

LEON RUSSEL AT YOSHI'S WEST

November 11, 2009



Unexpectedly got tix to review Leon Russell at the new Yoshi's in SF so went over there to examine the venue and the concert. Yoshi's West is much larger than the venue in Oaktown, with a larger main room as well as a balcony. There are no booths as found in Yoshi's East, and the tables are packed in more efficiently, however we found the acoustics to be very much inferior.

It was early in the week, but the place was SRO with every slot filled.

When the band came on their opening medley of Stones and old time rock turned into sonic mud with bass and drums not in synch and way over-amped. The bassist (doubling on vocals), Jackie Wessel had to motion the soundman to up his voice mike several times.

We took a walk during the single 90 minute set and heard definite variations in the acoustics from the balcony to the floor. One of the ushers there mentioned there are even variations going from right to left for all the shows, with the better sound away from the mixing board.

Leon Russell (born 1942 in Lawton, Oklahoma) came on staged aided by a cane. His voice has lost much of its power and he did not help much by arranging the vast majority of the foreign material with quixotic tempos and positively wierd rhythms, such that the classic "Georgia" and the Stone's "Wild Horses" became nearly unrecognizeable. This can be a real winner when a master takes an old chestnut to a different stratosphere as the Talking Heads did with the old blues number "Take Me to the River."

Unfortunately, a sort of foxtrot "Wild Horses" failed to work and Russell's voice, being largely overwhelmed by the orchestration made it that more difficult to figure out just what was going on.

In the entire set, Leon Russell played no more than three of his own songs, causing one of our companions, a former member of the successful sixties group "Joy of Cooking", to put her head in her hands and shake slowly from side to side.

Towards the end of the set, the bassist and drummer left, which allowed the fairly accomplished pianist Brian Lee and guitarist Chris Simmons to really shine, with Simmons performing a very capable "Walking Blues" on slide guitar, and Mr. Lee belting out a fairly decent blues version of "That Lucky Old Sun" (written by Beasley Smith and Haven Gillespie, made popular by Frankie Laine).

The rhythm section returned but this time the group really jelled as they launched into a '50's rock and roll medley with ensemble singing, playing the music with traditionally expected tempos and rhythms in 4/4, and the lead guitarist doing as much of a Chuck Berry duckwalk as one could do on the postage stamp stage, ending the concert on a high note.

We sure wish there had been more ensemble singing to add punch to the vocals, as this is where the group really shined, but they never did an entire song that way.

Leon Russell began performing in Tulsa at age 14, went on the road right after high school with Jerry Lee Lewis. After that gig, he settled in LA to become one of the most sought after session musicians in the business.

After recording on several hundred hit records in the 1960's, Leon built a recording studio in his home in 1967 where he and Marc Benno recorded songs which were released on two critically acclaimed records as the 'Asylum Choir'. Leon co-produced, arranged, and played piano, organ, and guitar on Joe Cocker's second album, 'Joe Cocker!' in 1969. He also recorded and toured with 'Delaney & Bonnie & Friends'. Leon founded Shelter Records with partner Denny Cordell and released Leon's first solo album, "Leon Russell" in May, 1970. It included Beatles George Harrison and Ringo Starr, Rolling Stones Bill Wyman and Charlie Watts, Steve Winwood, Eric Clapton, and Klaus Voorman. The album contained classic Leon songs, 'A Song For You', along with 'Hummingbird', and 'Delta Lady'. Shelter Records was home for not only Leon but many other artists such as Freddie King, Don Nix, J.J. Cale, Tom Petty & The

Heartbreakers, The Gap Band, Dwight Twilley and Phoebe Snow. Leon played on and produced three Shelter albums for blues guitarist Freddie King.

Leon organized and led the band behind Joe Cocker for the famous "Mad Dogs & Englishmen" tour of the U.S. in March-May, 1971. The huge 11 member band included 3 drummers and a 10 member choir which played 65 shows in 48 cities. The tour was filmed for the movie "Mad Dogs & Englishmen". The live double-LP album on A&M Records reached #2 on the U.S. album charts and sold over a million copies.

On August 1st, 1971, Leon joined George Harrison and friends for two performances of the Concert For Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden in New York to raise money for refugees. His "Jumpin' Jack Flash/Youngblood" medley was considered the highlight of the show by some. The album earned a Grammy Award for Album of the Year.

He went on to gather several Gold Record awards for solo work, becoming Billboard Magazine's "top concert attraction for 1973".

At the height of his popularity, he began recording country-western albums under the pseudonym "Hank Wilson", and toyed with the bluegrass genre. In this new incarnation he performed with Willie Nelson and with Earl Scruggs, garnering Grammy awards in the process in the early 80's.

Clearly the man is a giant in the music industry with lasting impact, hence we are hesitant to criticize the show, however it was generally agreed that, while the current outfit he is touring with undoubtedly possesses high voltage energy,

they occasionally do not gel together and that Leon's vocals outside the studio probably should take a well deserved rest.

Oh yes, play rock and the blues the way they are supposed to be played. The wacky arrangements just do not work.