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Music

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Being There

Polyphonic Spree

House Of Blues, Saturday, July 7

By Aaron Mendelsohn

The marriage between theater and rock has historically made for an interesting pair. It's yielded memorable productions like Jesus Christ Superstar, Hair and Hedwig and the Angry Inch, and sprouted groundbreaking albums like David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, the Flaming Lips' Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots and the Who's Tommy.

However, it's hard to say how time will treat the Polyphonic Spree. Tim DeLaughter's 23-person ensemble has a flair for the dramatic, from the pseudo cult vibe and matching wardrobes (this tour has everyone donning black fatigues versus the angelic robes), to a choreographed choir and well-timed confetti cannons. Yet underneath this facade is a real band, a symphonic configuration that embraces all the characteristics of theatrical rock, but might actually be better off dropping the novelty shtick to just concentrate on music.

Throughout its 90-minute performance to a half-full House of Blues, the Spree looked and acted the part of a musically gifted drama troupe. It began the show by cutting a red ribbon that concealed and then revealed the band, and DeLaughter did his part as ringleader, conducting his band through most of this year's politically charged Fragile Army. Despite the onstage antics and having to manage multiple musical components, DeLaughter did his best to keep the Spree in sync, struggling through "Light to Follow" and "Younger Yesterday" but excelling during "It's the Sun." But the real treat came during the encore, where the Spree re-emerged from the back of the venue dressed in its infamous robes, and then delighted the crowd with "Together We're Heavy," Nirvana's "Lithium" (which became a poppy sing-along) and "When the Fool Becomes a King." While still very much staged, the lengthy encore felt more like a rock concert than the previous set, and finally showed what the Spree is capable of becoming when it forgoes the drama and doesn't take itself so seriously.

California newcomer Jesca Hoop opened the night with a superb, soulful set. Like a more proper Amy Winehouse, Hoop spent 45 minutes strumming her guitar, stirring the sparse crowd with her strong voice and poignant songs. n



The Polyphonic Spree - It's time to drop the shtick.

Built to Spill

Grog Shop

Monday, July 2nd

"That seems minor to me," intoned Built to Spill leader Doug Martsch near the finish of his band's set-opening take on "Liar," a standout track from last year's return-to-form *You in Reverse*. What I'm fairly certain wasn't minor to Martsch was the unacceptably poor sound at this sold-out Grog Shop stop, which found the band unable to overcome a horribly washed-out, muddy, impenetrably low-end heavy mess of bad EQ. The Boise band deserved far better. Perhaps as a result, the packed house was witness to a pretty sluggish performance from Martsch and his cohorts. While it's never been known as a crowd-pleaser (they've been known to treat an audience to a two-hour, six-song set list), the band seemed to go out of its way to choose obscurities over favorites, breaking out the oldies with "Nowhere Nothin' Fuckup" and an appropriately bouncy version of "In the Morning" (probably the highlight of the set).

While Martsch is widely respected for having resurrected the idea of the indie-rock guitar hero (and for very good reason, as his effortlessly fine, rhythmic leads should be respected), much of the effect of his fretwork vanished in the audio haze. Rescuing a track from the keyboard-heavy misstep *Ancient Melodies of the Future*, "Strange" could have been more revelatory (and the band would have done well to include that record's whimsical "Fly Around my Pretty Little Miss," a highlight from other recent shows). Solid takes on a couple of Perfect from Now On classics (namely "Stop the Show" and the extended encore tear through "Randy Described Eternity") saved the set from being a total wash. But in the end, what should have been an enjoyable romp through a rare small club show for one of indie rock's greatest bands was a dull disappointment.

