

Cowboy Junkies' Concert Lures Listeners Into Moody Mindset

By David Staton

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The Cowboy Junkies live show Saturday night at the Paolo Soleri Amphitheatre was not an energy-filled, heavy-rockin' show. It was, in a word, nice.

Vocalist Margo Timmins is blessed with a delicate, sultry voice that whisked through the amphitheater like a breeze, ranging from whispery to gail force. With an off-the-cuff charm, she delivered hip, homespun anecdotes between songs.

The Cowboy Junkies repertoire is filled with songs of the intricacies of relationships and self-absorption. Margo was right at home, make that down home, on a stage setup a la Tennessee Williams. Perched on a chair, a linen-topped table, set with a candle, wine glass and a rose in a vase beside her, she contemplated and chatted about the emptiness of love.

The treatment of Cowboy Junkies songs on this tour is not only enhanced but positively perked up by the addition of four musicians.

Lap steel guitar, mandolin, accordion, fiddle and percussion flavored the music with a deliberately, delicate spice. This in stark contrast to the stillness and absence of sound on the group's "Trinity Sessions" release. Likewise, Margo's singing strayed from the tonal sameness that marked that "session" of the group's sound.

"Cause Cheap Is How I Feel" was a snapshot of fatality. David Houghson's honky-tonk steel guitar created a cryin'-in-your-beer atmosphere that was accentuated by a mournful accordion and funky, tavernlike blue and pink lighting.

The song was heartfelt. Margo explained that this tune, penned by brother Michael Timmins, was the group's reaction to getting its second song on the "Tonight Show" cancelled. The group's curtain call was bumped in favor of a guest on the show attempting to sing. The guest was onetime funnyman Buddy Hackett.

The next song, "Where Are You Tonight," Margo explained, was about "sitting in a bar talking to a stranger and wishing the stranger would go away and somebody better would come along." The multi-talented Jeff Bird, who played har-

monica, and mandolin, played punchy fiddle licks as the faceless guitarist Michael picked bluesy, countrified chords. Michael played seated and slouched over his instrument and milked the notes from it. With "I Don't Get It" he slid into a solo that dripped psychedelia and red on green lighting reflected the tone.

The eight-piece Cowboys moved back to a country vein with "Sun Comes Up, It's Tuesday Morning." This song has the pace and textures

of a real weeper. It's not. As Margo explained, this song was written to dispel the notion that all the band's music is depressing. This, she said, is a happy Cowboy Junkies song about waking up alone in your bed after breaking up with your love. But, you're happy about it. After all, you have more room in the bed.

Most of Michael's songs received oddly upbeat quirky 'n' perky treatments. Even Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane," the band's signature tune, was quickened to a livelier pace.

The band slipped effortlessly between such uptempo numbers and slowdowns such as the beautiful Mary Margaret O'Hara song, "You Will Be Loved Again." The musicians also operated seamlessly and with confidence on the new songs, the dancey "Rock and Bird" and the newer, "Southern Rain."

Like the Junkies recordings, its live show works in a compelling, subconscious fashion. Listeners are eased into a moody mindset. And it's a nice place to be.

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