

CONCERT REVIEW: Pat's post-bop big top - Jazz guitarist Pat Metheny returns to town, bigger and bolder

By JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS
CORRESPONDENT

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Let us count the ways and times Pat Metheny has steered his various musical enterprises through the 805. Lucky for his legion of fans in these parts, the brilliant jazz guitarist/bandleader has appeared in Santa Barbara numerous times over 35-ish years, in both his more organized Pat Metheny Group setting and freer, more improvisation-gearred contexts, including his trio and his potent current band of all-stars, the Unity Band quartet.

Somehow, though, it's hard to remember a Mr. Metheny show more sweeping and all inclusive than Thursday night's nearly three-hour extravaganza at the Lobero Theatre, a relatively intimate venue beautifully suited to what Mr. Metheny does and is, he presented under the auspices of the newly and more clearly-named Unity Group. He covered the waterfront this night, from hints of earlier material going back to the late '70s, his assorted acoustic and electric guitars of choice, and a field report from his latest chapter, the more elaborate, structured and distinctly Pat Metheny Group-like material of his brand new album, "[Kin (\u2190\u2192)]."

And the three-ring, story-so-far sweep of the evening also came replete with the circus-like apparatus of his organic "Orchestrion" machinery, which we heard him use to full, solo effect at Campbell Hall a few years back, and the addition of a fifth, mostly texture-centric member, Italian keyboardist, vocalist and multi-instrument man Giuliana Carmassi.

Apparently, the Unity Band, which played in this room a year and a half ago, has apparently provided Mr. Metheny with a new muse source, a spark to personal growth and creative retrenchment. After the original band, a more traditional, "blowing" jazz band format, made its strong, Grammy-winning impact, the guitarist got very busy rethinking and expanding on the possibilities, writing a new set of material and creating a new ensemble wardrobe.

Fittingly, the Lobero show opened with an hour by the "Band" music, and segueing into the more romantic-epic set of mini-suites of the new album. Between the two portions of the evening, Mr. Metheny quipped "we are the opening act for ourselves." More to the point, it



Guitarist Pat Metheny manning his guitar synthesizer, as part of his epic Unity Group concert at the Lobero.

DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTO

was a night showcasing the many, and widening palette of personalities that is and has been Pat Metheny, coming into a new focus just recently.

Featured in the core Unity ranks is friendly saxist powerhouse Chris Potter, one of the handful of great tenor players on the jazz scene and perhaps the strongest soloist of any in the long roster of Metheny bandmates. Longtime drummer ally Antonio Sanchez seems adept at perfectly adapting to whatever musical situation the guitarist puts him in, while the youngster of the bunch, bassist Ben Williams, showed why he is one of the strongest and supplest bassist voices of his twentysomething generation.

Framing the generous show, the guitarist appeared solo and acoustic, in the very different contexts of his mutant, 42-stringed "Pikasso" guitar, whose series of open strings keep the harmonic palette limited to modal and almost new-age-y tonalities. By contrast, on the closing encore, a medley of his favorite older tunes, beginning with a pinch of "San Lorenzo," the guitarist worked harmonic wonders and warming trends, through chordal melodies and intricate weavings.

Enter the wonder that is the Unity band, which immediately showed its individual and collective-minded wares on a set of tunes from the 2013 album, capped off by the older tune "Police People," from Metheny's collaboration with Ornette Coleman, "Song X," here spotlighted by a dazzling drum solo. They opened the "Kin" set with the title track, one of several mini-suite-like song structures, in which sophisticated organization of sections and parts move beyond simple jazz tune-smithing. They also played the album's opener, "On Day One," — marked by the trademark syncopated clapping rhythms as a "hook" — and "Adagia," on which the flamenco elements made it an implicit dedication to the late, great Paco de Lucia, who died the day of this concert.

To break up the ensemble dynamics of the show, at one late point in the show, the guitarist scaled down the stage population and paired off in duets with each player, also a chance to hear his fluency in moving into the "standards" zone, the fine jazz art of making your own statement over the lingua franca of the "real book" songbook. The material included Jobim's bittersweet beauty "How Insensitive," which Mr. Metheny has had a masterful hand on for years, with Mr. Williams issuing a lovely and melodic solo, a collectively improvisational tete a tete with Mr. Potter on the fast and winding chord changes of "All the Things You Are." He took to his classical guitar for a lulling ballad duet with Mr. Carmassi and then, on his Gibson 175-style Ibanez "jazz box" electric guitar, engaged in a spidery up-tempo blowout with drummer Sanchez.

Bringing the musical attentions back to deeper corners of the Metheny library, the Unity Group gave its considerable all to fresh versions of tunes from the Pat Metheny Group songbook, including the simmering-then-soaring "Are You Going With Me?" with its characteristic, orgiastic high-range flying on his Roland guitar synthesizer instrument.

In short, the Lobero concert confirmed that Pat Metheny is another roll, in a long career of same, and thanks to his interest in keeping this town on his map, a happy full house of listeners were in for a long and satisfying treat.