

O.C. POP MUSIC REVIEW

Not Dead, but Not Quite Alive, Either

■ Bob Weir and Rob Wasserman display particularly intense musical personalities but they lack lyricism, playfulness and humor.

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IRVINE—With highly skilled folkies Bruce Cockburn and Michelle Shocked in tow as opening acts, Bob Weir and Rob Wasserman launched a summer tour they've dubbed "Scaring the Children" Thursday night at Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre.

Weir, the Grateful Dead singer-guitarist, and Wasserman, the free-lance instrumental virtuoso who hits his bass harder than our punch-less Anaheim nine can hit a ball, didn't get around to explaining the

significance of their tour's name. In typical Dead fashion, the headliners said nothing whatsoever during their 75-minute set before several thousand blissful young Dead fans who were dressed in the usual tie-dye and peasant-dress regalia. A press release issued by the duo's publicist says they didn't want to go on merely billing themselves as Weir & Wasserman, because their names alone "sounded like a law firm."

You could see how Wasserman's approach to the upright bass might scare some children. For one thing, the streamlined, futuristic, six-string electric bass he used during most of the show looks like

some device Darth Vader might employ to harm cute, furry Ewoks. For another, Wasserman favored an aggressive attack full of booms and vrooms and dissonant, plangent skids that gave his solos and fills something in common with a day at the drag strip.

(Wasserman, who also plays in Lou Reed's band, learned firsthand recently what it means to perform under really scary circumstances. The Los Angeles riots broke out the night Reed played a brilliant show at the Greek Theatre, making Wasserman an inadvertent Nero who had to bass-fiddle while a city burned.)

Weir's apocalyptic vision in the set-closing anthem, "Throwin' Stones," could be construed as scary, but the Dead kids were more delighted than afrighted, clapping to

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keep time, doing hoppy dances and shouting along enthusiastically on the "ashes, ashes, all fall down" refrain.

No, what was really scary about this concert was the thought that the Grateful Dead might one day retire, and Weir will decide to try a second career as a singer of lounge standards. His rendition of the Frank Sinatra tune "Witchcraft" was a grating horror, so tuneless it could have served as a Bill Murray-style sendup of the saloon-ballad mode.

But Weir, who is nothing if not earnest, wasn't trying to be funny. His voice hasn't a hint of lyricism, body or roundness. It's all hard, flat surfaces, austere and severe, declamatory and earnest, with an element of almost puritanical rectitude. That worked in some settings, but a ballad singer he ain't. With the Dead, Weir is balanced by the mellowing influence of wizened old creaky-voiced Jerry Garcia.

(It's verboten for Weir and Garcia to sing and play together in Irvine with the Grateful Dead, by the way. The City Council insisted that Irvine Meadows stop its annual Grateful Dead concerts a few years ago, after an overflow of ticket-less fans and overnight campers in the Dead's wandering caravan of followers caused traffic miseries and riled the neighbors. Irvine Meadows' Solomon, but not nearly as lucrative, solution has been to split rock's most reliable touring cash cow in two: The Jerry Garcia Band arrives at the Meadows on Aug. 1.)

Weir and Wasserman both displayed particularly intense musical personalities. But they lacked other qualities, such as lyricism, playfulness and humor, that can make for a well-rounded show. They tackled some beautiful songs, such as Bob Dylan's "When I Paint My Masterpiece," and Weir's "Looks Like Rain." At such moments as those, one wished they were a trio, with a passionate, soulful and accomplished singer to help them do the songs justice.

At their best, Weir/Wasserman formed a commanding, physically bracing rhythm section. Standing shoulder to shoulder, or turning face to face, they were able to prod and play off each other in driving,

forceful, extended passages.

The furtive, bluesy love song "Eternity" showcased their ability to communicate musically. After Weir had intoned the song's lofty sentiment, "Let's love each other through eternity," one looked for Wasserman to second the emotion with a solo running toward tenderness or soaring loveliness. Instead, he hurtled into the void on a noisy, unsettling excursion that recalled the spacey dissonance of the instrumental break in the Byrds' "Eight Miles High." The journey toward eternal love, the solo suggested, is a strange, hazardous space shot buffeted by existential asteroid fields that can tear such a tender capsule apart. When Weir started to sing again, the lyrical sentiment remained the same—"Our love will never die"—but his voice was charged with the desperation of a man who had understood the daunting import of Wasserman's solo.

Such excellent moments came often enough to make it worth bearing with Bob and Rob through their insufficiently melodious adventure.

Evidently, nobody told Michelle Shocked anything about scaring any children. Instead, she delighted them with her smiling, folksy presence, an array of strong and varied material, and an earthy and adept little string band that included her brother, Max Johnston, on fiddle and Allison Brown on banjo, dobro and guitars.

Shocked's between-songs chat kept you (or, as her Texas drawl would have it, "y'all") in her confidence while building connecting bridges between songs. After singing the wry "Making Trouble for the V.F.D.," Shocked explained that its tale of pre-adolescent pyromania was true—well, almost. Then she followed with "Eddie Bonebrake," an edgy blues that cast the fun-loving firesetter from "V.F.D." in a darker—and, according to Shocked, more truthful—light. Eddie's father had been killed by lightning before his eyes, Shocked said in her intro, and the song, embellished by this mobile performer's effective body English, told the poignant tale of how he compulsively lit smoky fires—maybe to signal his dad in heaven or maybe to blot out the sky that had struck him dead.

Shocked showed her political agitator side with another blues, "Graffiti Lies," managing to register righteous indignation over police brutality while keeping a sardonic sense of humor. But the highlight of her set came on more personal songs, such as the folk-pop tune "Anchorage," about an old and enduring friendship, and a stretch of tradition-rooted songs from her fine current release, "Arkansas Traveler." Those numbers took her from pretty Celtic airs to hard-driving bluegrass. The Deadheads let out a disappointed groan when Shocked didn't come back for an encore after her enchanting 45-minute set.

Cockburn, with his professorial mien, looked more as if he had arrived to instruct the children. Without being didactic, he did impart lessons in a set that was graceful, eloquent and passionately rendered. It played like an extended meditation that encompassed both a fallen world ruled by exploitative power and a visionary realm of transcendence and redemption.

Playing solo, Cockburn seemed less distant than he had while fronting his own band at Anaheim's Celebrity Theatre earlier this year. His nine-song set, including a well-earned encore, stayed away from some of the less-inspired material that intruded on that show.

"If I Had a Rocket Launcher," inspired by death-squad attacks in Latin America, said as much about Cockburn's skill as a composer and a guitarist as it did about his political passions. Playing reverberated electric guitar, Cockburn enacted a drama with finger-work, using pulsating rhythms to portray the menace of a helicopter-borne death squad, the racing panic of flight among its intended victims, and, in sharp, clinching chords, the final resolve to resist.

All hands gathered for an evening-ending encore treatment of the Willie Dixon blues classic "Spoonful"—Weir/Wasserman booming out tough rhythms, Cockburn inserting some twisting electric guitar lines, and Shocked, relegated to backup vocal duty behind Weir and Cockburn, having fun slapping her thighs in time and weaving like a happy kid in the middle of a game of dodge ball.