

Guitarist Bob Weir and friends' acoustic tunes revive memories

By Jim Meyer

Grateful Dead singer/guitarist Bob Weir and a few musical friends turned back time a bit during a short, strange show of acoustic music at the Orpheum Theatre last night.

Through his ongoing collaboration with bassist Rob Wasserman, Weir has tried to make creative space for himself outside the Grateful Dead tradition. But this program — which included notable singer-songwriters Bruce Cockburn and Michelle Shocked — did bring back memories of the days in the '60s when disparate but sympathetic groups would join together for loose-knit superconcerts at Winterland Ballroom or the Fillmore.

But apparently you can't go all the way back to the way it was. Even this bill filled with potential headliners didn't generate quite the draw it might have — forcing the concert to be moved from the Civic Center Forum to the smaller Orpheum Theatre.

Aesthetically, that change was for the better because these small groups and soloists were more suited to a theater than a small hall.

The sales might be a reflection on Bob Weir, now on his third annual

A review

Bob Weir and Rob Wasserman

Opening acts: Bruce Cockburn, Michelle Shocked.

Review: Bassist Rob Wasserman shone the brightest during a solid but sometimes strange triple bill of acoustic-based rock and folk.

tour with bass guitar innovator Wasserman. It's debatable whether he's a singer you would consistently want to see in a live duo.

As a singer he is quite ordinary, possessing neither a strong natural range nor a clear individual style. When he's interpreting standards such as "Witchcraft," "Take Me to the River" or Bob Dylan's "When I Paint My Masterpiece," his faults are all the more evident.

Within a merry band like the Grateful Dead — who've made overambition a musical philosophy for decades — this mediocrity is acceptable, perhaps endearing. But left to his own with only bass accompaniment, Weir's musical

experiment is almost amazing in its overextension. Fortunately, he's backed with no ordinary bassist. Though the term "revolutionary" is often overused in music, Wasserman has brought a strong depth and expressive power to rock bass like few others. With the invention of various customized six-string basses and his rugged attack on standard upright, he brings a sturdy jazz feel to modern rock.

In fact, Wasserman was the key to the finest moments of the Weir/Wasserman set. Beginning with his pure solo in mid-set, he swerved from an edgy redefinition of the typically soft "Over the Rainbow" into an interlude featuring bowed-bass, before swooping down to a floor-shaking workout on the riff from Willie Dixon's "Spoonful."

When Weir returned, "Spoonful" was the basis for an extended improvisation that better displayed Weir's strength. (The "Spoonful" motif was also the root of a final jam involving all three acts.)

Wasserman's interesting bass tones also enhanced Weir's best vocal moments. When Weir works with the mellower moods of his own repertoire, he doesn't need to prove himself anyone's equal, and a deeper, truer tone emerges.

This small-group get-together offered a return to the roots for Michelle Shocked. Her big break came when an English record producer recorded a solo acoustic set on a portable cassette machine at a folk festival in her native Texas (now available on "The Texas Campfire Tapes").

To her credit she's parlayed that fluke into a major-label record deal that's allowed her to record albums that bounce from standard folk-rock to big band jazz. On her new album, "Arkansas Traveler," she toured the country in a mobile recording studio, cutting sessions with her admired American music artists such as Pops Staples, Doc Watson and Gatemouth Brown.

Because of her casual affiliations with the protest movement, her obscure personal history and her ever-changing musical focus, it's been hard to see the real artist behind the ambitions.

It was hoped that this concert would unveil an unobstructed view of her personality, and that it did, for good and bad.

For starters, this exciting, comparatively new artist deserved better than opening up to a barren house at 7, but she dealt with the challenge rather strangely.

She attempted over and over to get a sing-along going on "Memories of East Texas." Not only is the song too personal to really invite audience participation, but there was hardly any audience at the time.

Then she performed her new single, "Come a Long Way," with mere bass accompaniment. Too bad, because it seemed much too early to waste a strong song on the sparse crowd, and this bouncy tune might have benefited from the larger group that eventually joined her.

When the group did join in, things really cooked. Alison Brown was consistently sensational on guitar, banjo, and an overturned steel guitar that she played with a bottleneck slide. The four-piece version of the group — featuring her brother Max on violin — got the crowd energized on "Prodigal Daughter (Cotton-Eyed Joe)," but she responded to the audience's awakening by almost berating them for their disinterest. "This next song's about morphine. You might relate to it," she kidded.

The following versions of "On the Greener Side" and "The Secret to a Long Life" got the crowd on their feet, much to Shocked's pleasure, but she made it all into more of an ordeal than necessary.

This tour also gives valuable exposure to Canadian songwriter Bruce Cockburn, known for stinging topical songs as well as more broadly philosophical lyrics reflecting his Christian humanist outlook.

Sony Records is re-releasing all 19 of his albums dating back to 1971 — an unusually strong commitment to an artist's back catalog, and a testament to Cockburn's creative diversity and consistent quality.

His nine-song middle set featured many of his more famous and angry topical songs such as "If I Had a Rocket Launcher" and "Call it Democracy," but on new songs such as "Someone I Used to Love" and the opening instrumental "Train in the Rain," he proved to be an under-rated guitarist. His fluid, jazzy style and complex chord sequences were truly impressive.

All in all, with some of the bad vibes and the not-so-great music, it was not quite as groovy as the Summer of Love, but the selection of strong talents on the bill probably gave everyone in the theater a few things to cheer about.

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