

**BEN HARPER**  
**OAKLAND PARAMOUNT THEATRE**  
**NOVEMBER 3, 2007**



**I AM THROWING YOU A LIFELINE**

Island-Life sent our reviewer over to Oakland's venerable Paramount Theatre Saturday night to take in Ben Harper on his swing by the West Coast tour promoting his new album "Lifeline". As it turned out the show was sold out.

First, when one says, "Oakland Paramount Theatre", one is not talking about a dingy little box slapped up casually by some impresario. One is talking about a genuine historical jewel that is the pride of the East Bay.

Oakland's Paramount Theatre is one of the finest remaining examples of Art Deco design in the United States. The Paramount Theatre was built as a motion picture palace, during the rise of the motion picture industry in the late 1920s. Palace was both a common and an accurate term for the movie theaters of the 1920s and early 1930s. In 1925, Adolf Cukor's Paramount Publix Corporation, the theatre division of Paramount Pictures, one of the great studio-theater chains, began a construction program resulting in some of the finest theatres built.



Designed by renowned San Francisco architect Timothy L. Pflueger and completed in late 1931, it was one of the first Depression-era buildings to incorporate and integrate the work of numerous creative artists into its architecture and is particularly noteworthy for its successful orchestration of the various artistic disciplines into an original and harmonious whole.



Its exterior with its 110-foot high tile mosaic of enormous figures by projecting Paramount sign, which can be seen up and down the street both day and night, but it is the interior that rises to unequal heights. A 58-foot high grand lobby, with side walls made of alternating vertical bands of warm green artificial light panels and muted red piers, and with both ends and ceiling decorated with an almost luminescent grillwork, forms a regal introduction. Rare and costly materials are everywhere: hand-adzed quartered oak, Hungarian ash crotch, birdseye maple, Balinese rosewood, Malaysian teak, and Italian marble. The auditorium is unmatched for its refulgent splendor. Its gilded galaxies of whorls, patterns, gold walls with sculpted motifs from the Bible and mythology. Outside and in, the Paramount radiates the dream-world escapism with which sought to beguile its customers. There will never be another like it. The Paramount organ was built by Wurlitzer for the Paramount Publix theaters: a four-manual, twenty-rank model called the Publix I (Opus 2164), which cost the fantastic sum of \$20,000 in 1931.



After its initial brief blaze of "movie palace" glory in the 1930's, this remarkable auditorium suffered three decades of neglect and decline until its rescue by the Oakland Symphony, the City of Oakland and numerous private donors. The building was purchased by the Board of Directors of the Oakland Symphony Orchestra Association in 1972. A painstaking and authentic restoration was completed in 1973.

In 1975 the City of Oakland, the present owner, assumed ownership from the Oakland Symphony Orchestra Association. The Paramount Theatre became a California Registered Historic Landmark in 1976, and on May 5, 1977, was declared a National Historic Landmark. Walking into the main lobby, with its gold

ornamentations along the walls, curving staircase and glowing light fixtures is like taking a trip back through Old Hollywood. Public tours of the Paramount Theatre are given on the first and third Saturdays of each month, excluding holidays and holiday weekends.



Restored to its original splendor, meticulously maintained, and fully upgraded to modern technical standards, the Paramount now serves all the arts. The Paramount Theatre is the home of the Oakland East Bay Symphony and, as one of the San Francisco Bay Area's premiere performing arts facilities, hosts a year-round schedule of popular music concerts, variety shows, theatre, and - of course - movies.

Now to the music. Warmup for Ben Harper was Piers Faccini who follows up his critically acclaimed initial solo effort of 2004, with this year's release of'

Tearing Sky', a sort of multicultural assemblage of various styles borrowed from all over the world.

Born in London, Faccini speaks four languages and considers himself a "mongrel" of sorts, one who has gypsy, Polish, English, Irish and Italian blood running through his veins—which he thanks for creating an openness in his life and a curiosity with which he has been able to absorb cultures and music from around the globe.

Defined in the Wikipedia as "an English singer, painter and songwriter" he appears to have spent most of his time prior to recording as a spoken word artist in France where he was raised and now currently lives.

