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The Orange Peel

Asheville, NC

Words by **Jason Mebane**

Photos by [J. Scott Shrader Photography](#) & [Alex Cox Photography](#)



Today the jamband scene is leaps and bounds different than it was at its height in the late nineties and early two thousands. Back then, when jamband music was the hot genre on the live music scene, even a band with minimal talent could play large clubs all over the country. Nowadays you have to have something special to set you apart from the masses if you want to grow into anything more than a regional draw. One of those younger bands that is gaining traction on a national level is Prescott, Arizona's Spafford. This past Friday night, in the midst of a forty-city tour, Spafford made their way to the The Orange Peel in Asheville, NC. From the opening moments of "Lovesick Melody" to the closing notes of the "Salamander Song" encore Spafford proved that, despite what Twiddle fans may think, they are well on their way to the top of the jamband mountain.

In each of the two sets there was a MONSTER jam that had the floor of the Orange Peel doing its best impression of a bouncing trampoline as throngs of Spaffnerds collectively boogied to the musical magic that was pouring from the stage. During the first set it was the combo of "It's A Bunch" > "Ain't That Wrong" which lasted nearly forty minutes. "It's A Bunch" started as a funky low-key groove that quickly built into an all-out musical assault, before slipping back into a mellower funky groove only to yet again start its ascension to insanity. After three or four rounds of this playful back and forth they really dug into a funky jam that served as a perfect platform for some impressive improvisation between the four musicians. Slowly yet deliberately they eventually found their way to the "Ain't That Wrong" payoff. At this point in the journey the lyrics "I'm on a roll" couldn't have been more true.



The dripping funk of "Ain't That Wrong" paired with the intensity of Spafford's state of the art light show, was almost too much to properly comprehend. It was one of those rare moments when it feels like an entire venue is going to lift off and transport us deep into the universe.

Spafford pulled off an equally impressive feat in the second set with a "Walls" > "That's It For The Other One" > "Walls" sandwich. The first eight or ten minutes of "Walls" was fairly standard, but at some point the jam turned fairly evil and ominous before almost disintegrating into unstructured melodic meandering. Each of the four musicians wandered their way through a few minutes of ambient space before eventually coming back together to col-

lectively explode into “The Other One” in such an intense manner that Phil Lesh himself would’ve been impressed. As a younger jamband it is somewhat of a gutsy move to introduce Grateful Dead covers into your repertoire, but “The Other One” is a perfect vehicle for the style of music Spafford creates. They stayed true enough to the early Dead versions that it remained respectful, but they also brought a youthful exuberance that seemingly breathed new life into a fifty-year-old gem. There were a few times they dove so deep into the jams that it was hard to remember what song they were even playing. Then all of a sudden they’d circle back to that familiar theme for a few minutes before wandering off on a totally different sonic journey. Eventually the music evaporated yet again into a loose soundscape reminiscent of The Dead’s “Space.” That lasted just long enough for the audience to regain our composure before the band built their way back into the second half of “Walls” for another ten or so minutes of musical mayhem.



Those weren’t the only instances that Spafford shined during their stop in North Carolina, but both passages were a perfect window into how Spafford is taking improvisational rock and roll music to new and exciting places in 2019. Sometimes I get bored when bands jam just for jamming sake, but these guys really do it for me. The interplay between the band and audience gives me the types of feelings that I haven’t felt from this genre of music in a very long time. Each one of the players on stage has the ability to lead his co-pilots on exciting detours within the greater journey. Over the last few years more and more fans have been hitching a ride for those nightly journeys. Their fan base has been growing quite rapidly and based on what I witnessed the other night there’s no reason to believe it won’t continue to do so.



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