

Toni Childs' rapport with crowd transcends auditorium formality

By Rick Heyman
Emerald Contributor

The Silva Concert Hall at the Hult Center presents a tough challenge for an energetic singer like Toni Childs. The hall is so beautiful that it makes rock 'n' roll concertgoers behave as if they're at a classical performance. The polite, sit-in-your-seat-and-clap-at-the-end-of-a-song norms run counter to the kind of bonfire a singer like Childs is trying to ignite.

If you're Toni Childs, you play a few songs, turn up the house lights, and play Simon Says with the audience. This makes them look so silly that dancing becomes a very unself-conscious act by comparison. In one simple stroke on Monday night, Childs changed a stuffy concert hall into a small club, encouraging people to come up front and dance.

It didn't hurt that on the next song, the incendiary "Stop Your Fussin'," she and her band knocked the intensity level up a few notches and never looked back.

Childs' songs are intensely personal, and she did a magnificent job connecting with the audience on a deep emotional level. Her sometimes funny and always heartfelt between-song chats with the audience were very warm and human. Although difficult to do in a venue the size of Silva Concert Hall, Childs never played the "star" or "performer"; her album is aptly titled *Union*, and Childs was able to join with the audience in a rare musical communion.

Childs' stunning gift as a singer is not her husky voice, although it is an instrument to marvel at. Childs emotes so fully that it seems that every sinew, every nerve in her body is struggling to express the feelings locked inside the music.

Before her last encore, Childs told the audience "Singing is a way for me to express all the things I'd keep locked inside. If I didn't get to do this, I wouldn't be here today — I would have checked out a long time ago."

The catharsis shared between Childs and her audience on Monday was exhilarating and

wide ranging: a music grounded in a global beat, moments of exuberance and abandon, moments of political and social fervor, and moments of desperation and longing.

The only trick for Toni Childs will be maintaining the intimacy and union, so crucial for her and her music, when a huge following befalls her. And as her performance at the Hult amply demonstrated, this is clearly her destiny.

Matthew Sweet opened the show with a loose, rocking set taken mostly from his recent,

sound leans more to roots rock than the anachronistic, E.L.O.-ish keyboards that he's used to destroy a number of projects he's produced.

Full Moon Fever doesn't differ much from a standard Heartbreakers record. The two primary differences are the thickly layered guitars, which fill much of the musical space usually occupied by Benmont Tench's keyboards, and the freedom to explore.

Petty uses this freedom in several ways. He recorded a version of the Byrds' "Feel a

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critically acclaimed album *Earth*. Sweet's voice has become fuller and more mature since the recording of the record, which only served to make his catchy and quirky songs even more irresistible.

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Full Moon Fever — Tom Petty

Tom Petty fronts one of the best bands in the universe. Why in the world would he possibly want to make a solo record?


The answer seems to be that it would be fun. It's a time to play around without the normal expectations which accompany an artist of his stature. The Traveling Wilburys, the Petty-Dylan-Orbison-Harrison-Lynne supersession, didn't cave in under the collective weight of its members' reputations because they didn't take themselves seriously.

The same art-for-fun's-sake atmosphere of the Wilburys pervades *Full Moon Fever*. E.L.O.'s Jeff Lynne co-produced the album and, as with his co-production on the Wilburys record, the LP's

Whole Lot Better" that is so true to the original (Petty's voice has always sounded uncannily like Roger McGuinn's) that on a Heartbreaker album he would be accused of recording filler. With the expectations abandoned, it's a hell of a lot of fun to hear his tribute.

Full Moon Fever was also a chance for Petty to air his wicked sense of humor. Take the first few lines of "Yer So Bad": "My sister got lucky, married a yuppie/Took him for all he was worth/Now she's a swinger, in love with a singer/I can't decide which is worse."

For all this talk of lowered expectations, you might be surprised to learn that the songwriting is uniformly excellent, from the rocking beauty of "Free Fallin'" through to the rocking stomp of "Zombie Zoo." *Full Moon Fever* is first-rate Petty — a bit looser, a bit funnier, and a bit more guitar crazy. The best part may be that the Heartbreakers are a band who thrive on challenge. Not only is *Full Moon Fever* an album to blare all summer, but I bet the next album with the Heartbreakers will raise the stakes even higher.



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