



Last Night: Andrew W.K. and Calder Quartet at Swedish American Hall

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Andrew W.K. and Calder Quartet
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Swedish American Hall

Better than: Metallica and the San Francisco Symphony.

Hours before he took the stage, [Andrew W.K.](#) was amping up his fans. His Twitter feed was bursting with typical AWK excitement:

"PARTY MINDSET OF THE DAY: Remember that even when life feels hard or scary, I am here cheering you on, and you will KEEP GOING!"

"Walking around San Francisco & thinking about moving here. Of course I would keep my house in NYC too! CONCERT TONIGHT!"

This is a man who, in his own lyrics, "gets wet without even trying." And last night, he got wet about classical music like no other musician I've seen. (I doubt many rockers have accompanied a string quartet by whistling into the microphone while holding the entire mic stand horizontally, like a flute.)

W.K. has found his classical muse, after spending time recording an album of "[spontaneous solo piano improvisations](#)" earlier this year. Match that yearning for the ivories with a manager who has connections to the experimental classical group [Calder Quartet](#), and you have an evangelistic evening

of strings, stomping on the ground, and, at the end of the night, silence. It was a pretty amazing show.

The night began with programs--handed out at the door, like we were entering the symphony hall. And the show itself began with W.K.--in all white, per usual--and cellist Eric Byers coming up on stage, W.K. beaming like he was accepting a winning trophy at an awards ceremony.

With W.K. at the piano, they launched into Bach's "Prelude in C major/Ave Maria" only to move towards high-brow comedy. The tune jumped off the tracks as W.K. and Byers played with their respective parts, halting the song completely, interrupting one another musically, and generally making enough of a disruption that the rest of the quartet (violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bullbrook and Jonathan Moerschelon on viola) could join in the rupture, playing their instruments while waltzing down the aisle. The quartet came at us from all angles physically, foreshadowing the way they'd also come at us from all angles artistically.

W.K. was the same uber-enthusiastic entertainer with Calder that he's been with his rock gigs. He was both the ultimate enthusiast and an absurd comic whose grin is infectious. As the group ran through haunting compositions by Fred Frith, Tristan Perich, and Christine Southworth, W.K. pulled off plenty of tricks. He threw a thumbs up at the crowd; he made proclamations ("This tour has been incredible! We even went to Canada! I love San Francisco! Calder Quartet loves San Francisco!"); and he endeared the audience to him immediately.

Part of his charm stemmed from the fact that he "made up a song" for the crowd. W.K.'s "spontaneous solo piano improvisation" was a symphony of coughs, keys, headbanging, a spread-eagle playing style, and, in one enthusiastic spurt, his leap off the piano bench and onto the floor. From ground level he rubbed his mic on the stage and molested the monitor. It was a very physical, theatrical performance, and the fans reacted like this was a rock show, yelling encouragements like "You can do it!"

The best part of the banter, though, came after the intermission, when W.K. gushed about how much he loves intermissions ("As a rock n roll musician, it's a revelation! You go back to square one and then jump to square 13!") and reveal that, during the break, W.K. and the quartet realized, "Some of us have had intimate relationships with individuals in San Francisco." Next, he asked who in the crowd has had intimate relationships with any of the five on stage. When he got to "Are any of my ex's out there?" he got a hoot from a man and a woman, which made him smile, and the group got back to work on the music with "Company" by Philip Glass, dedicated, jokingly, "to Sam, to Kim, and to Pat."

Even with so much joviality, though, the musicality of the performance was high. I'm no string quartet expert, but coming from a pop music angle, W.K.'s playfulness softened what can be a stuffy style of music to see live. Within all the hijinks, the music was both beautiful and unsettling, especially when W.K. let Calder take the front seat, keeping his piano accompaniment subtle. There was one piece in particular where the strings sounded like violent birds, their melodies given electronic distortion as the music took flight.

W.K. seemed to bring as much enjoyment to Calder Quartet as much as he did his fans. You could see the edgy--yet serious--musicians on stage, alternately trying not to laugh, or stomping their feet like this was an AC/DC show. The latter reactions happened during the four-song run of W.K. material--"I Get Wet," "Party Hard," "I Love New York City" (changed, for our benefit, to "I Love San Francisco,") and "Dance Party." During these tunes, W.K.'s star power was immediate. The voices of the crowd hit an instant soccer hooligan fever pitch. It was crazy, and really fun, to get swept up within.

But for their final number, W.K. and Calder threw the night on its head, ending with John Cage's infamous "4'33," a four-movement, silent composition. The piece is supposed to emphasize the performance environment, and last night that meant lots of uncomfortable coughs, shushing, giggles, footsteps, and one sarcastic "I get it," from the crowd. To the fidgety folks' credit, it was a challenge to sit still after we'd been "partying in our chairs" for the last 20 minutes.

W.K. initially rose up through the noise ranks--releasing a record on [Bulb](#) before blowing up with his 2002 frat boy opus *I Get Wet*. So in the end it was cool to see the guy expanding his musical reach with a performance that was part noise, part rock 'n' roll, and part something completely different--but still containing all that insanely positive, trademark Andrew W.K. energy. If there was a way to powder his genuine hyper nature you could, perhaps, help an entire nation of musicians kick coke for good.

Showing 0 comments