

CHRIS SMITHER
FREIGHT AND SALVAGE
NOVEMBER 7, 2003



It's not much to look at from the outside - just an unpainted rough warehouse wall with a door, and the interior hardly rises above its origins as a storage and distribution center for produce. Just a big room that holds about a hundred people, set with a motley assortment of cafeteria chairs, remnants of old kitchen sets and a bank of salvaged theatre seats. But this venue, the venerable Freight and Salvage, is the premier place for acoustic music on the West Coast, and probably the entire Country.

The Significant Other repressed her Punk instincts long enough to accompany us to the Freight and Salvage in Berkeley, there to enjoy one of the most interesting blues guitarists to come out of New Orleans -- Chris Smither.

You might never have heard of Chris, for he has never been somebody who marketed himself well or aimed at the Top 40 slot. But this is a musician

whose lyrics have been compared to those of Dylan and whose distinctive guitar sound, which blends melody and rhythm in a Lightning Hopkins/John Hurt manner -- has long held a devoted following among those who play and appreciate acoustic music. He has, in fact, managed to successfully establish a continuation of the blues idiom without being slavish to shuffles, I-IV-V progressions, and predictable tropes. He plays contemporary blues about things that matter to us today without trying to be a museum of past techniques and ideas.

He has a new CD out called *Train Home* which is another instance of a master who is once again hitting his stride. Free of all the cumbersome orchestration that flagged some of his other productions, this is one hell of a keeper from the bouncy title track, the crunching power chords of Call Time, to the funereal version of Dylan's Desolation Row.

Smither in person, in live concert, is quite a treat, for the man's immense good humor and laughing sensibility really comes out to counterbalance the songs of lost love and stolen cars. In fact, Smither appears to really enjoy himself while performing, which is a rare thing in someone who has near thirty years of experience on stage. Saturday night he caused the audience to break up several times with ribald jokes and appeared to forget himself a couple times while singing. But then, that is the wonder of watching a master work, for when Chris Smither made an obvious mistake he would buckle down and get it all back in moments. It actually was quite amazing to see him juggle balls in the air, drop

one, then deftly pick up and get going until the dropped ball somehow found its way in the air again by virtue of sheer concentration.

Also performing were John Mulvey and producer David Goodrich -- who did things with a mandolin no one ever thought possible. At one point Goodrich lifted his electrified instrument to his face and blew across the bridge, producing the most eerie effect through the amp.

We have to say, Chris Smither is a delight to see, even on an off night, for an off night for Smither is wildly successful beyond the dreams of the average hack. And if two standing ovations from the very critical Berkeley crowd were any indication, Saturday can be counted as one of his many successes.

