

4-16-04

Ever ch-ch-changing rock icon kicks off the Santa Barbara Bowl season in high sold-out style

DAVID BOWIE, with Polyphonic Spree

When: 7 p.m. Monday

Where: Santa Barbara Bowl, 1122 N. Milpas St.

Tickets: Sold out

Information: 962-7411

By Josef Woodard
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

I will sit right down, waiting for the gift of sound and vision."

It's just a haunting little phrase, sung by David Bowie on his quirky semi-instrumental song "Sound and Vision," from the 1977 album "Low" - also aptly used as the title of a sweeping four-disc Bowie retrospective. More than any other figure in pop history, David Bowie has been sitting right down and consulting a crazy, often inspired muse for sound and vision.



COURTESY PHOTOS

David Bowie has shown more creative vitality and longevity than virtually any other figure in pop.



The art school dropout and chameleonic rock genius, born in 1947 in Brixton, England, has repeatedly reinvented himself, and his vision of pop. For over 30 years, he has made serious music with a sense of humor about himself and his multi-idiomatic music. His music comes liberally lined with theatricality, artful detachment and, generally, a lust for change. The term "chameleon" fits, glove-like.

Needless to say, news of Bowie's local debut on Monday to open the Santa Barbara Bowl's concert season, sent pleasant shock waves around town and got ticket-seekers scampering. The show sold out quickly - in 90 minutes, to be exact - and it promises to be the pop event of the year in this humble burg, especially since Bowie is anything but a dusty rock fossil resting on laurels. He's ever moving forward, judging from the steady output of fresh ideas and energy.

Take, for example, his potent latest album, "Reality," which both looks forward and backward, in a sonic style cooked up by formerly close producer ally Tony Visconti. Oddly enough, the new album, widely hailed as Bowie's best in years, neatly follows a numerological plan in his history. It was in 1973 that he donned his alien style glam visage with the career-launching album "Aladdin Sane," a lavish two-disc "30th Anniversary Edition" of which was recently reissued by EMI. In 1983, Bowie went from cult star to mega-star status with his Nile Rodgers-produced "Let's Dance."

Bowie sat right down for an interview in Westwood in 1993, just before releasing "Black Tie, White Noise," one of the classics that got away. (That album, in a special package with an extra disc, was also recently reissued.) At that time, he was coming out of a long, artistic drift period, following a few pallid albums in the '80s and his intriguing "therapy" project, the band Tin Machine. In '93, Bowie had just signed on with a new, but doomed label, Savage, and the album ended up not getting its due attention upon initial release.

Back then, Bowie commented, "It seems that the number three keeps popping up. Three is my lucky number. Nineteen seventy-three was the year that 'Ziggy Stardust' hit, then I worked with Nile in 1983 and indeed, this one has come about in 1993. Whether that's my cycle or not, I don't know. I'm looking at it like that. I seem to be a 10-year person. I play about a lot to get there. Just indulge me," he said with his infectious, slightly manic laugh, "it will be alright in the end."

Sure enough, it's alright again, 10 years after. "Reality" includes a ripe, raucous version of Jonathan Richman's funny spin on the folly of artistic celebrity, "Pablo Picasso," and George Harrison's "Try Some, Buy Some," a gentle stab at consumerism's fallout effect on interpersonal relationships.

Mostly, though, the good stuff comes from Bowie's active songwriting brain, including the rocking opener "New Killer Star" - sounding like a leftover from his 1980 masterpiece "Scary Monsters" - and the bumptious "Fall Dog Bombs." A spookily hushed ballad "The Loneliest Guy" contrasts the driving, back-beaten energy of the title tune and the darkly slinking finale, "Bring Me the Disco King," resembles Steely Dan's "Royal Scam" in mood and theme.

"Reality" brings Bowie back to some semblance of what the titles promises. In fact, through whatever guises, personae or fashions, Bowie was always an artful dodger in the best sense. Between "Black Tie White Noise" and now, he has released several varied albums (all with one-word titles): the Brian Eno-produced experiment in industrialized Bowie, "Outside," "Earthling," "hours" and "Heathen," which sets the stage for the latest. All have their strong points, but "Reality" coheres and rocks and ponders and poses, with style.

"I'm a post-Modernist," he said, back in the '90s, using a term since fallen out of fashion or usage, but which touches on an ongoing theme in his career from the late '60s through the present. "It's been the only phraseology that I think has been applicable to what I've done, sort of eclectically put together an alternative reality of things past, remembered."

As for the line "waiting for the gift of sound and vision," Bowie admits that "it was a Socrates line. I did feel a lot like that in Berlin," he says, referring to his late-'70s period, when he produced the adventurous trio of albums "Heroes," "Low" and "Lodger." At the time, he recalls, "I wasn't rushing around ambitiously trying to get anything going in Berlin, for the first time in a long time. I'm not sure if it was because I was going through periods of great depression at the time, but I seemed a lot more relaxed about making music."

"I also felt elevated by the response to working with Eno, who was very much the man of 'don't prepare a damn thing before you go into the studio and let's just see what happens when you get in there.' Whereas I would have prepared a fair degree of the stuff that I put down on tape before then. During that period, it was just 'let's wait and see what happens.' "

Regarding his muse, Bowie says, "I find her ambitiously active in my life. I always think that when I finish an album, that's probably the last thing I'll ever write, because I feel kind of drained. (But) a well of inspiration



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just keeps coming back to me. I've been very fortunate that way. I haven't had a lot of problems with blocks, and a lot of my peers do.

