

Cowboy Junkies twang into Santa Fe

By STEPHEN POWELL

First there was the legendary Hank Williams, followed by Johnny Cash, Willie 'n' Waylon and, of course, the women — Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, Emmy Lou Harris. And then some upstarts: Kris Kristofferson, Randy Travis, Steve Earle.

But country, once relegated to backroads AM stations, could no longer remain immune from shifts in the music industry.

Seemingly wild eccentrics such as Lyle Lovett and k.d. Lang were hitting the mainstream.

And finally, The Cowboy Junkies, who will be visiting Paolo Soleri at 8 p.m. Saturday, combine a Velvet Underground sensibility with a neo-C&W sound.

Based out of Toronto, the Canadian band is the collaborative effort of the Timmins siblings (Margo on lead vocals, Michael on guitar, Peter on drums) with Alan Anton holding down the bass.

Characterizing their music is a deliberate sparseness filled in with Margo's ethereal voice.

In essence, the Junkies take a country song, drain it of its more maudlin dimensions, and replace it with a Lou Reed low-key urgency.

Primary songwriter Michael explains the band's motivations.

"What you hear on the radio is pretty sappy. It's pop with a Southern accent. The sounds coming at you today are so blatant, so up-front about everything, that they force an emotion on you. Instead, we want our music to be evocative, to pull at emotions."

As Canadians, the Junkies have taken advantage of their emotional and geographical distance to approach the music for its mythic quality.

Playing off the constant Ameri-



Cowboy Junkies string it out at Paolo Soleri Saturday night

CLOSE-UP

What: The Cowboy Junkies
What: Neo-country
When: 8 p.m. Saturday
Where: Paolo Soleri
Tickets: \$19.75

can theme of the "lonesome outsider," the band sets and deepens a certain mood and tone, rather than trying to tackle new musical territory.

The results are simple and yet

often stunning, music that flails at the sentimental heart of the genre with the hope of finding renewed meaning.

"I think *The Caution Horses* is a distinctly non-romantic acceptance of life's reverses and heartaches," Michael said, referring to their 1990 RCA release.

One can't help but feel a softness, however, a yearning vulnerability in his sister's interpretation, which Margo confirms.

"In each of Michael's songs, no matter how desperate the situation, I see hope and the possibility of love's renewal — that's what I try to bring out when I sing them."

The Junkies' breakthrough

came with *The Trinity Session* (RCA, 1988), a one-day live take recorded in a church underscoring the approach and style of their music.

Ironically, the \$250 take landed a deal with RCA and tours that have put them around the globe the last two years.

In a time when most releases are sparked by a complex use of studio pyrotechnics, the Junkies chose a completely opposite less-is-more approach.

"The album expressed a kind of shyness and innocence," Margo said.

How the Junkies were able to arrive at such an ambience actually came about through reverse

osmosis.

Playing in a no-holds-barred British rock band for four years, Michael and Paton returned to Toronto to reclaim some tranquility.

Coaxing Margo into singing and brother Pete into filling in on the drum kit, another garage band was born.

"We'd got the aggressiveness out of our systems. Now we could think about our music — and leave some spaces in it," Michael said. "That's where a lot of quietness of The Cowboy Junkies comes from. It's from not wanting to disturb the neighbors."

The Junkies will be preceded by special guest Townes Van Zandt.