

in concert

Leo Kottke in Eugene

"We're going back to Minnesota on the 16th for a Christmas concert. It'll cost us more money to have some extra people along but it's up to me. I'm thinking about getting a Japanese fart soloist...he'll fart anywhere if you pay the bill," Leo says. "It should be fun."

Both his shows were sold out days in advance, and an ad in the Emerald had someone wanting up to \$5 for a \$2 ticket. Who said rock and roll is dead? Leo Kottke was in town.

Leo was scheduled for two shows, Wednesday and Thursday night and squeezed in between was a workshop and a KZEL interview. The latter was dropped, for obvious reasons. Leo returned from an extensive tour or Europe two days before the Eugene date; secondly he had very little time to recover from the trip and the first show. In the two days I spent with him, it was easily detectible.

He described himself as "nervous and in a catatonic state" before the show Wednesday night, but tried not to show it in his performance. Leo is a hard person to pinpoint and describe. He's one of those fellows who's got a story for every situation. "Everywhere except for Denmark was good. In Denmark they threw shit at me. They were so young too, 12 years old, and oh so f---ed up."

"I've never seen one, but they were like an Alice Cooper audience. I played my usual set of an hour or so... I wanted to make them suffer. Ha! I got hit with a beer bottle, a bottle cap and a ballpoint pen which hit me in the neck."

"They're smart—when you get hit with those little small things, the audience can't see it. All they can see is some guy up there getting pissed off and shaking around the stage."

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Kottke has two ways in which he opens his shows. Both were used Wednesday and Thursday nights. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, I'm Donnie Osmond!" Then of course there's the other standby. "Hi!" He'll wait till someone says "Hi Leo" back to him and then reply, "I'm not Leo, my name's Tammy Wynette."

Most of the crowd felt his nervousness and his obvious lack of rest. Nevertheless, the shows were more than up to par. Both opened with instrumentals which led to the merry melodies of his past.

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The first time I met Leo, I was quite impressed by his sense of honesty and overall sincerity toward people, journalists in particular. He's got to have the most incredible memory of any person I've ever met. Leo recognized 3 out of 4 acquaintances backstage during the first show. Most he met several years ago.

We had met at a Procol Harum show a few years ago, and it was then that I discovered his mellowness toward reporters. In fact, he's that way with everyone. Leo is cool, calm and to say the least, collected.

During the second show, Leo dropped one of his guitars face down, while working on a broken guitar string. "Well, it sounded pretty good on the way down," he joked. The guitar was still on the floor. "See how cool I am, I haven't even picked it up yet."

Thursday afternoon, he was supposed to go over to KZEL and do a radio interview but was still asleep when I arrived. He was staying with his friend Bruce Micklus, who the night before entertained Kottke, and two past acquaintances of Leo's, promo men from Capitol and MCA records.

The house was in a beautiful setting atop a declining slope here in Eugene. It provided Leo with some real quiet and privacy, much like one would find in a silent forest of green.



Leo Kottke at Thursday afternoon workshop in Gerlinger Hall. Photo by Kevin Lee

It was sometime after 1 p.m. when we decided it was time to get moving and head out for the workshop. "Do you think we've got time enough to stop somewhere for a hamburger?" he asked. We had the time and so it was to the "golden arches" we drove.

McDonald's is one of those places where they you can get an "all American meal, and get change back from your dollar." Nifty huh? We stopped at the one on Villard, and Leo was quickly recognized by the young lady taking our order. It's hard to figure out how she ever got his order as she spent most of the time talking about how it was the first time she'd ever waited on a rock and roll star. Big deal.

On the way to the workshop, we talked about John Fahey. "The first time I played in Eugene was with Fahey. We played at the bowling alley. He asked the audience if anyone wanted to get married, and somebody came up. He told her she was too young... I guess he was kinda in a sour mood that night. Right now John's in India."

Outside the car window in the street there was a little kid running through a dozen old puddles of rain. Leo focuses his attention on the boy, throws up his arms in jest and laughs: "Oh, Heaven, look at him." It was one of those classy situations that provokes Leo to write songs, one of which he did that evening. It was a lullaby for "one of those kids about 10 or 11 that you'd just love to punch!"

Anyhow, after we had passed the little kid, he continued about Fahey. "Oh, yeah, he went to India with his Maharishi to see his Maharishi's Maharishi. It's the truth, but it sounds strange to me. Well, no it doesn't, now that I think about it."

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Kottke has been doing a Tom T. Hall number in all of his shows lately, called "Pamela Brown." Dig the lyrics:

I'm the guy who didn't marry pretty Pamela Brown.
Educated, well intentioned, good girl in our town.
I wonder where I'd be today if she had loved me too.
Probably be drivin' kids to school.

Guess I owe it all to Pamela Brown,
All of my good times, all my roamin' around.
One of these days I might be in your town,
And I guess I owe it all to Pamela Brown.

