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Ghost Light 4.17.19

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Asheville Music Hall

Asheville, NC

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

I have no clue exactly when or how Tom Hamilton and Holly Bowling came together to form Ghost Light, but us Ashvillians like to think they have their founding roots here in our small mountain city. A few years ago, during Warren Haynes' annual Christmas Pre-Jam, not only did Holly join The American Babies for their entire set, but Holly and Tom both were a part of Bob Weir's backing band as well. It may not have been the very first time the two shared the same stage, but it was definitely an early moment in their musical relationship.

This past Wednesday night, Ghost Light rolled into town almost a year to the day after their first stop at *The Asheville Music Hall*. I remember walking out of their April 2018 show having had my mind blown. I remember thinking that I hadn't seen a brand-new band playing original music that had impressed me the way they did in a very long time.



Wednesday's show did not impress me quite as much as the first time I saw them, but it was still an extremely enjoyable experience. I think the main difference that I noticed a year later was that, at least on this night, Ghost Light seemed far less of a collaborative effort and more just a group of musicians playing in Tom Hamilton's backing band. It may have been just my perception, but it appeared none of the other band members wanted to step up and help Tom navigate the soundscape, instead being content just riding along with him as he led them down a musical path.



Don't get me wrong Holly did take the reins from time to time, and there were moments that each player stood out, but it just wasn't the same beast I had remembered. Perhaps part of it had to do with the fact that they have a new bass player on this tour. Perhaps part of it had to do with the sound issues they were clearly having during the early part of the show, or perhaps it was just Tom's night to step up. Of course it doesn't hurt that over the years Mr. Hamilton has grown into one of the most interesting guitarists on the live music scene. There are very few musicians that can do the things he does in an improvisational setting, and improv is what Ghost Light is all about.

Much like Tom's other current band, JRAD, Ghost Light seems to use songs only as jumping off points into musical exploration.

From the minute the band hit the stage and started noodling their way from a spacey opening jam into a cover of the Shins' song "Simple Life," you could tell those of us that had ventured out late on a weeknight were in for a treat. Before we found ourselves at the end of "Simple Life" an hour had passed, and we had wandered our way through a pair of American Babies Songs and an old Brothers Past holdover. The first part of the sandwich was "An Epic Battle Between Dark and Light" which was very reminiscent of the original version. Thumping techno like bass lines with Holly working her synthesizer knobs more than the keys gave this version the electronica feel that we have come to expect from Tom Hamilton projects.



The jam out of "Epic Battle" was when Holly first really stepped up as she slowly yet deliberately led her band mates into the next ingredient of the sandwich, "They Sing Old Time Religion." At which point we were even treated to the rarity of hearing Holly's singing voice as she and guitarist Raina Mullen harmonized perfectly behind Tom's powerful lyrics. A quick run through of Brothers Past's "State Police" followed before Ghost Light found their way to the end of the opening "song" and at the first break in action since they hit the stage.

The cool-down only lasted long enough for Tom to introduce his band mates and shed his patented, button adorned, jacket while explaining that since it was a weeknight they were just going to "play through" instead of taking a set break.

What followed was another hour-long journey that found the band wandering in and out of jams stopping on certain songs only long enough to regroup for a few moments before again jumping off the deep end together. The first song of this portion of the show was also the first Ghost Light original of the evening, "Best Kept Secret." They used "Best Kept Secret" as a central theme for the remainder of the evening, revisiting it at least two more times before the end of the show.

As a matter of fact, there were a handful of songs that re-appeared from time to time over the course of the evening. If one were keeping a written set list of the show, there would have been lot of "intros" and "reprises" and "teases" to notate. A couple of tunes that really stood out during the second portion of the set were "This Thing Ain't Going Nowheres" and Ghost Light's own "Beyond/ Before." The former including a few sublime moments of Holly and bass player Dan Africano creating a haunting sonic landscape while drummer Scotty Zwang kept a gentle beat, the latter, an instrumental in which Tom used a unique guitar tone to create the part of a song that the lyrics would normally reside.

Save for a few more teases and reprises, Ghost Light ended their set the same way they started it, with a cover song. This time they dug a little further back than the Shins and pulled out a version of Neil Young's "For The Turnstiles." With its imagery of sailors exploring the unknown seas paired with the journey Ghost Light had just taken us on, it was a perfect way to end the evening.



Tom gave a guitar clinic during their take on the song. At times sounding like a weathered bluesman and at times delving into dirty heavy metal style licks. After a quick encore of "Don't Come Apart Just Yet My Dear," also off Ghost Light's new album Best Kept Secrets, we were left to gather our jaws off the floor and were sent out into late hours of the night trying to comprehend what had just happened. Hopefully this band sticks it out and continues to push boundaries.

In my opinion, Ghost Light is a nice outlet for both Tom and Holly to concentrate on in between doing their normal gigs. I'd imagine it is fun and refreshing for both of them to take a break from covering Dead (and in Holly's case, Phish) tunes. Additionally, it's a real treat for us music lovers to see them offer up some improvisational madness that isn't centered on cover songs.

Scott's Photo Gallery

www.ghostlightband.com