Kent's *Beaten Awake* also fell victim to the awful sound, as well as the excessively chatty and impatient crowd. Neither did it any favors, as the songs from the band's Audio Eagle debut, *Let's Get Simplified*, were simply lost. - Chris Drabick

The Human Circus Tour

Grog Shop

Friday, July 6th

There weren't any bearded ladies, elephant men or even a single child raised by wolves at this circus. However, when the Human Circus Tour came to the Grog Shop, a battalion of bands brought razor-sharp hooks and rowdy sing-along anthems colossal enough to fill a big-top tent. Dallas, Texas outfit Forever the Sickest Kids opened the show with a massive dose of sugary pop rock. The latest act to supply the synth-driven rock made popular by heavyweight acts Hellogoodbye and Reggie and the Full Effect, the band lit up the stage with "Hey Brittany" and "Believe Me I'm Lying," both hugely successful MySpace demos that helped it sign to Universal Records earlier this year. Saddled with the unfortunate position of following the overly cute antics of Forever the Sickest Kids, Permanent Me brought its A-game as it delivered a superb set of angular melodious rock. The band's sound, though vastly accessible, was perhaps too honed for the youthful crowd, whose palettes were not yet adept enough to fully

appreciate the complex and layered orchestrations found in each of the band's songs. But when the band served up its stripped-down closer, "Allison," the floorboards shook as everyone bounced along.

But the real surprise of the night was Self Against City. From the robust opener, "Becoming a Monster," to the merciless closer, "Talking to the Mirror," the band sauntered through a half-hour set stuffed with songs off its latest album, *Telling Secrets to Strangers*. And each massive chorus provoked flurries of fingers to be thrust skyward, most notably on "Tequila Sunrise," a serene-sounding song about a one-night stand. But it wasn't until headliner Valencia marched onto the stage to the theme song from 2001: *A Space Odyssey* that it became obvious who the crowd was there to see. After a long hiatus from touring, Valencia picked up without missing a proverbial beat, delivering one intoxicating pop-punk gem after another, complete with spinning guitarists and Shane Henderson's expressive vocal work. The crowd ultimately was stirred into an uncontrollable ruckus, leading to spontaneous bouts of mosh-pitting and amateur slam dancing. And through the unrelenting set, including the infectious "3000 Miles" and "The Space Between," the band proved that the old no-nonsense, no-filler blueprint for emotional punk rock founded by acts like early New Found Glory and Rufio can still refreshingly work in an age of bands dependant on flashy techniques. And for a band headlining a "circus," there's nothing clownlike about that. - Tim Webb

Weird Al Yankovic

Plain Dealer Pavilion

Friday, July 6th

A Weird Al show is not a hipster hangout. The two-thirds-full outdoor amphitheater on the West Bank of the Flats was primarily populated by exceedingly pale-skinned men and boys decked out in different decades of Weird Al wear. The audience undoubtedly was familiar with the phrase "White & Nerdy" before a parody by that name hit the charts. But I'm not being critical, far from it. A lack of pretense is what Weird Al is all about and much of his multimedia filler material pokes fun at the airs put on by so-called talent like Jessica Simpson, Kevin Federline, Mariah Carey and others.

Sans glasses and facial hair, Al is not as "weird" looking as he used to be. But, despite the fact that he's now in his late 40s, he's still as high energy and topical as ever. Parodies of more current hits by Avril Lavigne and R Kelly were peppered with classics like "Eat It," "Yoda" and "Pretty Fly for a Rabbi." A short bit about Paris Hilton's prison sentence set to the tune of Crash Test Dummies' "Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm" brought loud cheers from the audience as did a jab at Atlantic Records during Yankovic's rendition of "You're Pitiful," a take on James Blunt's "You're Beautiful." (Apparently the label wouldn't allow Yankovic to release the parody despite Blunt's blessing on the project.) Yankovic took to the floor, serenading the crowd almost one member at a time during "Wanna Be Ur Lover" (a song that includes, by the way, lines like "Can I chew on your butt?")

All in all, the frivolity lasted more than two hours with about 12 minutes of that being an encore of Al's longest song, "Albuquerque," something I could have lived without. If you missed the weirdness, consider watching a short "interview" with Al and his latest video, "Stuck in the Drive-Thru" on Dooctoons.com. - Samantha Fryberger

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