



Vagabond Opera

Red Hot Opera

Scandalous scarlet crinolines, old school accordions, guys with waxed moustaches – who *wouldn't* love being temporarily transported to an old-world cabaret house? **Vagabond Opera** is a Portland ensemble that taps into the lusty bohemian in all of us, satisfying days-of-yore urges with compositions that infuse classical opera with European and Middle Eastern elements ranging from Persian hot jazz to klezmer to Ukrainian punk. Sultry and rhythmic, comic and dark, Vagabond Opera does more than cross music genres; it evokes forgotten mysteries and celebrates the timeless, tragic joys of life during the group's acclaimed stage show.

Eric Stern is the eclectically minded musical maestro behind Vagabond Opera. A European trained opera singer, Stern felt ill at ease amongst the regalia of classical opera and longed for "performance on a more intimate scale." The breeding ground of creative genius that is Portland led Stern's path to cross those of five other highly trained musical misfits, each on a respective journey to find the magical crossroads between conventional art and groundbreaking innovation. Since they began practicing their intoxicating alchemy, audiences all over the West Coast have lapped up their performance experience and come back begging for more: more unpredictable tempo changes, more soul-shattering notes held longer than humanly possible, more spellbinding stage presence and more haunting melodies to float upon in dreams come nightfall.

Vagabond Opera shares the stage with Eugene's own Mood Area 52, also masters of scrambling the time-space continuum between old world tango music and avant garde jazz. Prepare yourself for an evening of romantic languages, sensual harmonies, off-beat humor and antique inspiration.

Vagabond Opera and Mood Area 52 play at 8 pm Friday, March 23 at the WOW Hall. \$7 adv., \$8 door– *Adrienne van der Valk*

Pondering Sondre

Sondre Lerche's 2002 U.S. debut, *Faces Down*, was a bit of a barnstormer within indie rock circles across the country. Twenty years old at the time, the Norwegian singer-songwriter floated in from nowhere to light up college music charts and dazzle critics with his dulcet folk/pop tunes. Lerche went on to

record three more LPs and a slew of import-only EPs; inspired by a wide array of '80s pop – from the new-wave vibes of Thomas Dolby to the crisp rock 'n' roll of Elvis Costello – the young crooner's erudite grasp on the mechanics behind classic pop tunes enabled him to sell the saccharine without ever sounding vapid or meretricious.

In hindsight, *Faces Down* – while his first and most raw-sounding – is still Lerche's best; even with his growing library of material, it was Lerche's stark, one-man acoustic version of the album's title track that had journalists and employees swooning at a recent ad-hoc acoustic session over at Astralwerks HQ. *Faces Down* heralded Lerche as this kind of neophyte-savant – his melodies were ingenious, but the way his impetuous falsettos cracked and awkwardly wrapped around certain high notes added a charming dimension to his youthful persona.

But the young man has grown quite comfortable and skilled with his intuitive gifts as a performer, polishing his singing and evolving his songwriting. And while his latter albums – most notably 2006's studio-jazz/lounge-pop album, *Dupper Sessions*, and 2007's energetic mod-rock endeavor, *Phantom Punch* – might sound more appropriate wafting overhead in a Starbucks than coming through the college radio airwaves, Lerche's music is still pretty damn sweet. His performance at such an intimate environment as Sam Bond's should prove both scintillating and whimsical.

Sondre Lerche and Willy Mason play at 9:30 pm Saturday, March 24 at Sam Bond's Garage. 21+ show. \$10 adv., \$12 door. – *Steven Sawada*

Punk Jazz

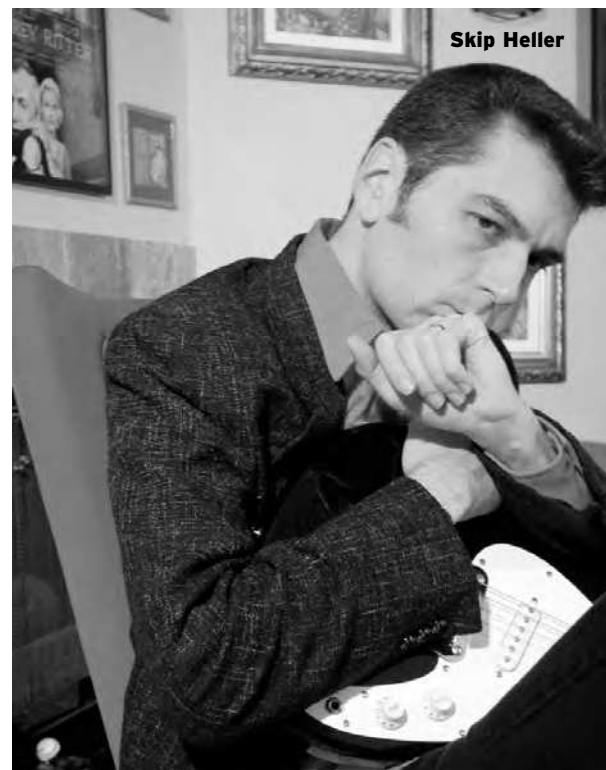
Skip Heller's background is so diverse – playing and composing everything from exotica to big band, soundtracks for crime audiobooks, space-age lounge, rockabilly, film scores, cartoon music, Chicano music, even a stint touring with NRBQ – it's a wonder the L.A.-based guitarist been able to find his own voice. Yet while much of what Heller plays starts off sounding like something else, it usually winds up recognizably his own.

Consider the long and winding stylistic roads he's explored in 42 years: started listening to country folk as a kid and then worked his way through soul, 1980s L.A. punk (including X and the Blasters, whose Dave Alvin appeared on Heller's 2002

disk) and rockabilly. Heller eventually ended up playing jazz in the mid 1980s, working with musicians from Uri Caine to Yma Sumac (!) to X drummer DJ Bonebrake (who'll be joining him here) on several projects. Critics hailed his every sudden turn. His path proved circular: Heller's last few albums have maintained the organ combo format that reached its pinnacle during his youth in his native Philadelphia with Philly legends like Jimmy Smith.

Not to say Heller plays musty half century old jazz standards; for all his reverence for Bill Evans and Grant Green, his new disk covers XTC's "Dear God," the Dead Milkmen's "Punk Rock Girl" and X's "Motel Room in My Bed" along with his tasty originals. But it all grooves (with equal credit due B-3 whiz Chris Spies), it's all as accessible to rock and pop fans as to jazz heads and you can hear traces of every genre he's sampled along the way.

Skip Heller Trio plays at 9 pm Saturday, March 24 at Jo Federigo's. 21+ show. \$5. – *Brett Campbell*



Skip Heller

For Us!

Live albums: Interesting musical documents or filler between new stuff? The question's a little different when you're talking about a band like **Against Me!**, a ferocious mish-mash of aggro rock with an overlay of dirty twang. An Against Me! live show is a thing of blistering energy, both from the band and the sweaty kids on the floor, and there's just no way to fully capture that though the band's most recent release, *Americans Abroad!!! Against Me!!! Live in London!!!* (yes, all those exclamation points are really necessary), makes a game go of it. The live record is still on indie punk label Fat Wreck Chords; the quartet's next studio album, *New Wave*, will be released by Sire Records (part of the massive Warner Bros. empire) and produced by Butch Vig, whom you may know from such releases as Nirvana's *Nevermind* and Smashing Pumpkins' *Siamese Dream*. What that means for the Florida band's anthemic, sometimes country-tinged punk sound should be on display at Sunday's show, as the current tour is a new-stuff preview.

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