

A confusing set from Weir/Wasserman

By Steve Morse
GLOBE STAFF

Music Review
MANSFIELD — Bob Weir and Rob Wasserman call it the "Scaring Your Children" tour. But it's more like the "Confusing Your Children" tour, based on last night's often random and muddled partnership. Perhaps it was an off night, but they clearly tried to do too much with too little effect.

In fact, the night's better sets, played before 5,000 mostly Dead-head fans who had come to see Grateful Dead singer/guitarist Weir, came from opening acts Michelle Shocked and Bruce Cockburn. Each had more focus — and more to say.

The Weir/Wasserman duo was indeed puzzling. Weir did a couple of strong Dead songs later in the set (the antipolitician rant of "Throwing Stones" and the soul-searching "Victim or the Crime"), but mostly sought to showcase his non-Grateful Dead side. The only problem was that he stretched too far, hitting the wall on light jazz numbers like Erroll Garner's "Misty" and "Witchcraft," both ill-suited to his more raw-edged voice. Weir is never going to be confused with Mel Torme, yet

BOB WEIR & ROB WASSERMAN,
with Michelle Shocked and Bruce
Cockburn
At: Great Woods Center for the
Performing Arts, last night.

he was in Torme land at times.

Weir was much more comfortable with funkier numbers like Al Green's "Take Me to the River," the classic "Walkin' Blues" and the set's highlight — a driving version of Bob Dylan's "Maggie's Farm." Both Weir and Wasserman attacked the song and dramatically brought it to life, with Weir adding a great scat at the end. It was in contrast to their more self-conscious, overly arty moments elsewhere.

A couple of other complaints: Weir generally strummed acoustic guitar while Wasserman set off sonorous, avant-garde explosions on an electric upright bass that was mixed so loud it drowned out Weir's playing. He should have played more acoustic upright bass (it sat up there untouched until the encores), especially on Weir's softer tunes. And while Wasserman's solo segment was dazzling (an imaginative treatment of Willie Dixon's "Spoonful"), we never got any solo time from Weir.

Michelle Shocked, on the other

hand, was compelling throughout. She mixed her hit, "Anchored Down in Anchorage," with social protest ("Graffiti Limbo," about a subway artist killed by New York police) and reworked treatments of the fiddle tunes "Soldier's Joy" and "Cotton-Eyed Joe." She even did some Texas-style dancing while her brother, Max Johnston, played fiddle and former Bostonian (and Harvard graduate) Alison Brown cooked on dobro and guitar.

The somber but sophisticated Cockburn entranced the crowd with his own social protest slant ("If I Had a Rocket Launcher," about fighting in El Salvador) and the morality tale, "Waiting for a Miracle," covered last year by Jerry Garcia. Cockburn performed solo, but sounded like a one-man band with his polyrhythmic fingerpicking and occasional kick of some floor-mounted chimes.

All of last night's acts later joined for the Band's "The Weight" and another version of "Spoonful." It ended the show on a tribal high — and made you wish they'd done more songs together and cut some of the rambling portions of the Weir/Wasserman set. Maybe it's time Weir resurrects his old band, Bobby and the Midnites. At least they were more fun.