

in concert

Cheech and Chong perform the drug culture's 'Laugh-In' while the Dead play an excellent show (as usual)

"Cheech and Chong," the drug culture's Rowan and Martin, came to Portland's cavernous Paramount Theatre last Friday and put on a hilarious "Laugh-In" style show that would never get past the NBC censors.

After nearly an hour of vibrating "folk salad" singing by Tony Joe White, an emcee screamed in his best Dick Clark imitation: "Give a warm welcome to Cheech and Chong!"

And on they came acting and sounding as stoned as their recordings—the ultimate spaced-out hippies.

They did the performance in the form of a variety show: two hip comedians tossing up different subjects, shooting them down with devastating one-liners and following up with a skit scene on the subject. They introduced the skits and played the parts in the skits as well, with the help of an on-stage quick change booth.

The subjects were popular: sex and drugs, but it was their contagious voices and manner that made things funny and carried the audience more than the material. They were zonked, but you could identify with them. Everyone likes to get zonked once in a while.

And, from the heady scent of marijuana smoke drifting through the theater, you could sense that a lot of the audience was trying to identify with them. Just getting loose and really enjoying the bonus of visual entertainment which really made Cheech and Chong's dialogue work.

A lot of the routines were new, one from their yet-to-be-released third album, but they also did some familiar things which were enhanced by the duo's visual antics. The funniest routines were the ones they hadn't done on records, skits they had worked out just for the stage.

One of these new skits involved an old entertainer called "Blind Brother Chitlin," played by Chong.

Cheech, as "Right On Washington," the glib disc jockey from their albums, introduces "Brother Chitlin" as "funky as 10 skunks." "Chitlin" is carried on stage sitting in a chair, an oblivious euphoric expression on his weathered face. He sits there for a minute or two, grinning at the ceiling, until "Right On" revives him. "Chitlin" goes through a rambling and sometimes obscene portrayal of an old, turned-on blues artist, then is carried off behind the booth for a quick change and back on for another skit as someone else.

But first, a commercial message. Yes, the show even had product advertisements between scenes. Not the kind you catch on the soap operas, of course.

Cheech comes on with a plug for "Pristine Feminine Hygiene Spray. If he kissed it once will he kiss it again?" Chong follows with a testimonial for "Preparation H" suppositories. A little gross, but the audience really likes it.

Moving back into a night-club-comedian format, Cheech and Chong turn the subject to, of all things, dope. "How many of you smoke grass? Half the audience raises their hands. Then, "Anyone on speed?" Cheech and Chong then start a grotesque routine with changing colored lights just to draw out anyone who wasn't sure whether they were speeding.

After a couple of one-liners on marijuana—"You've got some great dope in this city. We brought it."—they do a scene about drugs in Vietnam.

A company commander is calling a forward platoon that has been sent out to destroy a patch of marijuana. "Roger Fox Dog, Roger Fox Dog, come in."

A slurred answer comes back, "Roger does what? Man, that Roger is a weird dude."

The company commander didn't get it either, so don't feel left out. The commander asks, "Any casualties?"

"Yeah, man, the whole platoon is wiped out," comes the slow reply.

After another one-liner, the platoon is left to finish off the marijuana patch and Cheech, back as emcee, introduces "the U.S. Open National Masturbation champion."

"How does it feel to be champ?" Cheech asks.

"Sore, man."

The audience is laughing with anticipation, now.

Cheech: "I understand you had some stiff competition. Did you have a handicap, champ?"

Champ: "Yeah, they kept flashing a photo of Trish Nixon in front of me."

Cheech: "That must have made it hard."

Champ: "No, it made it soft."

This isn't the first time Chong puts Nixon, and the establishment in general, on the end of a pun. Earlier, he brings up the subject of Watergate:

"Nixon's in trouble, isn't he?" The audience reaches a consensus rather quickly, answering in the affirmative. "They don't call him 'Tricky Dick' any more," Chong goes on gleefully. "Now it's 'Limp Dick.'"

Rather crude humor, but Chong does seem to become more bitter and biting than funny, when he discusses establishment personalities.

On American Bandstand's 20th Anniversary show June 20, Dick Clark invited the two comedians to participate in a mock "Rate-a-Record" session. Cheech fell into the spirit of the thing, but Chong came on with a hostile manner. When Clark asked him to rate one record, Chong grabbed the record and asked Clark, "You know what you can do with this record? Huh?" Then he broke the record over his knee.

Maybe it just wasn't a good record (Cheech gave it only a "three" rating) but Dick Clark, covering with laughter, gave the impression that he would rather have been elsewhere.

Commenting Saturday night on the record-breaking scene, Chong says, "I've always had an urge to get that dude."

The dynamic duo then swings into a hitchhiking scene from their first album where a speed freak has picked up a hitcher and they are now driving. Fast.

Cheech (to cowering passenger): "You're not afraid of a little speed, are you?"

Passenger, now alert, interested: "You got some speed, man?"

You can really appreciate the added benefit of seeing the two on stage during this skit. Especially when the red light starts flashing behind their car and Chong, the passenger, starts scarfing down handfuls of pills and joints.

The combination of visual impact and their spacy dialogue has the right effect on the audience. And, Cheech and Chong seem to like the Portland audience, too.