Most of the critical references to this artist can be largely ignored as either irrelevant, or mindlessly slavish in praise without meaningful explanation or understanding. We at Island-Life think that this is a shame, because in fact the artist is quite good at doing what he does. Superlative in fact. Furthermore, we have from a reporter in Tennessee where this artist performed at this year's Bonaroo Festival, the pleasant discovery that the artist is a decent human being and a warm person.

So now, the review. Faccini is all about vocals. Yes he is a singer/songwriter, however the quality of his vocals are so far beyond anything that is out there that the vocals command immediate attention. He does have some quasi-folk songs sung in a voice reminiscent of Nick Drake, however his powerful vocal instrument is several octaves and several degrees far beyond anything the short-lived English folk singer could ever have accomplished, even

had he not destroyed his life with drugs and alcohol. In performance Faccini sticks to fairly simple finger picked patterns on his guitar, accompanied by a bassist and a percussionist, with his remarkable voice filling the entire hall with uncanny ululations that seem to come from some primeval source within all of us. From Nick Drake, he ranges far afield from Jim Morrison to Moroccan goat herders. The effect is one of simple folk melodies composed upon some forgotten bucolic hillside, English skiffle songs presented in some lowdown bar, and Mississippi blues that segue into complex middle eastern ragas echoing across the sands of northern Africa, albeit with level 10 distortion at the amp. The actual lyrics matter less than the voice employed as a musical instrument.

We would say, that at this performer were to adopt some kind of easily packaged presentation with artificial construct similar to David Bowie, you would enjoy astounding financial success, however we don't think he wants that and we don't want that either, for there is a place for the man who has no place, who is understood as belonging to Every Place, the Universal Citizen of the World who makes by his very existence passports meaningless and all divisions between people senseless as they really are.

It is no surprise that Ben Harper and his people have adopted this artist into their own.

By the time in the Harper took the stage with his band "The Innocent Criminals", every single seat in the house was occupied. It was quite clear from the very beginning, that Ben Harper had come into the very center of a place which was precisely the source of his immense popularity. After several years of



trying this and that, it appears that Ben Harper has finally found the center and focus that he has lacked in the previous efforts.

Harper was born in Claremont, California, U.S. (in California's Pomona Valley, 10/28/69). Ben Harper's father, Leonard Harper, was African-American with some Cherokee Indian ancestry, while his mother, Ellen Chase, is of Russian Jewish descent. His parents divorced when he was a child. Okay He began playing guitar as a child in Claremont. He eventually specialized in the acoustic lap steel guitar (Weissenborn guitars). As a young man, he recorded an LP (Pleasure and Pain) with fellow folk guitarist Tom Freund. After this limited edition record, Harper got a record deal with Virgin Records, who released his debut album, *Welcome to the Cruel World* (1994).

From early on in his career, his music received more attention in Europe than it did in his home country. While he was a well-known and respected figure in the States, in countries like France, Germany, Switzerland, and The Netherlands, he was a star, receiving a great deal of airplay and critical acclaim. His popularity in Europe is such that he was French Rolling Stone magazine's Artist of the Year (*Artiste De L'Année*) in 2003, and his tour that year for *Diamonds on the Inside* played to packed arenas across the continent.

Along the way he has collected a legion of fans who hang upon his every word in every single song, sometimes deservedly so. Harper is an artist who is earnest, and committed to, and devoted to, the idea that he and his music can make a social difference in the world. It is quite clear that in his lyrics speak intimately to the passionate longing and dreams of his audience. From the very

first note he had every single person in every single seat standing and screaming, with the overall sensation that here, finally, somebody was saying what needed to be said.

"Those men who send the children off to die/ shall hear Death's constant whisper."

His version of "Gather Around the Stones" developed particular resonance here.

You're too young to know  
That you're too young to go  
There's no freedom to be found  
Lying face up in the ground

Ashes from an unfinished life  
Are all that's left  
In a tear-drop-shaped locket  
Hanging from his mother's chest

