

PANORAMA

IT'S A GRAND OLD TOAD

By **ROBIN KAVANAGH**
CORRESPONDENT

In the beginning of the 1990s, there was a surge of "new" music (call it alternative, call it grunge) and it was good, even if the underground had loved it long before mainstream radio did. Among the darlings were Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, and — Toad the Wet Sprocket?

You know their songs, even if their name isn't so familiar. They made a splash in the alternative rock scene in the early '90s with hits such as "All I Want," "Walk on the Ocean" and "Come Down." Turn the radio dial to WPLJ, and you can still hear some hits from their gold and platinum albums played more than 10 years later.

When word that the band was reuniting for the first time in five years blew through the air, Web sites dedicated for the sole purpose of keeping the memory of Toad the Wet Sprocket alive and well went wild, and the 20- and 30-somethings whose adolescences were marked by Toad's soft-spoken yet rock-based sound helped to create sold out shows around the country. It was as if the band had never broken up.

"The shows have been great, the audiences have been wonderful," said lead singer Glen Phillips of the club shows the band has played over the past few months. "It's been pretty astounding."

Phillips said that returning Toad fans would not be disappointed, mixing up old favorites with a few songs from the members' solo projects.

"It's like a grand-old-toad show. I'll maybe do one solo acoustic song, the rest of it's pretty close to the album. It's 20-something songs so it becomes a reasonable slice."

The folksy, rocky (maybe even a little country) band from California broke out of the underground in 1991 with their album, "Fear," which went platinum, even though the group never strayed from their main view of what music should be: lyrics and melody before popularity.



Toad the Wet Sprocket plays an all-ages show at the Birch Hill in Old Bridge tonight.

"We're probably a third-generation American bar band," Phillips said of the group's sound. "The really formative music when we were getting together, it was stuff like The Replacements, Husker Du, Dinosaur Junior, Elvis Costello, Whoop the Boy, REM. Punk had happened and kind of gone down. People were calling this punk, post-punk or garage, whatever it was. I remember it being called post-modern for a second, college rock. Whatever it was, it was this very song-based, lyric based music that was defying a lot of description and it wasn't being played on the radio yet, but this was the kind of music that made us want to play music."

Toad the Wet Sprocket enjoyed a short ride in the limelight with Top 40 hits from their follow-up albums, "Dulcinea" and "In Light Syrup." But as time ticked away during their proverbial 15-minutes of fame, band members found that their musical ideals and passion for their sound had begun to wane. Solo projects looked like a good idea, and it took five years before they would dare try it again.

"It seemed like it was feasible

again," Phillips said of the reunion. "We had, as break-ups go, we were able to break up before things got really, really, really bad, and while things were just about to get really bad. We knew exactly where it was heading. Enough time passed that everyone had an understanding of what was good and what was bad, and everybody had more gratitude and were able to get together and I think the expectations had dissipated and allowed it to be what it was without all this crazy pressure all around it. It just felt possible for the first time. It seemed like it might be a positive thing instead of a drag."

Toad will be playing the Birch Hill in Old Bridge tonight joined by Bleu and Wheat, bands that Phillips said are "very grounded in melody," much like Toad.

"Bleu is kind of in the Jellyfish world of, I don't know what you would call it, extreme pop? It's just all those gargantuan bands the 70s rolled up into something that's larger than life and a lot of fun. And Wheat is much more in kind of a Granddaddy Built to Spill or Flaming Lips world, more, you know cer-

tainly on the pop side of that but really inventive, great songs."

So what does the future hold for this genre-defying, lyric and melody-driven group that is only playing a limited number of dates around the country? Phillips said no one knows for sure. He said there are no plans to write new music, or release a new album, but that the band would just take the future, one step at a time.

"We're not going to be rushing into anything that's not going to be great — the music actually has to have some passion behind it or it's not going to be worth anyone's time."

TOAD THE WET SPROCKET

With Wheat and Bleu
• 7 p.m. today, March 4
• Birch Hill Nite Club
• Route 9 South, Old Bridge
\$20

ABERDEEN

CLEARVIEW'S STRATHMORE
4, 1055 Route 34, (732) 583-7160 — Adaptation Chicago (PG-13) 5, 7:30. Lose a Guy in 10 Days 5:20, 7:40. The Jungle Book 5, 7. Rabbit-Proof Fence 5:10, 7:30.

ATLANTIC HIGHLANDS

ATLANTIC CINEMA 5, 82 E. (732) 291-0148 — Chicago (PG-13) 7:15. Daredevil (PG) Hours (PG-13) 7:30. How a Guy in 10 Days (PG) The Life of David Gale

BRADLEY BEACH

BEACH CINEMA, 110 Main (732) 774-9089 — The the Rings: The Two Towers (PG-13) 7:05.

BRICK

LOEWS BRICK PLAZA 10, Plaza, (732) 777-FILM Chicago (PG-13) 12:45, 2:10, 4:30, 6:50, 9:30. Dark Blue (R) 2:15, 5, 7:45, 10:20. Gods and Generals (PG-13) 11:30, 4, 8 to Lose a Guy in 10 Days 1:30, 4:15, 7, 10. The Book 2 (G) 1, 3:10, 5:15, The Life of David Gale 6:15, 9. Old School (R) 4:45, 7:20, 9:45. The Rec 13) 12:15, 2:45, 5:30, 8, 10. Shanghai Knights (PG) 4:30, 7:30, 10:10.

EAST BRUNSWICK

MEGA MOVIES AT BRUNSWICK SQUARE, 755 Route 1B 651-6342 — Chicago (PG) 12:10, 2:30, 5, 7:25, 9:50. The Grave (R) 1:05, 3:30. Daredevil (PG-13) 12:20, 3:30, 4:55, 5:00, 7:15, 8, 9: Blue (R) 12:25, 3:05, 7:00. Final Destination 2 (R) Gods and Generals (PG) 7:10, 8:30. The Hours (R) 11:45, 2:05, 4:30, 6:55, 9:20. Lose a Guy in 10 Days 12:05, 2:35, 5:05, 7:30, 9:50. Jungle Book 2 (G) 11:30, 1:30, 2:10, 3:15, 4, 5:10, 5: garoo Jack (PG) 12:35. of David Gale (R) 12:40, 9:55. Old School (R) 12: