

Andrew W.K. and the Calder Quartet

live in Toronto (2009)

live show

Reviewer Rating:

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Having already tackled solo recording, recording and touring with a live band, touring with only a playback device, motivational speaking, Cartoon Network appearances, J-Pop cover albums, producing an album for Lee "Scratch" Perry, starring in children's programming, and most recently releasing an album of improvisational piano songs, it actually isn't THAT shocking that Andrew W.K.'s next move would be to book a short tour playing with a string quartet.

Going into this show, I made a point of not looking into much of what the previous shows on the tour consisted of. Would it be entirely free form piano/string collaborations? Would we be treated to string-augmented versions of classics like "Party 'Till You Puke" like a bizarre mutation of *MTV Unplugged*? The type and level of involvement were entirely a mystery to me. My curiosity only grew when it was announced that due to the "sexual feeling" Andrew got out of playing these shows, they had been moved out of churches, to more secular venues.

Approaching Toronto's Music Gallery, a heretofore unexplored venue for my friends and I, we were confronted with a building that looked remarkably like a church. Once inside, the small room seated only about 150, the air smelled of incense and we sat in pews with bibles in front of us. Now, my church experience is admittedly limited, but I failed to see what about this place made it not a church. Also upon entrance, we were given one-sheet programs, outlining the evening's events and musicians involved, which was a very nice touch. The program outlined only four AWK songs towards the end, along with songs by Bach, Phillip Glass, Christine Southworth, John Cage and others. Also included were spots for an intermission, and two spots for "Spontaneous Solo Piano Improvisation."

Soon, the lights dimmed slightly, and out walked Andrew along with Eric Byers, the cellist of the Calder Quartet. Andrew sat at his piano and Eric sat with his cello, and they started to play together. For the first few seconds it was pleasing sounding, but then one of them would stop. They would attempt to restart after exchanging glances, seemingly unable to find the proper key to start in. The fumbling continued for what seemed like a full minute, as the crowd began to laugh nervously. Then we heard violins from behind us, as the rest of the quartet approached the alter through the aisles. This had been a clever ruse, as soon all five musicians were playing together beautifully.

Not being well-versed in either chamber music (or sitting down while watching a band perform), I was a little bit out of my element for the first half of the show. The music was engaging, and well-executed, but to an untrained ear like mine, it sort of sounded like a movie score. After a little while I started to feel a little like Andrew W.K. was deceiving his audience. I came to watch an Andrew W.K. show, aided by the inclusion of a string section, and instead was watching a quartet

playing with a piano player that just happened to be Andrew W.K. I started to think if he had wanted to do a piano/strings tour, he didn't need to attach it to his usual persona -- he could have left his white clothing at home and the show could have been billed as "The Calder Quartet featuring pianist Andrew Wilkes-Krier." It wouldn't have had the same audience, but it would have been way more honest. Before long the intermission came, and the overall tone of the room seemed to be "okay, this is interesting and everything, but what the hell?" It was like when Spinal Tap spontaneously decided to do "Jazz Odyssey."

Thankfully, that all turned around for the second half of the show. It started off largely the way the first did, but after about 10 minutes it was time for Andrew's second "Spontaneous Solo Piano Improvisation," this time including what seemed to be stream-of-consciousness lyrics about being happy to be alive, and a call-and-response whistle solo with the crowd. This led directly into an uptempo AWK style instrumental with the quartet which led into "I Get Wet." The crowd's enthusiasm was building as they launched into "Party Hard," which had people on their feet with fists in the air. "Dance Party," "Long Live the Party" (which was not included on the provided set list) and "I Love New York City" (changed to "I love To-ron-to-oo") came in quick succession, some including backing tracks, and the crowd loved every minute of it. The show had been completely redeemed by Andrew's music and infectious enthusiasm.

Throughout the whole show, but more so in the second half, whether he was wrestling with his piano stool, improving lyrics or climbing into the crowd, Andrew displayed a genuine fearlessness that was nothing if not admirable. The Calder Quartet for their part were also fun to watch, whether it was reacting to Andrew's antics or just the novelty of seeing a classical quartet drink tall-cans of Bud between songs.

Once the crowd had been worked into a frenzy, it was abruptly over. The crowd cheered and chanted, and soon Andrew reappeared with Eric, the cellist. Andrew explained that they didn't really have an encore planned, but they thought of something they could do. Eric sat at his cello, and Andrew continued standing, dedicating the forthcoming performance of a Bach number to a recently passed-away dancer. Eric began to play the piece on cello, and Andrew pulled out another unknown skill from his repertoire: interpretive dance. Completely straight faced, without a shred of irony, Andrew quietly and expressively danced for us.

It was the icing on the cake to one of the most bizarre, unique and genuinely entertaining evenings I've ever been to. Overall, the Andrew W.K./Calder Quartet experiment was a successful one, and definitely the most fun I've ever had at a church.

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