

Guy Clark/Joe Ely/John Hiatt/Lyle Lovett

Saturday, January 27, 2007

Tabernacle

By Al Kaufman

"We have no set list, no agenda, no clue, and no fear," quipped Guy Clark, after four of the greatest songwriters of our generation ambled onto the sparse stage and seated themselves.

Thus began a magical night.

Sitting in alphabetical order (and also in order from oldest to youngest) the night began with Clark playing his classic "Homegrown Tomatoes." Then came Ely with "Silver City," and so on until some 26 songs were sung.

Surprisingly, for a group that has been doing these "guitar pulls" on and off for some 18 years, there was little interaction among the men. Ely and Hiatt always seemed willing to add some guitar to another's song (Hiatt provided a wonderful solo on Lovett's "My Baby Don't Tolerate"), and Lovett kept trying to playfully interview Hiatt about his songwriting technique. But other than that, when it was one man's turn, the rest sat out of the spotlight and either thought about the next song he was going to sing, or got lost in the music. (Hiatt commented the three-quarters of the time he was an audience member and sometimes he forgot that it was his turn to sing.) There was a lot of last second guitar tunings as a performer would change his decision as to what song to play based on the song the previous performer played.

Even without the interplay, it was obvious these men respected each other and their music. And perhaps it was testament to each other's skills that the others knew to just sit back and listen to the beauty and power of a single man with a single guitar.

Guy Clark, the only one of the four with a new CD, played three songs from his brilliant new *Workbench Songs* along with such classics as "Dublin Blues" and "The Cape." Clark is a veteran of these guitar pulls, as he often did them with his late friend Townes Van Zandt, as well as friends Steve Earle, Terry Allen, and Robert Earl Keen, just to name a few. His quiet, picturesque songs fit the format perfectly. Clark also worked hard to retain his crusty image, barely interacting with the others and offering a satisfied smirk when finishing his song. It's a game he and Van Zandt used to play: Top that. While nobody else seemed to be playing along, (possibly because they knew they couldn't win) they at least held their own.

Ely and Hiatt, who both have more than a little rock and roll in their blood, seemed to have difficulty staying in their chairs during a couple of their selections. Ely, probably the least known of the four, won many new admirers as he boomed through "Thousand Miles From Home," "All Just to Get to You," and

one from his mythical Texas supergroup, The Flatlanders, "I'm Gonna Strangle You, Shorty."

Hoosier bred Hiatt, the sole non-Texan of the group, had some difficulty fitting hard rockers such as "Perfectly Good Guitar" and "Drive South" into the format. But his more tender ballads, such as "Icy Blue Heart" and "Crossing Muddy Waters," were stellar. And he practically transferred himself into a revivalist preacher for "Have a Little Faith in Me," one of the high points of an evening that was all high points. Hiatt seemed to be having more fun than anyone. He had that look of a five-year old meeting Mickey Mouse for the first time whenever he watched someone else sing.

Lovett was Lovett. More traditionally country than the others, and also more formally dressed, at first glance he seemed like he didn't belong. But, stripped of the Large Band he usually plays with, he was forced to deconstruct his songs down to their basic levels. He chose wisely, with songs such as "What Do You Do." He ended the night with Guy Clark's "Step Inside This House," a song Lovett recorded for his cover CD of the same name. He demonstrated his deadpan humor before his first number. "It's doesn't get any better than this," he said. "sharing a stage with Guy Clark, Joe Ely, and John Hiatt." After the applause died down he continued, "You know, it's a sobering thought when you realize things can't get any better," before leading into "It Could All Be Downhill from Here."

If there can be any negatives of the night, it is that with each performer only getting a chance to play six of his songs, many great songs were left unplayed. But nobody left disappointed. In fact, most left with new appreciations for people they had previously never heard of. Questions like, "Who was that guy sitting next to Lyle Lovett? He was great." were mixed in with comments like, "I just came here to see John Hiatt. Now I've gotta buy all these other guy's records, too." Great. Now if there were just some radio executives in the audience, maybe all these brilliant guys could actually get some airplay.