

in concert



The Mahavishnu Orchestra

Photo from IFA

Mahavishnu in Portland: loud but good

The highly visceral Mahavishnu Orchestra put on a rousing, if too loud exhibition of their progressive jazz-rock-space music at Portland's near-capacity Paramount Theater on Sunday last.

John McLaughlin and Co. continue to impress with their technical virtuosity and their material is both sophisticated and powerful in one. They are an esoteric, emotional group and if they had been more in syncopation Sunday, it surely would have been the concert of this or any year.

The group, inspired by mystic Sri Chinmoy's Eastern cosmicity, opened things up with a prayerful minute of silence, during which a handful of acerbic Portlanders shouted a desire to "boogie" or "get it on." The first tune, "Meeting of the Spirits," rendered such mundane requests superfluous as the theater shook with a fulsome beauty and touches of electric schizophrenia. McLaughlin dazzled on his new double-necked 12-string guitar and Jan Hammer with colorful keyboard, Jerry Goodman on mostly vibrant violin, Rick Laird with booming bass and the magnificent Billy Cobham on drums, provided intense interplay.

The first half-hour was quite exciting, including mostly new unannounced material and jazzy jamming. A tune off "Birds of Fire" struck a familiar chord as "Open Country Joy" then exploded on the audience. Sounds were too loud, though, to pick up on all of the song's sensuousness and violinist Goodman seemed both off-key and drowned out at intervals.

Another hour of fast-paced hysteria ensued, including a segue-in

of their towering "One Word." But I must say that their series of solos did not always inspire. Yet when McLaughlin and drummer Cobham engaged in double repartee or Hammer and Cobham exchanged ideas, the group soared. Laird continued tight on bass but Goodman had his violin offstage for fully a third of that hour. A bit of ennui was inescapable, though the time is always too short when Mahavishnu plays.

A passionate version of "Hope" certainly satisfied and the following unknown number also awed, then suddenly McLaughlin mumbled some thanks, the lights were out and the group was gone. The crowd elicited one encore, the harrowing "Vital Transformation" off their first album, "The Inner Mounting Flame." This was perhaps their finest moment and it seemed to me the flame was ignited as the inner tension mounted with the searing volume. Alas, that was all for Portland and a stunned, shattered audience filed out reluctantly despite their aching ears.

The concert could have been better, it should have been softer surely (see acoustic McLaughlin guitar and Hammer piano would have been appreciated periodically).

The boyish-looking, beautifully smiling McLaughlin remains a guitar genius with a long and lively past, though he sometimes sounds human these days and is occasionally repetitive. One hopes his future foretells more of the eternal beauty he exemplifies.

Cobham is so dynamic on percussion that his talent and speed rate at the very top of rock, jazz or any style. Here's one drummer who is truly the group's pulse, not just a loud 4-4 thumper.

Hammer is outstanding and very versatile, Laird is solid and Goodman good, though the latter has been heard in better form.

It is definitely difficult to pass judgement on musical mind-blowers such as the Mahavishnu Orchestra. If something was missing, I would suggest that a bit of staleness or a two-year-itch is setting in somewhat. Still, the group is a brilliant musical "sanctuary" for many people, and for their faithful followers, hearing them erupt in Portland was of "Paramount" importance. There was no other place I wanted to be on Sunday night.

Owen Mascott

Note: If you are putting on an event for which admission is charged and falls into the entertainment category, let the Emerald know about it and it will be placed in the weekend preview column appearing on Thursdays. Announcements of this type are no longer carried in the "briefs" and "on campus" sections of the paper.

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