See the likes of cities, and I've been inside their doors,
Sailed to foreign countries and walked upon their shores.
I guess the guy she married was the best part of my luck.
She dug him 'cause he drove a pick-up truck.

"It's just a real good lyric and a real twist," Kottke said during a discussion of its impact on the audience and its lyrical structure.

"Pamela Brown" and several others from this tour will be on the new album due to be released soon. "They said it'll come out sometime in January, but I understand that some demos are being pressed now. There's a few being done now for the radio stations." The new album, finished during the summer, was due for release during the fall but was delayed due to a vinyl shortage at Capitol Records. "That was our main gripe," he continued. "We didn't care so much if you couldn't get the record, but we wanted something fresh out there. At the moment, I'm playing places I've played a couple of times before and I hate to do them without fresh stuff." The Kottke entourage, which consists of Leo and his two guitars, is on a 10-day stint which ends this evening in Portland at the Civic Auditorium. "I'm looking forward to the holidays," Leo said. "I think I'll take a month off during Christmas and rest up."

"It's a good record," Leo said. "It's one I really like... a lot more than any of the others I've done. There's one instrumental, it's kind of an 'Albatross'. It's called: 'A Child Should Be A Fish.' I did it on an electric 12-string, where we took the 12-string direct and miked it, so that it sounds a little different."

Result: one of the best Kottke albums to date, full of instrumental and vocal melodies designed to mellow out the mind and soul. "It was supposed to come out in October but I went about a week over in recording time. We really took a lot of time on this one, which I think is why it turned out so nice. With the other albums, we got into the studio too late and had to rush," Leo said. "There's a lot of vocals with instrumental construction in the vocal. We tried to work it so that if someone was interested in my guitar playing they could listen to the track. It's like the track is good, and the vocal is there, and then the instrumental break... it's a lot more arranged."

The new material from the upcoming album includes a tune Leo and friend Mike Johnson wrote. "There's a friend of mine in Minneapolis that went through what must be the worst possible moment on stage," Leo explained. "He was playing at a club in Chicago called the 'Earl of Old Town' a couple of years ago. He's a classically trained singer so he casts kind of a chilly sort of spell over an audience and they become very quiet, sort of tear-stained and attentive. He was reaching for a high note in his second-to-the-last set and he threw up! The front row there was a lot closer there than it is here. Anyway, he said thank you and walked off the stage, which has got to be the height of professionalism." The number included on the new album is a lengthy instrumental.

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I mentioned one night to Leo that there was a guy in the audience that had seen him a long time ago at a coffee house near Carlton College in Minnesota where the capacity was 35. "Carlton?" he said.

"I run into people from there all over the face of the earth. They turn up everywhere. It's the town where Jesse James was killed. I'm not sure if it's known for anything else."

"I had an admirer there who had gotten drafted and came to one of my concerts and told me that he'd like to distribute my 'Oblivion' record in Germany where he was going. He eventually did, and sold 50 copies of it in Munich at the PX. It was winter time, and he had walked into the river, got pneumonia, walked around town, collapsed somewhere and died. Ain't that just the power of music?"

Kottke, 28 years old and born the son of a basketball coach in Athens, Georgia, began playing his guitar "at 13," he recalled. Several years later, he found himself playing at the Showboat Lounge in Washington, D.C. "I got to hear some really good music there... some real good guitar music. It was owned by Charlie Parker Byrd and a few other people. It was there that I first heard Kenny Burrell," Leo says.

During the two days he spent here, it rained all the time, in fact it rained harder than hell. When he got to Gerlinger Hall on the day of the workshop, it was still raining and coming down like "cats and dogs", as they say in the weather biz.

Leo was asked at the workshop if he had ever played any other instruments other than guitar, and if he had had voice lessons, to which he replied, "I was told that my mouth was too big to play the flute. I met a singing sergeant in the Air Force once. He told me to grab a doorknob on both sides, spread my legs apart and sooner or later I'd

find out where my diaphragm was." Even funnier was what he said at the beginning of the workshop. "Does anybody know what we're supposed to do at a workshop?"

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At the conclusion of the afternoon it was mentioned that Alan Gaylor, of the Sunnyland Band, and co-author of "Tiny Island," would be coming down for the second show. That evening, Leo and Alan, ex-roommates ("He was a postman and I was a drunk") sat and reminisced about old times and discussed the possibilities of a Sunnyland Band album. "Naw, I don't think we're ready for it yet," Al said. "I'd rather wait till we get good and tight. We're just starting to get used to the new drummer."

They sat and talked backstage for a good 20 minutes or so and decided it would be a good idea to get nice and drunk. "I get real waxy with my words when I'm drunk," Leo told me. They then headed over to the local Black Angus and as I understand, drank themselves into a stupor.

It was still early yet, somewhere around midnight, and they were still humming away. I realized hours ago that for me, the evening was nearing its end, but for Leo Kottke the day had just begun.

Greg G. Lee

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