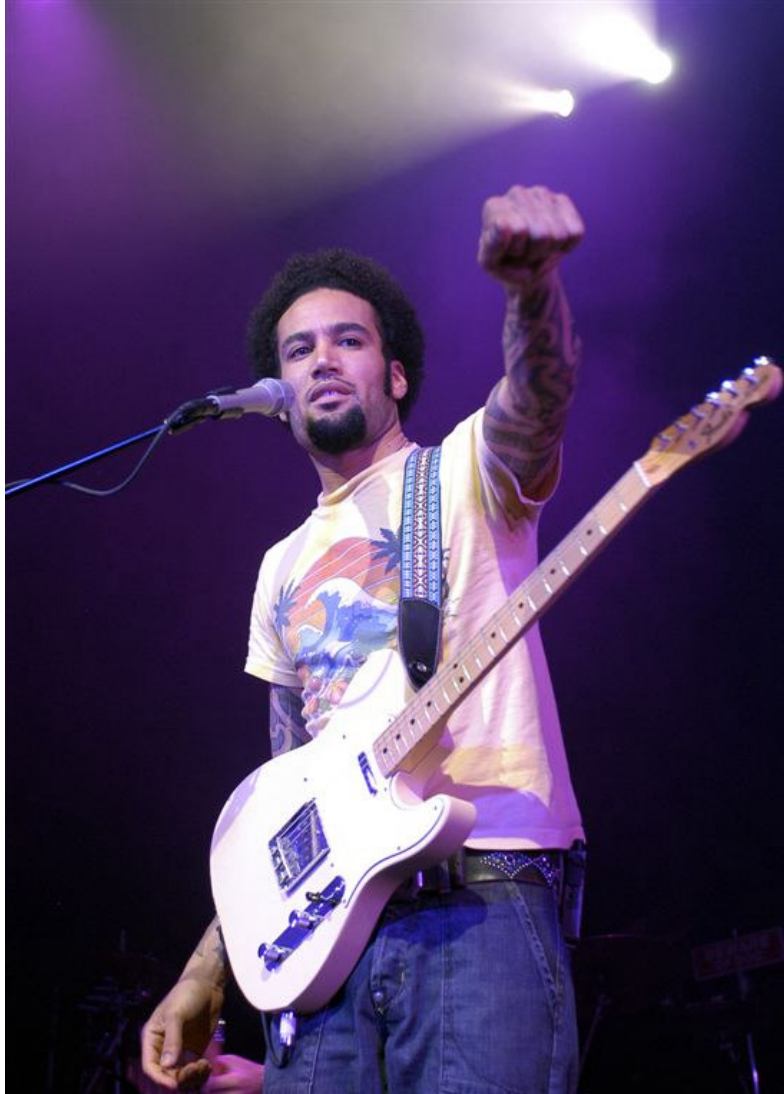
You whip the back of freedom  
'till it bleeds an oil stream  
Then you sail down upon it  
In your killing machine

Oaktown, by its very nature, as a place of multicultural diversity and vibrancy is precisely the kind of place that sees Ben Harper as a Native Son who speaks the essence of its longing for freedom and justice. The Paramount Theatre, with its fixed seating arrangements is not well designed to accommodate what happened Saturday night. As each song ratcheted the energy higher, the people began to leave their seats and dance in the aisles until the end resembled the high level high energy of a revival tent in the deep South.

Harper commented during a brief pause that you really enjoyed coming to this region of the country because of the feeling that the Revolution was still alive in America. He is version that night of "People Got to Lead", acquired a significant anthemic power. When he closed out with the 10 minute long, very emotional song based on the Rodney King episode, he proved that the desire of the people for justice extends far beyond the platitudes of CNN and the embarrassing lickspittle quackery of FOX pseudo-news.

"You may shoot me with your guns/ You may cut me with your knives/ But I shall rise/ We shall rise/ We shall rise."

The recorded music CDs barely do justice, in fact they do quite an injustice to the extraordinary energy and passion of this remarkable artist, as especially demonstrated Saturday night at the Paramount Theatre in Oakland. It appears that after a decade, Ben Harper is finally hitting his stride, demonstrating the immense potential of a very talented musician and composer.



Incidentally, the version of "I Don't Want to be Your Whipping Boy" is spot on.

The Rodney King song was so powerful, there was some question that an encore would even be performed as roadies began detaching cables and taking apart the stage set, however after several long minutes then Harper returned to the stage with his signature Weissenborn lap steel guitar to lead-in to the song "Lifeline", performing a version of "Romanz in D Moll", revealing his extensive classical musical training. He then brought on the entire band to continue for

another 30 minutes of beautiful music. His diehard fans were left ecstatic, and many were the newly found converts to his fan base. We can say we have become among them.