

Short Takes: R.E.M., Dylan and six 'Pipedreams' organists

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R.E.M.

He may be off the campaign trail, but Michael Stipe was in no rush to "bridge the partisan divide" and bring the country together as a sea of shiny happy people Sunday night, as R.E.M. performed a mix of old and new at the A.J. Palumbo Center.

And it went beyond the joy he seemed to take in the over-enunciation of "Bushwacked" in a haunting performance of "Drive."

It was more in the way two anti-Bush songs from "Around the Sun," the band's new album, emerged as the concert's emotional core. Stipe introduced "I Wanted to Be Wrong" as "our State of the Union address," then poured his heart out in a soulful performance that peaked on a heartbreaking chorus of "I told you I wanted to be wrong, but everyone is humming a song that I don't understand."

"Final Straw" was more defiant, a broadside of Lennon-esque protest-folk. Although there was some jeering anytime the banter turned political, the point in "Final Straw" where Stipe stands up to the Masters of War with "Love will be my strongest weapon/I do believe that I am not alone" was met with wild applause.

Another highlight taken from the new release, "Leaving New York," weighed in on 9/11 with a broken heart that couldn't undermine the biggest hook on R.E.M.'s new album, taken up a notch in concert by sideman Scott McCaughey on vocals.

While playing no fewer than six songs from "Around the Sun," the band seemed surprisingly connected to the oldies, especially guitarist Peter Buck, who replicated nearly every riff and solo from "Finest Worksong" to "The One I Love." Even the mandolin on "Losing My Religion" was just the way we heard it in the early '90s. Bassist Mike Mills took the center mike for a romp through "(Don't Go Back to) Rockville." The sidemen (multi-instrumentalists McCaughey and ex-Posie Ken Stringfellow with ex-Ministry drummer Bill Rieflin, all of whom are in Buck's other band, The Minus 5) are starting to feel like they're part of the band.

And Stipe was just amazing, with his Riddler makeup and his zany dance moves, neither of which, surprisingly, detracted from the passion of his singing, which was evident from the opening lines of "Finest Worksong" through the final encore of "Man on the Moon."

Other highlights ranged from "Wake Up Bomb," "So. Central Rain" and "Begin the Begin" to a raucous outtake from the early days that sent Buck leaping in the air as Stringfellow pounded out Jerry Lee Lewis piano chords and McCaughey whooped it up on the mike. They never seemed more rock 'n' roll. Not that they necessarily should have.

*-- Review by Ed Masley,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Bob Dylan

My impression of Dylan's last performance here was that his singing was terrible, he was out of sync with his band and the very notion of playing Rolling Stones, Neil Young and two Warren Zevon covers -- when he's written the best songs on the planet -- was absurd.

Sunday night at the Petersen Events Center, it was a whole different story.

From the opening notes of "Rainy Day Women, #12 & 35," it was clear Dylan was on. And his band? Well, it's about time it was given a name. The dual guitar attack of Larry Campbell and Stu Kimball struck on every song, whether playing it sweet, swinging into country or cranking Dylan's classics into monstrous blues jams.

The man himself, in black suit and cowboy hat, took his spot on the left, playing rhythm on the keyboard, a step or two away from a harmonica collection he used to great effect.

Rumors of his voice being shot have been greatly exaggerated. Dylan has always toyed with the melodies, either speeding up or slowing down the phrasing -- sometimes muttering away the high notes.

On this night, his growl was deep and strong and full of menace on songs such as "High Water" and a priceless "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," which drew cheers with the line "Even the pres-i-dent of the U-nited States, sometimes must have to stand naked!"

Dylan manages to keep fans coming back with an ever-changing set list. Sunday night's was a good one, with surprises like "Lay, Lady, Lay" and "Watching the River Flow" bumping up against strong new additions like "Bye and Bye" and "Honest With Me."

The only real clunker was "Sugar Baby," the victim of too many sour notes.

Fortunately, it was quickly erased by the one constant of Dylan shows: a show-stopping swing through "Summer Days" that sounded like Stevie Ray Vaughn had come back to life, into an encore of "Like a Rolling Stone" (abbreviated, but with a perfect "how does it

feeeeel?") and dark and stormy "All Along the Watchtower," powered by drummer George Riceli.

He happened to be the topic of Dylan's one piece of stage banter. Riceli, Dylan said, "went to the Steelers game today. Someone stepped on his toe. They had to call a toe truck. But he's all right now."

Keeping with tradition, Dylan let the songs do the talking, and two in particular spoke volumes. One was "Bye and Bye," on which he sang of his weariness, about being on his "last go 'round": "The future for me/is already in the past."

The good news is, on Sunday night, there was one that seemed more suited to Dylan's current state. It was called "Forever Young."

For those keeping score, here's the set list: Rainy Day Women #12 & 35/Forever Young/God Knows/Bye and Bye/It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)/Lay, Lady, Lay/High Water/Positively 4th Street/Watching the River Flow/Can't Wait/Don't Think Twice, It's All Right/Honest With Me/Sugar Baby/Summer Days/Like a Rolling Stone/All Along the Watchtower.

*-- Review by Scott Mervis,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

"Pipedreams Live in Pittsburgh"

It was a dream of a concert Sunday, a rare opportunity for six top Pittsburgh organists to make their mark with Michael Barone and his nationally distributed radio series, "Pipedreams." An overflow audience packed Shadyside Presbyterian Church to hear the mellifluous Barone comment on a selected program, mostly consisting of organ music off the beaten path and preferably with a Pittsburgh connection. "Pipedreams Live in Pittsburgh" had the collective backing of The Organ Artists Series, Music in a Great Space and WQED.

The house organ certainly received a workout, as both present and former Shadyside organists scored heavily with their selections. J. Christopher Pardini chose Dan Locklair's "Rubrics," an OAS 10th-anniversary commission and well-suited to his flamboyant style, brimming, as it did, with tricky foot work and jazz intonations.

"That piece always reminds me of dueling banjos," Barone drily commented.

Former Shadyside organist John Walker offered his own splashy commission, Ronald Arnatt's set of variations on "Nun danket all Gott," which he premiered at the dedication of the Shadyside organ in 1995. As Walker moved nimbly through a demonstration of the registers prior to playing the work, Barone commented on the trumpets, calling them "party horns," although he was "not sure which party."

David Billings opened the program with a knowledgeable reading of Josef Rheinberger's fourth sonata, the only piece without at least a tenuous Pittsburgh connection.

But Neil Stahurski immediately corrected that with Kittanning native Calvin Hampton's pleasant, if rather slight, "Prayer and Alleluias."

The venerable Ann Labounsky produced Joseph Willcox Jenkins' "Confluence," a grand OAS 20th-anniversary commission filled with water allusions that define Pittsburgh, then utilized Stahurski on the loft organ for Jean Langlais' quiet duet, "Virgo Dei Genetrix."

Gretchen Franz took Barone at his word, opting for a lengthy discourse on odd trifles such as the quirky "Reverie" by former Sacred Heart organist Louis Huybrechts, a pick-me-up country "Quick Dance" by Harold Stover and former Carnegie Hall organist Edwin Lemare's "Maestoso con fuoco."

Walker concluded the festivities in resplendent style by leading the audience in singing "Sine nomine," then segueing into a boogie-woogie prelude version with dancing footwork.

*-- Review by Jane Vranish,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*