

THE VESTAL VIRGIN ROOM

By C.W. Smith (Atheneum, \$13.95)

By James Sallis

Behind the supposed glamour of most musicians' lives lie a thousand and one nights of road food, sickness and Holiday Inn gigs, a failed marriage or two, problems with drink or drugs or both, sexual confusion and gnawing self-doubt, the semi-eternal hope of a breakthrough, of recognition and fame.

Don and Dottie Baxter have been out there on the front for years, touring two or three months a year, teaching and trying to maintain some kind of normal life in between. They are deeply in love with one another, but also cautious — wounded by mutual heartbreak, bruised by disappointment, watching bright hopes fade as they start to grow, together and irrevocably, old. Shortly they will play Las Vegas, and this, surely, will be the break they've awaited so long.

But here is Dottie after their opening at the Vestal Virgin Room in a Las Vegas hotel:

"The lights blur through my tears. A new year's begun, one that looks pretty much like the old one, but one thing's clear. This hasn't made Don happy, hasn't made me happy. I never really thought it would, but I also thought I'd be relieved to have that proved. I feel crushed, beaten. I want to go lick my wounds, I want a home again, a family, and I don't care how many geriatric cafeterias or Holiday Inns I have to play: that's my life, and I can live it with dignity and without having to impress anybody. We proved we weren't bad enough to get hooted off the stand, but we're clearly not good enough to be rocketed to stardom. We're sturdily mediocre, and we'll always be that way. There won't be platinum albums. Though I really didn't believe it would happen, that it's so out of range makes me sorry I can't give it to Don. I guess I believed in it enough that realizing we won't make it is painful. And it's tearing Don apart."

And so Don and Dottie tour, fall for a time apart and finally, tenta-

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C.W. Smith, author of *The Vestal Virgin Room*.

tively, regather.

"I want to forestall all the trouble the future holds," Don thinks at the novel's end, as he and Dottie come together spontaneously, and a little hesitantly, over a popular song, "but I also want to relive the purity captured within the song. This may be all we ever get of peace or bliss. It's not enough, but I'll milk it for all that's there."

Written in present tense, shifting from Don's point of view to Dottie's, *The Vestal Virgin Room* is a marvelous document of everyday human aspiration and acceptance.

For most of mankind is "sturdily mediocre" and finds its sole solace (not enough, but all we have) in music and the arts. You know these people. You have asked them out to coffee, eaten alongside them at the cafe weekday nights, sat beside them on the bus, danced and drank on Saturday nights as they cast their ragged musical nets from some motel's stage.

The size of that stage may delimit our relative successes, but it can never diminish the creative impulses, the feelings, that make what we uniquely and together are.