



September 29, 2008

The Refugees At The Library

That would be the Thousand Oaks library. Where Renee Bodie has expanded her house concert series.

Can't say that I'm in the loop, but Renee tracked me down. Did I want to see the Refugees?

When I land on that desert island, I'm taking along Wendy Waldman on my iPod. Just listening to "Spring Is Here" makes me feel how great it is to be alive. Wendy never broke through, but she's a star in my book. So, of course, I said I'd go.

But this isn't a solo gig. The Refugees are a three piece band. Made up of Ms. Waldman, Cindy Bullens and Deborah Holland.

I've got Cindy's solo album. The one released on UA just before the company was merged out of existence. As for Ms. Holland...she was in that bizarre concoction known as Animal Logic, the supergroup with Stewart Copeland, Stanley Clark and...her. With that catchy track that got MTV airplay but didn't launch the band into the stratosphere known as "There's A Spy (In The House Of Love)".

Thousand Oaks is really far away. A different county, a different area code. I think it exists because of home values. As in you could buy one there during the first real estate boom, back in the seventies. And now it's grown, to include the foreign car dealerships, a branch of Mastro's Steakhouse... There's just about everything you need, you never have to go into the city again. Which you may not, with the traffic being so damn bad. And, a state of the art library.

Despite book repositories cutting their hours and their inventory, somehow this giant edifice was built in the middle of nowhere. Could it be taxpayer money, or independent fund-raising? Who knows? But I was shocked that they purchased a high end sound rig for their community room, to hold concerts like this.

And those in attendance weren't bitching about TicketMaster fees. That's not their concern, getting in to see Radiohead at the Bowl. They're older, more community-oriented, and they just don't want the hassle. Point is, this concert took place OFF THE GRID!

But now, almost everything is off the grid. It's hard to get critical mass. The power is in the niche. Assuming you've got something special and can grow your niche.

And the Refugees have something special.

They can perform those harmonies that Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young could not nail at Woodstock. They can pick their guitars. Hell, Deborah even played an accordion, Cindy a mandolin. And the material resonates, but what is even more impressive is the PRESENTATION!

Renee introduced them as post-menopausal. Cindy took offense. But that's what we are, middle-aged. Music rocked our world, drove the culture. But we've seen the Stones and the Moody Blues, we no longer get excited about the classic rock tours. We still love music, but we just don't know where to go for it. No one cares about us.

Looked like Starbucks did for a minute. But they blew their trusted filter status by overloading us with mediocre product. Where do we go to get turned on to new acts?

Not NPR, even though we're addicted. You see, NPR still worries about hip. And we're not hip. We wear relaxed fit jeans, some of us get plastic surgery to look young, but we're not. We're over the hill. But still alive. And despite having cash galore, no one cares about us.

And that's what the Refugees talk about. Us. What it's like to be our age and go on the road and try to rebuild a career when you never had stardom to begin with.

Wendy told her daughter's kids that she can't babysit anymore. GRANNY'S ON THE ROAD!

The old rock stars bitch about the travel. But it seemed these women were having a ball. An endless pajama party. Yes, they were reliving their youth. And they LOVED IT!

Wendy had written hits for Vanessa Williams and the Dirt Band, but now she focuses on producing.

Cindy has been criss-crossing the nation telling the story of the death of her daughter.

And Deborah... She realized the window on stardom had closed and she got her Master's and started teaching at Cal State.

But then Wendy called. She implored Deborah to come down to Kulak's and play live. Needing another element, Wendy tracked down Cindy in Maine, who told her she was only in if it was gonna be fun.

And it is.

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They play Wendy's "Save The Best For Last". Deborah does "There's A Spy (In The House Of Love)". Cindy demonstrates the pipes that backed up Elton John for so long. And they talk. How they want to be on the cover of AARP magazine.

They're not kidding. They figure if they mention it at enough gigs, someone in the audience will have a connection. And, if they do, they'll break through.

There's a circuit. It just hasn't been developed yet. It's got nothing to do with radio and everything to do with live performance. Akin to the condo circuit for comedians down in Florida. We want to see live music, we want to be up close, we want to be treated right, and we don't want to be ripped off.

And at \$20 a head, this show was no rip-off.

And the STORIES! These aren't stars yelling HELLO CLEVELAND! Deborah sings a song about her kid nagging her, he wants to give up the violin. I remember telling my parents I wanted to quit piano lessons. Our parents wanted us to have it better than they did, they wanted to give us opportunities, they didn't want to let us down. And now we train our kids in the same way. It's all we know.



But today's kids have so many distractions.

All we had was music. And music was enough. We'd lie on the floor in front of the record player, spinning our 45s, then our albums. We quoted song lyrics as we passed through the stages of life. And then, suddenly, we no longer knew what to listen to and felt it would be more fun to stay home than go out.

But it's not. The highlight of a baby boomer's life could be going to see the Refugees. You see we love music, and when someone respects us and speaks to us on our level, we REVEL!

I reveled in the Refugees' performance Saturday night. Don't expect to hear their music on Top Forty radio. Don't expect them to break through to the top of the iTunes chart. It's a stealth campaign. Just like the underground bands of yore. You had to hear about it from your buddy, you didn't care who else knew, before the era when movies were rated based on their gross, we were only concerned with quality. What resonated.

It's a long hard slough for the Refugees. They're perfect for "The View", great for morning TV. But to get those outlets to call, you've got to pay your dues.

But the Refugees are committed. As Wendy said, they're taking the music back.

It's about time someone did.



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