

## Spotlight

# Elton John serves up solid but unengaging performance

For Elton John fans who expected Reg to live up to his legendary stage performance, Saturday night's concert at the Smith Center was a disappointment.

It wasn't that Elton didn't deliver. During his two hours on stage, he banged out strong, memorable renditions of most of the favorites, gliding from synthesized pop to rock 'n' roll to ballad with scarcely a pause.

No, the trouble Saturday night lay somewhere else, somewhere in the vast, uncharted space between performer and audience. Given, the Smith Center is not the easiest place to establish that performer/audience intimacy, but even with the almost sold-out crowd, something just didn't click Saturday night.

Elton strutted onto the stage — fashionably late — dressed to kill in an

### Cara Bonnett Concert

ultra-sophisticated purple "Joker" suit designed by Gianni Versaci. (He may have ditched the Statue of Liberty costume, but it's obvious — and quite reassuring — to see that there's still a touch of the eccentric in the endearingly pudgy Brit.) In his sequined hat and dark shades, the 42-year-old Elton still cuts a dashing figure on stage.

A hot version of "Benny and the Jets" opened the show, and from the looks of it, Elton, consummate showman that he is, was prepared to play all night.

The same five-piece band and vocal

trio that accompanied him on the *Reg Strikes Back* tour again were a tight, professional machine, although they overpowered Elton's incredible piano playing at times. Longtime sideman Davey Johnstone was a standout on guitar, joined by Freddie Mandel on synthesizer and guitar, Romeo Williams on bass, Jonathan "Sugarfoot" Moffett on drums and Guy Babylon on keyboards.

The songs were just as tight. No self-indulgent eight-minute renditions of three-minute pop tunes here; this was strictly no-frills Elton, straight to the point.

Which might have been part of the problem.

For whatever reason, Elton just didn't seem to be into it. He didn't talk to the audience, and the closest he came to the

playful interaction that usually characterizes his stage shows was a bluesy game of vocal one-upmanship with his trio of backup singers as an intro to "Sad Songs (Say So Much)."

His much-publicized throat surgery of a few years ago left Elton with a deeper voice that, while a little rougher around the edges, can stroke the low notes better than ever before.

But the fact remains: while there were moments when the sparks flew ("The Bitch is Back," for one, and a rocking version of "Funeral for a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding"), the show never really caught fire.

The strongest part of the evening was the three-song set sans backup, when the band left the stage and Elton got to do some songs on his own. That's where the genius of Elton John comes

clear — when it's just him, his crystal keys, and 20,000 people singing along. There was "Daniel," "Candle in the Wind" and "Your Song": a powerful one-two-three punch that left you stunned even after the band hit the stage again and the lights flipped from blue to red for "Philadelphia Freedom."

Old standards like "Philadelphia Freedom" were the backbone of the show. In fact, of the 20-plus songs Elton played, there was precious little to be heard from his two latest efforts. Only a punchy, infectious version of the title track and "Healing Hands" were on the program from the tour's namesake *Sleeping With the Past*, and "I Don't Wanna Go On With You Like That" and a not-quite-there "Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters Part 2" from *Reg*.

The show was striking visually, from

the compelling camera work on the above-the-stage video screen to the impressive light show. But Elton rarely left his post behind the keyboard, and one got the feeling that he knew from the first time the lights went up on the audience that this would not be the show to end all shows.

In fact, when he returned to the stage after his traditional costume change (now attired in the limyest lime green suit and black top hat), instead of continuing into another hour and a half of music, he played only four songs.

When the lights came up after "Rocket Man," we didn't want to believe it was over, but it wasn't a real surprise — only a fitting end to what was a solid show by a masterful performer, but a far cry from the Elton John we could have seen.

# Raleigh homecoming proves Connells have risen above success

The relationship between a band and its hometown audience is a magical, mystical thing. While a certain bond is always there, it often changes as the band finds success and popularity away from home. On Friday night at the Raleigh Civic Center, the Connells laid their fans' doubts to rest once and for all and proved that they're the same old boys next door.

I have to admit, I was a little worried to start with. When the opening band Pylon hit the stage, the crowd only moved from the neck up. The music was worthy of a better response, but the audience clearly was not impressed.

Lead singer Vanessa Briscoe-Hay started out with a voice like Natalie Merchant but by the end she was

### Lisa Reichle Concert

screaming "Volume" through her hair. Although the band met a lukewarm response Friday, it's easy to see that Pylon will make a great opening band for R.E.M. later this year.

Between shows I looked around and realized that I was one of the oldest people there. Sure, there were a few token parents and long-time fans, but most of the 3,500 people present were between the ages of "My parents just dropped me off in the family Saab," "I just got my license and my father gave

me a Saab" and "I just moved into the frat house, and my father gave me a Saab." I have to admit, though, these yuppies were polite. They made sure to say, "Excuse me, y'all," as they elbowed their way to the front of the stage.

