

Blood, Sweat, Tears, Earth, Wind, Fire... and a Little Chicago @ SKyPAC, 2/2/2013

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By Pennman



Orchestra Kentucky has introduced several brand new Retro Series shows in this 2012-2013 season, and I hadn't been able to make any of them. So I eagerly jumped at the chance to take in the latest of these new shows, the one designed for the lover of the horn bands. I can't really say the rock and roll horn bands, because aside from early Chicago, are they really rock and roll bands? Earth, Wind, and Fire was always pop to me, bordering on disco at times. And Blood, Sweat, and Tears, well they're kind of hard to categorize, but I'd say jazz-rock comes close, with a little soul thrown in for good measure. So the orchestra and the touring band that played with them, Jeans n Classics, had their work cut out for them. For the most part it was a smashing success.

The set list included plenty of hits from each band plus Chuck Mangione's "Feels So Good". Starting out appropriately with Chicago's "Beginnings", the tone was set. Right from the get-go and throughout the show, the horn arrangements were very true to the original recordings. The next thing that really impressed me was the string section and the delightfully surprising not-so-predictable arrangements. The show continued with another Chicago song and two Blood, Sweat & Tears songs, featuring Gavin Hope on lead vocals. Then it was time for a mini-set of Earth, Wind & Fire, where Jean Meilleur took over on vocals (and dancing). "September" kicked off the mini-set, and the energy of the that tune got the audience going quickly. I'll tell you, SKyPAC needs to invite folks up front if they're going to continue to present such danceable music in the hall. Some of these tunes are just not meant for a fully-seated audience.

This show had many other highlights. Paul Stevenson did some nice, front-and-center work on trumpet, including “Feels So Good”, back-up singers Stephanie Martin and Kathryn Rose added lots of niceties into the mix (including sharing the lead vocals once with Mr. Meilleur), and as I said, some of the string arrangements were awesome. I particularly enjoyed “Go Down Gambling”, “And When I Die”, “Spinning Wheel”, “Colour My World”, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?”, “If You Leave Me Now”, “Boogie Wonderland” and the encore, “Shining Star”. I also noticed several times what a great job Orchestra Kentucky’s percussion section was doing. I’d say that’s a testament to the sound quality at SKyPAC as well.

Now I did say above it was a smashing success..... for the most part. Oh well, I do need to call out Jeans n Classics for one, in my mind, very big shortfall. Of the three bands featured I am most passionate about Chicago. And Chicago was indeed a rock band in the early days. So why was Peter Brennan’s guitar almost non-existent during this show?

I realize this was a horn band show, but “Make Me Smile” features a killer guitar solo, and “25 or 6 to 4” is a guitar song, no question about it. I can forgive leaving the guitar out of “Make Me Smile”, especially since it was replaced with one of those awesome string arrangements. But not hearing the opening chords to “25 or 6 to 4” had me incredulous. Then, when it came time for the pre-announced duel between their featured violinist (who did a great job) and Mr. Brennan (who was doing something but nowhere near channeling Terry Kath (or maybe he was but it was just turned down too low)) was unforgivable to me. I hope they do their Chicago fans a favor and beef up that classic solo in the future. So the final tally – horns and strings A+, guitar F, overall B+ (boy that F really brings it down).