After a standing ovation, Cheech and Chong come back on stage and Cheech happily exclaimed, "You're a great audience, great. But we usually get three joints on stage by now..." The crowd didn't take the hint, but Cheech and Chong went ahead with one last scene, anyway.

The last skit comes from their second album, on the subject of what dogs "dew".

"That's a nice arch there, Ralph. Hey, you're making a rainbow!" During this exchange the two pundits are crawling around the stage, acting the part, sniffing each other and revealing that dogs need love too: "Isn't that Fifi? Man, she makes me so horny I could pole vault."

A stiff \$5 fee, a line two blocks long and a shake-down for cameras and tape recorders seemed to leave no ill effects on the crowd, and Cheech and Chong certainly removed whatever traces of discontent remained.

The stoned, spacy voice imitations on the Cheech and Chong records are what made them successful, and it looks like they have a future in combining that talent with acting to bring over live audiences.

One thing they do need however, is some new material. Young audiences, Cheech and Chong's primary, are not going for the old Milton Berle, Bob Hope jokes, anymore. Sophistication has set in, and boredom comes quickly thereafter. Cheech and Chong are going to have to do more than adapt old one-liners and depend on the shock value of sexual and drug culture allusions.

The kids are really eating it up now because it's new and has the appeal of all things defiant and eccentric.

But, young people grow up fast these days, and fads have never lasted very long in the entertainment field. Talent and originality have always been the mainstay.

Cheech and Chong have the talent. Let's hope they get some more original material.

Phil Waldstein

The Grateful Dead are probably the only group who could play three times a week at five bucks a ticket and still have a full house for every performance. Last Sunday, the Dead played to a packed house in the Portland Coliseum. The Grateful Dead are hard to explain—just what brings the people out time and time again?

The Dead were in Portland earlier this year and sold out the Paramount Theater. And now, back again for another sell-out. Do the Dead deserve this kind of following? It is hard to argue with cold facts that show that many people want to see the Grateful Dead play music.

I drove to Portland early Sunday morning. At the first exit on the freeway I picked up a couple who were hitchhiking up for the concert from Eureka, California. That's a long way to come for a concert, but they didn't seem to mind; after all, once you are a "Dead Head" you'll do just about anything for a chance to see a Grateful Dead concert.

The concert was scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. and run until 11 p.m. I got to the Coliseum about three hours before showtime and stood in the drizzle for almost an hour before the doors opened and the thousands of early arrivals began to stream into the giant hall in hopes of getting the best possible seat. I had already figured out where I wanted to sit. From an extensive background of lousy places to watch concerts from, I had computed the best position in the Coliseum. I got through the guards at the door with my wine bottle under my coat and managed to get to where I wanted to be.

Despite the number of seats that are available in the Coliseum, most everyone wanted to be down on the floor. I couldn't handle four hours of standing on my tip-toes trying to strain for a look at the band. Instead, I sat back in my padded chair and waited for the show to begin.

The Dead came on stage a few minutes after seven. It was a relaxed sight to see Jerry Garcia amble on stage and begin tuning. None of the fanatical screams that greeted Alice Cooper or Led Zeppelin, just nice, appreciative applause.

By the time the band came on stage, several people had already been carried from the floor, victims of either too much to drink, the heat or bad dope. Coliseum officials had a hard time treating all the cases they were confronted with.

I can't remember what the Dead opened with, and I guess that's pretty typical of the whole show. I don't think there was any overpowering need to hear any particular song all night. It was enough that the Dead were playing, and what they were playing, they were playing well. It was an even show, a fast number followed by a slow number. Some old favorites, "Bertha" and "Sugar Magnolia." Two hours and then a short break, and then back to more music.

It is a different feeling going to a Grateful Dead show. You don't expect to be thrilled to death by the show; instead, you are entertained in a different manner—you get to see and hear a fine band play for a long time. The only problem this creates is one of stagnation. It is very possible that the Dead are equating length of performance to musical success—this happened in Portland.

The only really sour spot of the evening came three quarters of the way through the show when the Dead went into an extended jam. It lasted close to half an hour and I was bored, to say the least. There was no call for anything of that length. Granted, it was nice to hear Jerry Garcia zoom into whatever was in his mind, and it gave Bill Kreutzmann a chance for a little solo exposure on drums, but it put a lot of people to sleep and drove a lot of people home. It is unfortunate that it marred an otherwise perfect concert.

From where I was sitting, the sound of the Dead's new sound system was excellent. I had a little bit of trouble hearing some of the harmonies, especially Donna Godchaux, whose voice doesn't carry like Bob Weir's or Jerry Garcia's. But, it was really nice to hear a good system for a change, instead of the ones that have been around lately at the Lane Fairgrounds.

Well, I had originally intended to pan the show a little bit when I started writing. But, there is no sense putting something down because it is the same every time, or because it lacks the explosive excitement of some groups. No, for Grateful Dead fans, everytime you get a chance to see the Dead it is a good experience.

Who am I to try and discourage people from shelling out five bucks every six months to see exactly what they saw six months earlier? It's good and we might as well enjoy it while it's still here. The way things are going the good things don't ever seem to last very long, at least not long enough.

Bruce Micklus