

JIM WHITE

GREAT AMERICAN MUSIC HALL

JULY 20, 2002



Me and the Significant Other met up with an old pal to take in Jim White off the cuff when the pal won tix through KPFA. We almost didn't go, not knowing about the feller beyond a quick gander at his promo photo, which, quite honestly did not inspire us with any great desires to spend a few hours on cowboy yodels and annoying twang.

Man were we surprised.

San Francisco's oldest and grandest nightclub, the Great American Music Hall carries guests back to an earlier, more elegant era, with its ornate balconies, soaring marble columns and elaborate ceiling frescoes. Long-time customers

and newcomers alike feel at home in the 5,000-square-foot concert hall that symbolized renewal and optimism when it opened in 1907.

The remarkable interior design came from an unlikely duo: a French architect who designed the building in 1907, and Chris Buckley, a political mover and shaker who wanted to erect a grand structure after the devastating 1906 earthquake. The result was Blanco's, characterized as one of the most popular entertainment spots during San Francisco's notorious Barbary Coast Era. The restaurant/bordello offered fine food, gambling and fast women right up until the dark days of the Great Depression in 1933.

Three years later, in 1936, the extravagant and elaborate fan dances of local favorite, Sally Rand, brought new life to the dark building. She called it the Music Box, and swanky city dwellers would dance the night away there for the next decade.

After the World War, the hall sank into a long decline and was condemned by City Building inspectors. Locals saved the structure in an nth hour appeal and the place reopened in 1972 under its present name.

Loretta Lynch, a female a cappella trio opened up with some fairly traditional Appalachian melodies sung in razor-precise harmonies. Interesting enough, but hardly the thing to fill the venerable GAMH. Then the middle gal, all 4'10" and 98 pounds (with 8 pounds of that a lustrous fall of blonde hair) sang a song about cutting somebody's throat. Which livened up things a bit. Then the gals put away the instruments and with great verve launched into a splendidly harmonized "I Get Wet Between the Legs When I See You," which song caused

Father O'Finnikey to faint out of his chair, several sailors to blanch and a bus-load of nuns passing outside to disperse in all directions shrieking like a passel of crows. Even the carnies outside the strip joints turned red with embarrassment such was the language containing every Anglo-Saxon word you got whapped for plus a few new ones put together and sung in the most absolute sweetest voices imaginable.

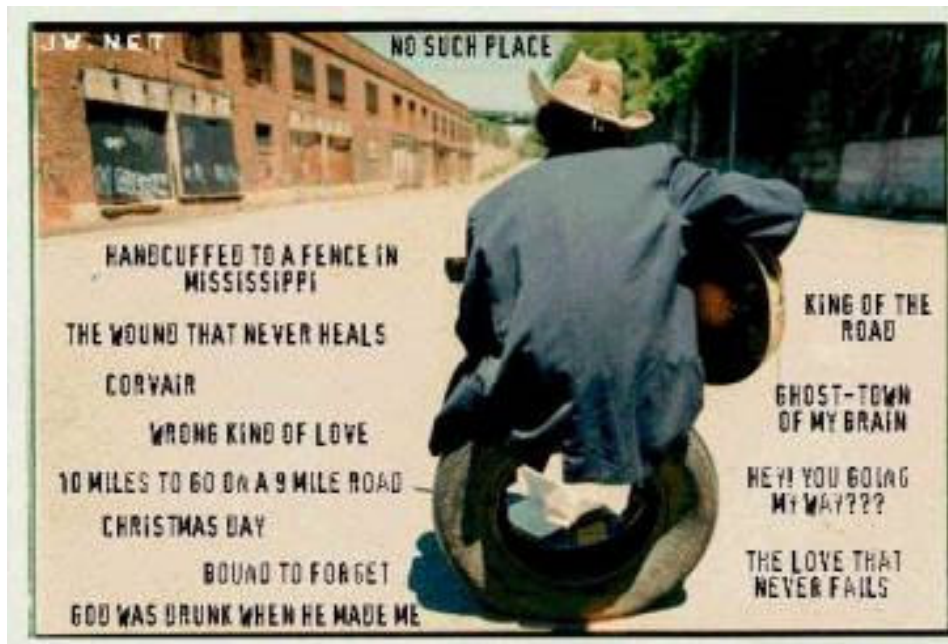
Frankly, they brought the house down.

After a few accompanied riot grrl songs they left the stage to loud applause.



Richard Buckner, a local favorite with the alternative crowd came on and had a mighty job to follow with his gravelly voice singing about basic hopelessness. His 1997 CD "Devotion+Doubt", was released on a minor Texas label and garnered significant critical praise. He played simple chordal rhythm on a basic steel string dreadnought, but his voice --evocative of hometown Lubbock TX -- was the real attraction. As our pal mentioned, "He has a flavor of uncompromising authenticity, and I like that." He also has a significant local

following, who called him back for a couple songs, finishing up with a Townes van Zandt, "I am still looking for you."



Jim White also hails from Texas, but this man has traveled musically quite far from his origins with eye-popping lyrics and amazing guitar work in which tape loops and his left hand do virtually everything. His right hand was maimed in an upholstery factory accident, leaving use in only two fingers, but the limitation was not noticeable at all as he flat-picked through every piece.

He came on stage, picked up an empty water jug and laid down a beat captured by foot-pedal actuated Casio recorder. He then did a short bass riff, captured that also, then launched forth into what became a foot-stomping, howling set that held the audience in its collective palm until well past 1:00am. His music, a brand new mixture of rockabilly, country, and -- improbably successful -- hip-hop, evoked with changing moods the broad dusty plains of West Texas, Mississippi delta and the tattered motel rooms in congested cities.

His lyrics are the best in the business, concerned with corvairs that have turned into bird sanctuaries on blocks, female serial killers, weird relationships that went wrong and a constant commentary on bad religion and his messed-up relationship with god best summarized by the song title, "God was Drunk When He Made Me."

The crowd could not get enough of the man and would not let him leave the stage, so he "negotiated" a pseudo-encore before darting off to finish his tour which has him hitting twelve cities in a two-week period; all venues at least 200 miles apart.

Seldom seen without what appears to be a 15-gallon cowboy hat, Florida's Jim White is an unlikely rock star. A former model and professional surfer whose Pentecostal upbringing turned him onto gospel music, White watched as his music career was almost ended by an industrial accident that severely injured his left hand. But his stripped-down guitar arrangements resonated with David Byrne, who recognized an affinity with the liminal artists on Byrne's eclectic Luaka Bop label. White's affecting (and decidedly off-kilter) brand of alt-country sticks with you for some time after the show was over.

Jim White -- remember the name.