

The cellos were homemade

In a way I hate to write about Central Maine Power, because the group has a very casual nonprofessional way of making music, and too much publicity could spoil the very thing that makes it so refreshing. But the hour or two I spent listening to them at the Kitchen on May 16 was so enjoyable and so full of good vibes that I feel obliged to report on it anyway.

The group, which is made up of artists from Central Maine, was on the road primarily to sell paintings and jewelry and so forth, but was giving a few concerts along the way to help pay the bills. The members are obviously very close friends and the group has the tone of a commune, although they do not live together.

They make most of their own instruments, the most remarkable of which are their two "steel cellos." These are large sheets of metal with strings attached, and are played with bows. There is another large sheet of steel with rods attached which may be either bowed or struck, and a similar instrument which uses a half-barrel as its sounding case. They have a couple of crude horns, sticks with jingly things attached, a little electronic equipment, a couple of drums, and suspended objects to hit: pipes, cymbals, and a circular saw blade. A beautiful handmade dulcimer and an African xylophone complete the ensemble, which makes an attractive stage set as well as an interesting orchestra.

This program, which they call "The First Day of Heaven," begins very casually with tuning-up sounds, occasional horn notes, and isolated bowing sounds. Gradually the music becomes more interesting and the audience quiets down. After a while one musician begins playing the dulcimer and singing in a very soulful, untrained voice. The text is the 23rd Psalm, and the vocal line is a kind of chant using only a few notes. Some soft steel cellos and electronic effects are in the background, and the music has a captivating primeval beauty.

Another section features very loud playing on the steel cellos, combined with relatively crude but effective electronic sounds.

At one point a beautiful rhythmic section is dominated by the African xylophone and the dulcimer. One of the players was so tickled by this that she had to stop altogether to comment that it sounded Balinese. Of course, in a professional concert you aren't supposed to break character that way, but with Central Maine Power it doesn't matter. Their music has nothing to do with slickness or professionalism. It is about people making music together, and about good vibes, and do-it-yourself independence, and sheet metal, and enjoying oneself, and being sensitive to others, and just letting things happen without trying to become famous. It is wonderful to see, and I like to think this kind of amateur music may be happening at informal gatherings all around the country. I'm probably dreaming—or am I?

—Tom Johnson

