MUSIC

Thompson doesn't play in mainstream

RICHARD FROM 22

Rather than basing his brand of rock music on the American soul, Thompson has squarely rooted his in English and Celtic traditions.

"It's not instantly radio accessible or something people already know," said Thompson, who appeared Thursday at Wilbert's Bar & Grill. He noted that Celtic music and its offshoots aren't exactly mainstream in America.

"I wouldn't call it obscure, but it's something that's a minority form of music," he said. "It's something that isn't really the main diet and so you expect a smaller but more specialized audience.

While he obviously wouldn't mind being better known, Thompson is pleased with the enthusiastic and loyal audience he's built up over the years.

The audiences are great. They're educated in a sense that they expect more from them with new material and new ideas all the time. It's an audience that never ceases to surprise with the respect they have for him.

The expressive guitarist and moody vocalist began his career with the groundbreaking British folk-rock group Fairport Convention in 1968. With them, he recorded such acclaimed albums as "Unhalfbricking" and "Liege & Lief.

He began a nearly decade-long collaboration with his wife, Linda, in 1974, which included 1982's "Classic Linda" album. In 1983's "Across a Crowded Room" and 1991's "Rumor and Sigh." His most recent release is this year's "You're Only," an ambitious two-CD concept.

Would an established 48-year-old artist decide to put out a double CD at this point in his career?

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MUSIC

Remember, Rusted Root (Mercyful: Forget all those comparisons to the Grateful Dead. Pittsburgh's Rusted Root may be one of those wannabe hippie H.O.R.D.E. bands. But this follow-up to 1994's "Best of the West" is not as strange a trip as it seems. It's more like Jethro Tull without the flute — overwrought, jazz- and worldbeat-influenced folk rock made worse by the goofy, "I'm-having-a-seizure" vocals of lead singer Michael Glabicki. Grade D.

Recovering the Satellites (DGC): A little louder and angrier than their 1993 debut "August and Everything After," but the Van Morrison-meets-Buffalo Springfield folk-rock tunes aren't nearly as memorable or catchy this time around. Welcome to the dreaded "sophomore slump." Grade C.

Best of Van Halen Volume 1 (Warner Bros.): David Lee Roth gets his chance to reclaim his Van Halen throne and then throws it all away by embarrassing himself and his bandmates on this year's MTV Video Music Awards. Smooth move. But at his best, Roth is without question a more effective Van Halen frontman than the recently departed Sammy Hagar, giving the band a darker, hard-rock edge.

The Doors Greatest Hits (Elektra): Ten of the Doors biggest '60s hits, available for the first time in the United States on a single CD. As a bonus, you get a never-before-released version of "The End," taken from the soundtrack of "Apocalypse Now," plus "Ghost Song," a Jim Morrison spoken-word piece set to new music recorded by band members Ray Manzarek, Robby Krieger and John Densmore. Fans with multimedia computers can also tap into a video for "Ghost Song" and other interactive features. Grade A.

"The Way I Should," Iris DeMent (Warner Bros.): The thing that made Iris DeMent's first album, "Tamworth," so compelling was its unadorned Ozark honesty and beauty. But this recording comes off sounding a little too slick and calculated, with DeMent fronting a band of professional session players (keyboardist Chuck Lowell, pedal-steel player Paul Franklin, etc.) and singing heavy-handed political songs about child abuse ("Letter to Mom"), materialism ("Quality Time") and American greed ("Wasteland of the Free"). Grade B.

Michael Norman

SOUND BITES