

the live wire

Riding high on the tide of a number one album (*I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*) and its number one single (The Prince-penned "Nothing Compares 2 U"), Ireland's Sinead O'Connor has recently been called the most important female rock figure since Chrissie Hynde. She has been touted as an enticing blend of airy innocence and hard-as-nails toughness, with a voice to match. She has also been saluted for challenging the public's perception of what a woman can look like and still sell lots of records.

With all this emphasis on gender-bending and stereotype-smashing, one might have expected that attitude and presentation would outshine the music in O'Connor's first L.A. show in two years. Nothing, however, could have been farther from the truth.

In Friday night's well-paced and dazzlingly lit performance, O'Connor proved not only that she warrants at-

tention for her daring demeanor but that, if anything, her presence has diverted attention from the power and beauty of her music.

Her material was divided into three basic categories: weighty, dirge-like songs with thick synthesizer pads ("I Feel So Different Now"), delicate acoustic tunes ("Black Boys on Mopeds"), and full-bodied Pretenders-like rockers ("The Emperor's New Clothes"). For many performers, such a drastic divergence in styles would have made the show seem fragmented, but O'Connor tied it all together with her natural presence and remarkable voice. She seemed to react vocally (and with her strangely jerky stage movements) to whatever she felt at the moment, giving the entire performance an odd sense of grace and making believable every emotion she expressed, from transparent vulnerability to near-bitchy frustration and bitter-

ness. As good as her new record is, it doesn't approach the dynamism of the woman in concert.

Opener Hugh Harris exhibited many of the same sorts of improvisational instincts that O'Connor did, except he indulged his whims too much, often straying from his recorded melodies (and from his microphone) to the extent that his songs became ineffective. Guest sax soloist David Koz provided a strong anchor for Harris, helping him hone in on the essential feel of certain songs with his emotionally vivid and well-articulated playing. But although Harris sometimes created haunting and soulful moods, especially on "Home Sweet Home" and "Rhythm of Life," his scattershot performing style diffused much of the set's momentum. Harris shows large-scale potential, but he will need to attain some self-discipline in order to achieve a better focus.

—Bob Remsteln

A couple of songs into her recent show at the Wilton Theatre, Michelle Shocked paused to give an explanation for her conversion from the folk-country music of her *Short Sharp Shocked* album to the uptempo, jazz/R&B of her new *Captain Swing*. She said that she felt the more political content of her earlier work kept away as many people as it attracted, and if those with opposite viewpoints weren't listening anyway, then all she was doing was preaching to the converted. And so, she said, it was time to play some fun music and draw in a larger audience.

Well, she may be playing bigger halls this time out, but the audience has roughly the same make-up: young, political, liberal. And the music from *Captain Swing*, while perhaps more upbeat than her earlier work, lacks the emotional depth that gave *Short Sharp Shocked* such a charge of energy—after about half an hour it all started to sound the same. Of her new songs, only the rockabilly gem "My Little Sister" and the gooly "It Must Be Luff" really stood out. The best moments came on a solo rendition of the melancholy "Memories of East Texas" and a wistful rendition of the pop gem "Anchorage," both from *Short Sharp Shocked*.

Far more satisfying was opener John Wesley Harding. In a brief, 45-minute set, Harding captivated the audience with his biting wit and evocative—though limited—vocals. Rather than playing only songs off his brilliant debut album *Here Comes the Groom*, Harding tossed off a few unreleased gems (notably the Live Aid spoof "July 13, 1985") and well-chosen covers (an almost straight reading of Ricky Nelson's "Lonesome Town"). By the time his set ended, Harding was playing to a full house and was even brought back for an encore. Maybe next time around Shocked will be opening for him.

—Jeff Schwager



Michelle Shocked



John Wesley Harding

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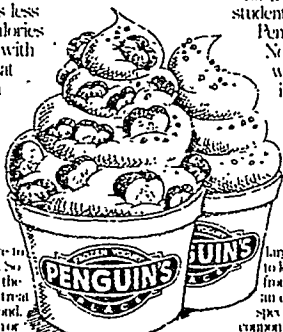
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There is deliverance in African music. Paul Simon, Sting and David Byrne could hear it. As archeologists and colonialists, they have delved into the harmonies and polyrhythms with varying degrees of success.

But there are moments in the music these outsiders could never catch. Saturday night at the Wadsworth Theater, Mahlatini and the Mahotella Queens delivered an entire evening of these ecstatic moments.

The show was paced perfectly. It began with joy and built up to a wild revelry. Mahlatini—a longtime fixture of the South African music scene—was both mysterious and unselfish in the spotlight. He provided the stage, delivering each song in the incredible voice—a guttural yowl that recalls Howling Wolf and Captain Beefheart—that has earned him the name of "The Lion of Soweto." He sings with such richness and warmth that it mattered little that most of his material is in Zulu.

The band was crack, whipping through one bright tune after another. The folkier elements of the music were played down in favor of a swirling, jangly pop sound with solid rhythmic underpinnings. When the vocalists departed the stage for a few minutes, the band tore through some sizzling jive that got every butt in the sold-out house a-shaking.

Mahlatini was also generous enough to give the Mahotella Queens quite a bit of stage time by themselves, however. The three women, dressed in colorful Zulu garb, almost stole the show out from under him. They danced and sang with so much elan that one had to wonder how a band that had been at it for 27 years could possibly still find so much joy in performing.

—Kent Andrade

The Havalinas Palace June 1

'Twas but a year ago that the Havalinas appeared on this very stage opening for that Texas twister, Joe Ely. The acoustic trio was just beginning to evoke a buzz 'round town, playing weekly brew-fests at Molly Malone's pub and turning up elsewhere for one-off gigs. So, this show last Friday should've been a celebration of triumph: beating the odds to get signed, releasing a driving debut disc, and playing to a relatively packed house.

With revelry floating through the smoky air, the band prepared to toy with the tipped-over tradition that made them so inviting in the first place. But they hit the stage a little full of themselves, with a fog machine (!) blowing at pretentious force, banging out their anthemic "Good For Nothin' Rag."

In between well-tooled numbers from their album, the band sandwiched in some new songs. Most are in need of work, though two notables were "Suspicion," with its

acoustic guitar surf lines, and a Dylanesque blues, "You Should Know How Hard It Is."

"You're guinea pigs," smirked singer and guitarist Tim McConnell, who still looks like a child of Ray Davies gone amok in the West. Smutty Smith did his usual balancing act atop his acoustic bass, as Charlie Quintana nailed every beat, reminding you why he's one of this town's best no-nonsense drummers.

With the barest of instrumentation, the Havalinas make a lot of racket, and there's insight in songs such as "Not A Lot to Ask For" and "There Was This Mother." How far they can take it is the question. They're already falling back on shtick and raps that've seen too many club days. Still, the music itself is rock solid and the sway and jump they created prove there's more to "dance music" than the usual Palace predictability that followed after the show.

—Darryl Morton