



A warm tribute to musical pioneers The Band

It's not easy to make a large formal auditorium feel like a cozy, down-home gathering of friends, but in their presentation of the collaborative themed concert, Across the Great Divide, the Hot Club of Cowtown

by
Carey Wilson

Review:
Across the Great Divide: A Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of The Band with the Dustbowl Revival and the Hot Club of Cowtown, Friday, March 29, Laxson Auditorium.

and the Dustbowl Revival managed to do just that. The mostly acoustic presentation by the two bands was steeped in American musical traditions and set an appropriately warm tone for what was a celebration of The Band, the pioneering Canadian-American roots-rock group that half a century ago released its first two hugely influential albums, *Music From Big Pink* (1968) and *The Band* (1969).

The Hot Club kicked off the show with "High Upon the Mountain," an original bluegrass number that gave the trio plenty of room to warm up their voices and instruments. Bassist Jake

Erwin and guitarist Whit Smith set the cantering pace with a boom-chick rhythm that Elana James' dextrous fiddle melody immediately elevated into springtime mountain music, enhanced by her sweetly sung lyrics evoking parallels between lush country scenery and the memories of lost love: "high upon the mountain, you're the morning breeze/sweepin' like an eagle, down through my restless dreams." Smith added immaculate lead embellishments on his vintage Gibson as well as some high-lonesome authenticity with his vocal harmonies.

Beginning the concert with an original song seemed a gutsy choice, but one that worked well to affirm James' assertion (in the program) that, "This isn't strictly a 'tribute' show. It's more a testament to the timelessness and broad influences of The Band's songs." And with three virtuoso players and more than 20 years of stage time as a band, the influences shared by the group and their forebears is broad and worthy of exploration.

One of my personal favorites by The Band—which I fondly remember listening to on the radio as a child—is the mournful ballad "Long Black Veil," the only cover on the band's debut. The song received a justifiably

reverent rendition, with Smith taking the lead vocal sung by Rick Danko. The Hot Club's version more closely reflects the arrangement of Lefty Frizzel's 1959 recording, with the welcome addition of Smith's guitar solo and James' gentle background vocals and doleful fiddle.

After an intermission, the Dustbowl Revival spread its eight players across the stage and brought the more rockin' aspects of The Band to joyous life with a horn-infused cover of "Don't Do It" from the 1972 live album, *Rock of Ages*. Drummer Joshlyn Heffernan and bassist James Klopfleisch locked in the groove as bandleader and guitarist Zach Lupetin encouraged the rather staid audience to get up and dance, and a few exuberant souls filled the side aisles with justified groovin'.

Alternating between excellent originals and Band classics, the Dustbowl Revival created a rockin' ambience that kept the cheers and applause exploding after each song. My only slight complaint was that vocalist Liz Beebe's mic needed to be turned up to better project her voice.

Lupetin possesses the ability to use song introductions to draw an audience in to the performance and dedicating Dustbowl's song "Beside You" to those affected by the Camp Fire was a nice touch.

The group's version of The Band's lively "Rag Mama Rag" brought Hot Club's James out of the wings to duet with fellow fiddler Connor Vance, and the two swapped licks with each other as well as the spirited horns of trumpeter Matt Rubin and trombonist Ulf Bjorlin. For a show-closing all-inclusive rendition of "Up on Cripple Creek," that hymn to enablers, the rest of Hot Club joined the Revival for a full-on hoedown that included solos by everyone and an epic bass battle between Erwin playing upright and Klopfleisch on electric that fused bluegrass, jazz and rock in a celebration of rhythm gone wild.

A standing ovation brought everyone back for an all-acoustic, un-mic'd Dustbowl Revival sing-along called "So Far Away," with the lyrics "I got these new friends/ And I ain't drinking alone," which punctuated the feeling that we'd spent the evening carousing and reminiscing with a bunch of musical friends. □

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