

SWEET Honey

Singer/songwriter Toshi Reagon uses a diverse fusion of sounds to musically captivate a rockin' audience



MUSIC

By Yael Menahem
Oregon Daily Emerald

"I can't believe people came to see me in Eugene," singer/songwriter Toshi Reagon told the WOW Hall audience at her Feb. 9 show.

She shouldn't have been so surprised. Offering anything from blues, folk, Led Zeppelin, Metallica and Joni Mitchell, Reagon astonished the crowd with her performance on stage. She's been wowing music critics with her fourth solo CD, "The Righteous Ones," which was released last September.

Reagon says her music can't be categorized and that's how she likes it. She opened the show with "There Are" and immediately captured the crowd, which couldn't sway to the songs enough.

Even though Reagon sat on a stool throughout the whole show, her body movement showed that she was happy with the way the concert was going. The sound was good, her voice came through and the audience couldn't get enough of her music.

She continually joked with the audience about the number of people that actually showed up, and once she even asked if her mother, founder of the influential group Sweet Honey in the Rock, asked all of the people to attend.

In fact, she doesn't try to appeal to a certain demographic of people, and the WOW Hall gig was no exception — people from ages 10 to 70 were dancing.

"Everybody can come to the shows," Reagon said in a phone interview a few days before her Eugene performance. "We don't care who you're sleeping with, we just want you to come in the room and be with us and have some fun."

Her music influences span several genres, and Reagon says her mother Bernice introduced her to music without limiting what her daughter could listen to.

She "put me in a really good space around music and now my taste in what I like to listen to and play are very varied," said the New York resident, who was born in Atlanta and raised in Washington, D.C.

Reagon isn't a newcomer to the music scene.

Ten years ago, Lenny Kravitz approached

her and asked Reagon to open for him on his first world tour, and she accepted the offer. Reagon said that Kravitz had never heard her play, but he just got a "vibe" from her. She toured on his England and U.S. shows.

Reagon described that tour as "a beautiful experience," but she doesn't credit her success to the tour. She has recorded four CDs, she has toured the country and she has made a name for herself on her own.

"Fierce and uncompromising ... a shower of retro fun, urban blues and folk ... to hear her is to believe," The New Yorker wrote in praise.

In 1993, she signed a deal with Elektra but left before recording a CD. She said she's not bitter about the ordeal, but she realized that recording with a smaller label appeals to her more.

"You hope that you work with people who understand what you're doing and not trying to change too much of who you are as an artist," Reagon said.

"The Righteous Ones" features songs such as "Real Love" — accompanied by Sweet Honey in the Rock — which at the end breaks into Zeppelin-like guitars. Reagon catches her listeners and her audiences off guard with the contrasts, and that's part of her appeal.

When introducing the track "Drive it Home" at the WOW Hall, Reagon said the song wasn't necessarily lyrically rich, but she promised 172 degrees on the dance scale, and it was. Then she turned it down a bit with "Mean Ol' World," a "Dylan-esque folk country song," as Reagon described it.

Reagon's first CD, in 1990, was a collaboration with her mother, while her second one, "Justice," came out on the independent record label Flying Fish (now Rounder Records).

In 1994, Reagon paid for and released "The Rejected Stone," her first record after being dropped by Elektra. The CD was warmly received by critics but didn't demonstrate her amazing capabilities as a live performer due to the careful production of songs.

None of that was apparent at last Wednesday's show. When she started singing a quiet cover song, she felt the audience was too loud so she stopped the show and asked that all conversations be held until afterwards.

She stressed that everything was said "with a lot of love," but people came to see her, and she wanted them to enjoy a Reagon concert.

Fans have said that

her shows have changed their lives. She said she takes no credit for that, although she is glad that her music can influence people in such a positive way.

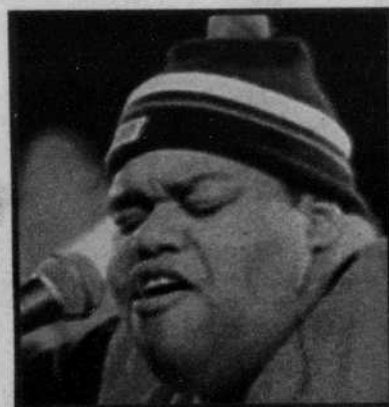
"I don't know if this is going to change the world," she was quoted saying at a recent Philadelphia concert. "All I'm trying to do is maybe if you get involved in this show, it's going to change the energy in your body and you'll sleep a little better tonight."

"The Righteous Ones" ends on a surprising heavy metal sound in the innocent-sounding title, "I'm Just an Egg Don't Mind Me," which turns out to be one of Reagon's favorite songs, she acknowledged.