As we got ready for the Connells to appear, there were a lot of doubts in the back of my mind. Would this be the same band that rocked the Cat's Cradle? Could they connect with *this* crowd?

But when the lights dimmed and the band appeared, I knew the Connells hadn't lost their touch. The crowd went nuts! A few seemed puzzled by the clean-cut guy with short hair playing the guitar in George Huntley's place, but as the opening songs started, we all

breathed a sigh of relief as we realized that it was the real George Huntley.

As the Connells rocked through a few opening numbers like "Fun and Games" and "Something to Say," vocalist Doug MacMillan seemed amused by all the lights and smoke on the set. "It's like Pink Floyd up here," he said. "We've got lights, smoke and a glow-in-the-dark tambourine. It must be a rock concert."

A little later, someone threw a shoe on stage. After asking who the owner was, Doug shrugged and said, "It is everyone's shoe now. That's the sacrifice we all make for rock 'n' roll." He threw it into the crowd, only to have it tossed back on stage. This began the game of catch that continued through-

out the night. After the shoe came a couple of rolls of toilet paper which tested the band's ability to dodge, catch and throw without skipping a note. They passed with flying colors.

Between the old Connells' favorites, the crowd enjoyed a trip down Memory Lane with Doug's version of "Close to You," a cover of Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band's "Night Moves," George's rendition of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," and the crowd's favorite "Don't Bring Me Down."

The concert included plenty of old favorites and hometown references to Raleigh as well. The Connells dusted off some of their early works like "Darker Days" and "Seven." With a rendition of "Boylan Heights" and

comments like "Mother? Where are you, Mother? Speak to me, Mother!" the band reminded everyone of their roots in the Triangle. Doug was even friendly enough to take a close up picture of George for a fan in the front row.

This concert offered more than an opportunity for Raleigh to become re-acquainted with the Connells; it offered the Connells a chance to get in touch with their roots. While their music has become more sophisticated, their stage show a little flashier, and their name more well-known, that link between band and audience hasn't changed a bit. It was easy to tell from the crowd's response and three rocking encores that everyone agreed. This magic will be around for a long time to come.

# Technical virtuosity characterizes Branford Marsalis concert

In less than 90 minutes, Branford Marsalis proved himself to be one of the world's most technically proficient saxophonists Saturday night at the Stewart Theatre in Raleigh.

He also displayed a remarkable knowledge of several major jazz styles, most notably the "sheets of sound" mile-a-minute soloing which marked the early developmental period of the legendary John Coltrane.

Unfortunately, Marsalis failed to prove that he was deeply possessed by the music to which he has devoted his life.

Which is not to say that this concert was devoid of inspired music; in fact, the quartet as a whole gave a heartfelt and, at times, dazzling performance, earning a standing ovation before the evening had ended. They did, however, appear somewhat tired, and Marsalis even mentioned, rather unwisely, that

### Matthew McCafferty Concert

they needed to conserve their strength for their heavy performance schedule.

As the show started, Marsalis reminded the audience that it was John Coltrane's birthday and joked that they would be celebrating "by not playing any of his music." Actually, the group did perform one piece, by the late "jazz messiah," and several others that were imitative of Coltrane's style.

"Mr. J.C." was the evening's opener, a piece written by the group's keyboardist, Kenny Kirkland. Recalling Coltrane's modal period, the tune included the first of the evening's many exquisite piano solos. Although the band did not really gel until the second piece,

Coltrane's "Tunji," the purity and inventiveness of Kirkland's improvisations carried the relatively young group until it reached its stride.

It was the contrast between Kirkland's mature, memorable soloing and Marsalis' cool, detached approach that finally left me with the impression that Marsalis just wasn't *feeling* it enough. He seemed at times to be chasing the music, over-actively searching for it as opposed to being receptive to it and "acting as the medium between the music, which already exists, and the listener's ears," as Miles Davis once put it.

His rapid-fire soloing was also characteristic of Coltrane's less memorable work, when he tried to squeeze as many notes as possible into a single bar of music, assaulting the listener with a

cascade of arpeggiated ambition.

Fortunately for the jazz idiom, Coltrane eventually discovered that the spaces in between the notes were as important as the notes themselves. Marsalis no doubt understands this as well, and as the evening progressed and he relaxed, his soloing became more memorable, emotional and generally more convincing.

Marsalis' best efforts came in "Royal Garden Blues," the title cut to his second album. This New Orleans-style tune seemed to suit Marsalis best of all of the evening's compositions, perhaps owing in part to his being raised in that jazz mecca. The band's ability to take even this very traditional sounding piece to its outer limits, without ever losing one another, was an impressive testament to their elasticity and growing

maturity as a unit.

