a job in two years. She lives with her lazy couch potato family and is dubbed by her father as "the most useless" one of all. Her bedroom is a shrine to ABBA, and she dreams of one day being the "Dancing Queen" that the lyrics so gloriously extol.

The film begins at a wedding as women fiercely battle to catch the bride's bouquet. When Muriel, clad in leopard skin gear, grasps the flowers in her hands, the other women suggest that she throw them back in the air because nobody would marry her. Eventually police cart Muriel off from the wedding because a store detective recognizes the stolen goods she is wearing. Her dad bribes the police with cases of beer so they won't arrest his daughter for shoplifting, reinforcing again her complete lack of control over her

Muriel's friends are three vicious vixens, party girls with attitudes that make the "Heathers" look like archangels. When they tell Muriel they want nothing more to do with her and criticize her for being fat, wearing uncool clothes and listening to disco music, they cut straight at her heart. They embark on a vacation without Muriel, telling her they have a reputation to

Equipped with a blank check from



Rachel Griffith, Toni Collette and Matt Day star in 'Muriel's Wedding.'

her father and a grudge to bear, Muriel follows the women on their holiday and meets up with an old friend, the free spirit Rhonda (Rachel Griffiths). The two become friends quickly, get revenge on their oppressors, engage in a spirited lip synch rendition of AB-BA's "Waterloo" and move to Sydney for one fling after another.

The plot takes twists and turns involving Muriel's rocky relationship with Rhonda, a marriage of convenience and the search for happiness amidst life's turmoils.

Written and directed by newcomer P.J. Hogan, "Muriel's Wedding" resembles the films of John Waters, who created underground smashes featuring bizarre characters and won recent acclaim for films such as "Hairspray." Accordingly, Muriel is a divine character who is easy to relate to because she is completely non-threatening. As played by Collette, she is provided with a soaring spirit and an evolving conscience. Her longing looks and larger-than-life smiles are priceless, and her character is unforget-

The triumphant sounds of "Dancing Queen" are a giddy motif, and transitions between extended vignettes are accented by confetti and a plummeting bouquet that falls toward the audience. The film is part character study, part comedy. But overall, it is a celebration of life, of its defeats and its victories and the struggle in between.

As Muriel learns to stand by her friend through thick and thin, she abandons superficial notions of pop love and happiness to pursue a lasting relationship of trust and sacrifice.

Some comedic highlights include

Muriel's flirtation with an Olympic swimmer and her jaunt through town to get her picture taken in every wedding gown imaginable.

As Muriel realizes her personal rite of passage, she learns a lust for life and achieves personal satisfaction.

In the tradition of "Strictly Ballroom," "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" and "Four Weddings and a Funeral," Hogan's comedy deftly balances hope and heartache. Although some of the subplots cause the overall film to be uneven at times, the end result is fun

"Muriel's Wedding" is a campy comedy that introduces audiences to strange new characters and a colorful new world of fascinating encounters. The fun lingers on long after the film, which is sure to have a spectacular reception.



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