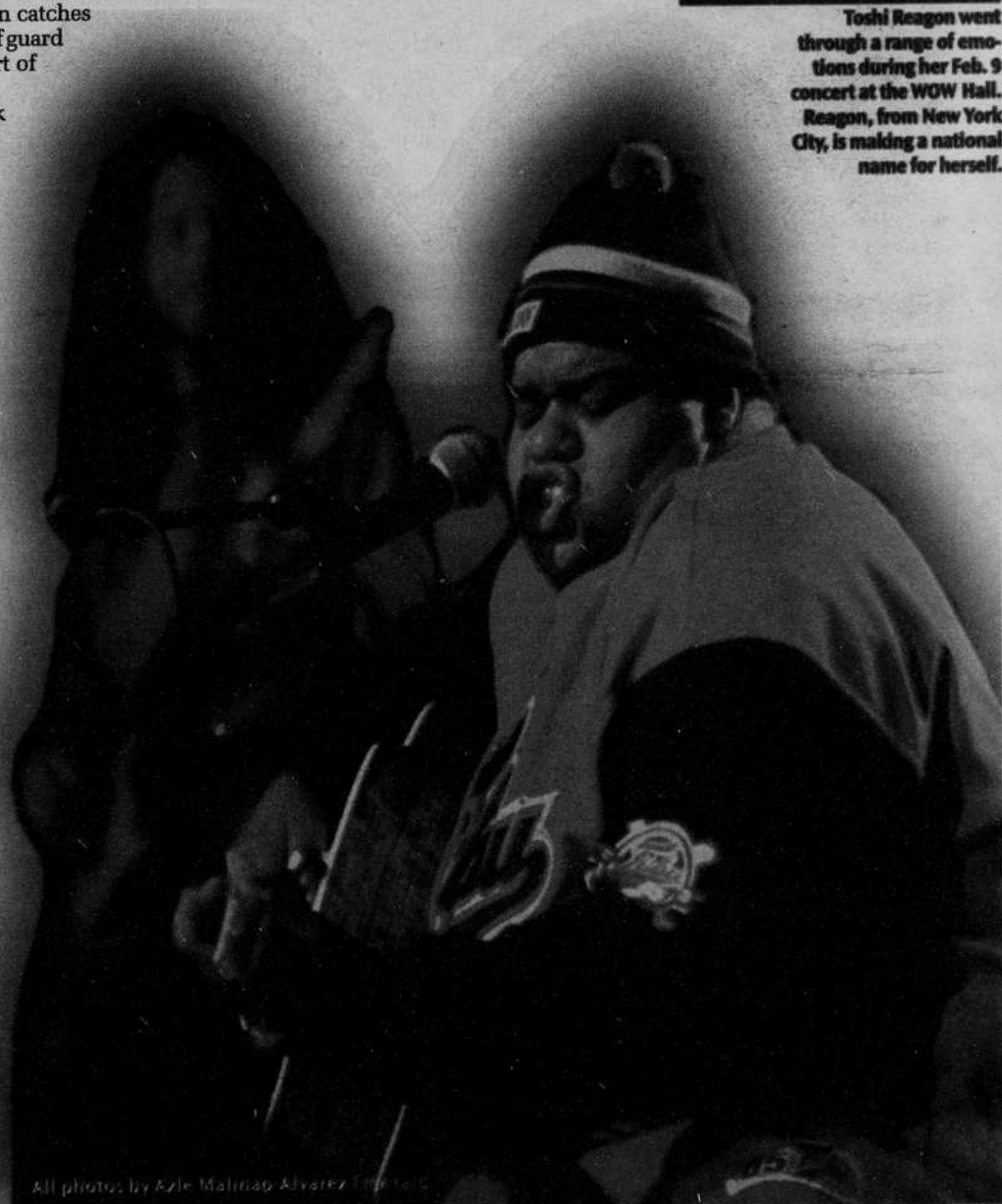
She laughed when talking about that track: "I'm a head banger. I love Metallica, and Kiss still has a warm place in my heart."

Reagon is an enlightening addition to a music world that has been overtaken by teenage pop sounds. She's mature and her sound should appeal to just about anyone because she doesn't limit herself to one genre of music.

Be sure to catch her next time she performs in Eugene. Meanwhile, get a taste of her incredible fusion of music in "The Righteous Ones."



Toshi Reagon went through a range of emotions during her Feb. 9 concert at the WOW Hall. Reagon, from New York City, is making a national name for herself.



All photos by Azle Malinas Alvarez for the Emerald

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