In addition to these musical highlights, the evening was chock full of great comic relief, such as when "Tain" Watts climbed out quite unexpectedly from behind the drum set *during* the last song and said "we heartily appreciate your attendance this evening and hope to see you again in the future." The musicians and the audience shared several long laughs, which helped to overcome any tension created by Marsalis' apparent discomfort in addressing the audience.

One of the show's more annoying features was Marsalis' tendency to wander self-consciously behind the stage while the remaining trio traded solos. Even more distracting was his tendency to talk to Kirkland beside the

piano while the bassist or drummer soloed. I found myself wondering, "if he doesn't care enough to listen to his own band member's solo, why should I?" In his desire to appear extremely relaxed, Marsalis actually drew much more attention to himself than if he had simply remained at center stage while he wasn't playing.

While these complaints are somewhat irrelevant to the music, they do speak of Marsalis' need to mature somewhat more as a band leader and an entertainer. Overall, it was a very good show. Marsalis' sound was brilliant and his knowledge seemed comprehensive, but if he is going to make a name for himself in the jazz history books, he must eventually carve a more decisively individual style. At age 29, this gifted musician has plenty of time.

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attributed to the fact that many of the families in the area put high priority on academics," Royster said. "Also, a lot of students' parents are involved in jobs that provide opportunity for travel, which is a broadening experience for all the family members."

There are special programs and classes offered at CHHS which increase a student's education possibilities, Gockerman said. "There is a speech and oral class, a vocabulary development class and tutoring programs that offer students one-on-one help."

Royster agreed with Gockerman that CHHS offered its students an education that prepared them well for college.

"We offer the best possible education available and we have a dedicated staff who stress good academic performance," she said.

In order to improve the test scores statewide, Royster said, many issues needed to be addressed, including increased parental input statewide, emphasizing family and student goal setting and the economic status of individ-

ual school systems and their ability to work with the students.

"Of course, the more money that is put into education, the better the education can be," she said.

Royster stressed that good educational programs were important to the success of the students. But officials are unsure about the cause and the cure for the low scores N. C. students received.

Carolyn Horn, vice-chairwoman of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro School Board, believes that in order to improve stu-

dent scores, emphasis needs to be placed on improving the education in lower grades.

"We offer a four-year-old education class which is not formal education but rather teaches social, verbal, and manipulative skills," she said.

The difference in the number of students taking the test may be the cause of North Carolina's low standing, Royster said.


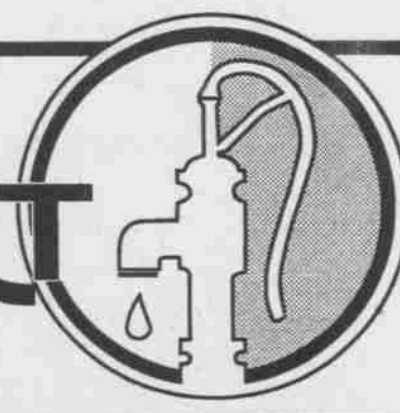
In schools east of the Mississippi River an average of 60 percent to 75 percent of the students take the SAT. In schools west of the river, a smaller percentage take the test.

"In those states (west of the river) only those who feel fairly certain they are going to college in the East take the exam," Royster said. "Therefore, fewer students take the SAT."

Horn disagreed that the high number of the students taking the SAT in North Carolina should be used to explain why the state fared so poorly in the survey.

"We should not hide behind these facts. A lot of schools with high numbers taking the test perform much better," he said.

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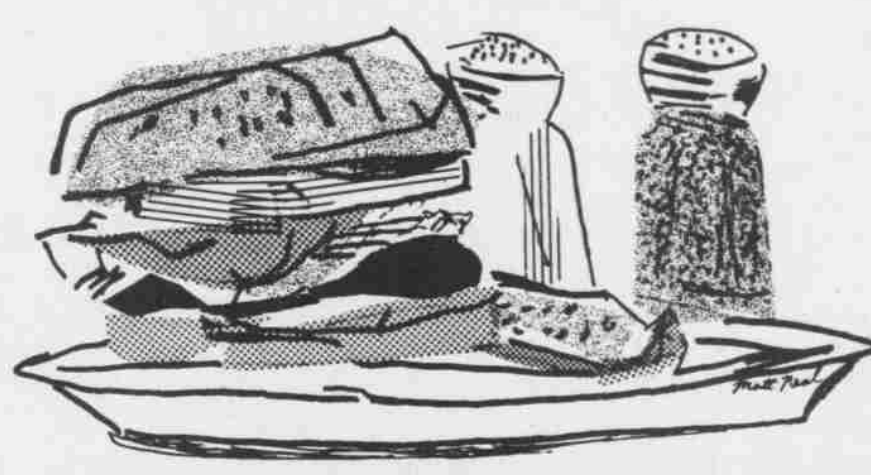
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