"If I feel a bit dry, then I'll go be invigorated, probably by another art form - painting or maybe cinema. That's the beauty of being an artist. All these things network themselves. Another artist's work can be very inspirational, even if they're in a completely different medium."

Whether or not radio formats pick up on or have any overlap with what he's up to in a given period, Bowie has enough of a cult audience and old radio hit voltage to keep him awash in luxury and sell-out crowds. Still, he seems amused by his career's wild arc, as if it's an art school project run happily, epically amuck.

"It surprises me that I've got any money in the bank, because I'm totally incapable with business," he says in the '90s interview. "Oh yes, I give thanks every day. It's wonderful to still be doing work in the profession that I chose. It's a gift. It's fantastic."

At that moment, he looked heavenward, clasping his hands contritely. "Thank you. I thoroughly appreciate it."

He then abruptly looks downward, muttering "I promise I have forgotten the deal we made." After a well-placed, dramatic pause, he busts out with a big, laugh.



COURTESY PHOTO
The Polyphonic Spree will open for David Bowie. They've conjured up a new sonic mixture of rock opera, pseudo-religious spectacle, and pure theater.

Polychromatic uplift

By Josef Woodard
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Leave it to David Bowie, seeker of strange cultural detours, to give gainful employment to a concert opening act as wonderfully weird and tasty as The Polyphonic Spree. This expandable and fairly indescribable Dallas-based group splintered off from the neo-psychedelia of Tripping Daisy, but it's a very different sight and sound to behold.

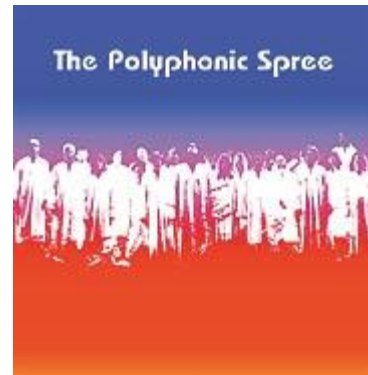
As heard on the delicious and bizarre album "The Beginning Stage Of The Polyphonic Spree" (Hollywood Records), a multitude of musicians, all dressed in white jubbies with colored fringes, join in around leader Tim DeLaughter. They sing cheerfully anthemic songs, connected in a larger suite, about the warming spirits of the sun, "hanging around the day" and other sweet subjects. Meanwhile, flute, French horn, tympani and other instruments noodle in the periphery, along with the usual rock 'n' roll business of guitars, bass and keyboards.

Crudely speaking, the band seems to come out of an unnamed cultural spot somewhere between Up With People, the Branch-Davidians, and with Moody Blues-iness

thrown into the picture. More to the point, their sound quickly reminds you of The Flaming Lips, for its sugar poppy melodies and air of the surreal, and possibly the sci-fi. The fact that they fit no particular category accounts for a large part of their oddball charm. They've conjured up a new sonic mixture of rock opera, pseudo-religious spectacle, and pure theater.

Bassist Mark Pirro was on a cell phone, backstage at the venue in Edmonton recently, talking about the band's incredible journey so far. A pressing question: How many people are in the current line-up? Pirro does a quick mental accounting: "I think we're weighing in at 26 members for this tour."

But the head count is important to the sum artistic effect, which gets far beyond the usual rock combo context. As Pirro says, the band concept was "really generated out of a desire to want to put a variety of sounds together. That can be done in the studio and you can hire players, but (founder DeLaughter) wanted to bring out a live aspect. There's only one way to do that, to get physical people to play the instruments. Having that many people impacting an audience is just the by-product of the initial idea."



In a way, what people hear in "The Beginning Stage Of The Polyphonic Spree" is a bit misleading, having been recorded quickly back in 2000, after the band had only been together for a few months. Their eagerly-awaited new album, "Together We're Heavy," is being released this summer, and includes even more musicians and singers.

In its early days, they would play around Texas, in Dallas or at Austin's famed South by Southwest festival. "We were told we'd never get out of the state of Texas with The Polyphonic Spree, because of the logistics and maybe even the challenge of the music itself," Pirro says.

However, Bowie - ever with an ear out for interesting and twisted new music - called them to be part of the annual "Meltdown Festival" in London, and has now roped them into his current "Reality" tour.

Other signs of a rising star include a song in the recent Charlie Kaufman-penned film "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," with Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet singing along in the scene, and a spot on "The Tonight Show" on April 21.

"For my point of view," Pirro comments, "what's most important and exciting about the band is that it seems to be breaking all the rules. It seems to be on the cusp of pioneering something, whether it's the sound or the way things are done, or just the sheer idea of it. Maybe even Tim (DeLaughter) isn't sure of what exactly it is. All I know is that whenever the band encounters some kind of obstacle or barrier to where it wants to go, it just either mows right over it or gracefully finds its way around it."

Wherever it ends up going, the band is refreshingly contrary to any pop trend you'd care to mention. As Pirro points out, "On paper, this isn't really supposed to work. If you were to try to sell this idea to somebody and get somebody to get behind, it would probably be a tough sell, at least in the initial stage.

"But one of the great things about Tim is that he's a very charismatic personality and he has very strong convictions about his ideas and his creativity, and he's able to bring 20-some people together for the common cause of expanding this musical idea. It's happening."