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Billy Strings 4.18.19

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Salvage Station

Asheville, NC

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When asked to write a review of last week's Billy Strings show at Asheville, North Carolina's Salvage Station, I almost passed on it. I just wrote a review of his last Asheville show a few months ago, and I thought it may be hard to come up with another set of words to describe to the readers exactly what a Billy Strings show is all about. I am sure there are a plethora of other reviews that other people have written focusing on how well he has mastered his instrument. I suppose I could recycle those thoughts and just sit here typing out a few adjectives describing each note Billy and his superb backing band played this past Thursday night, but that wouldn't be fun for me. Additionally I'd imagine a review like that wouldn't keep your attention either. Instead I have decided to focus on a few random parts of the Billy Strings show that seemed interesting to me.



One: Billy's astronomical rise in popularity. As most of you already know, Billy is making new fans so rapidly that he has quickly become one of the fastest rising stars in the acoustic music world. Here in Asheville, in just the last two and a half years, he has gone from playing a sparsely attended show at the tiny riverside bar The Bywater, to a sold out show at the 360-person Asheville Music Hall to, the other night, yet another sold out show at the 700-person Salvage Station. As a matter of fact, if you've been paying any attention to Billy Strings in the last couple of years, it would be impossible not to notice that sold out shows have become the norm for him. It seems that everywhere he goes music lovers are salivating at the mouth to see him do his thing.

Two: The covers. Most touring bands introduce covers into their live sets, but very few choose to cover their contemporaries. More often than not a band's cover repertoire consists of popular songs from years past, which Billy did with covers of Bill Monroe, The Beatles, and even Jackson Browne. Billy however does not focus strictly on ancient artist's songs to add to his cannon. Over the course of his short career, he has been known to cover artists like String Cheese Incident, Danny Barnes and Greensky Bluegrass. On Thursday night he pulled out a cover of Fruition's "Labor Of Love" that worked the crowd into a massive frenzy. It was presented so masterfully that you'd never have guessed it was Billy and his band's first time offering up their take on the song. In this writer's opinion, there is something exciting about knowing that the musicians we pay to see perform share the same favorite musical artists with those of us in the crowd.



Three: Billy's vocals. As I mentioned above Billy is known for his mastery of the acoustic guitar. His proficiency at his instrument and the fact that he seems to get better at playing it every single day is undoubtedly why he is gaining popularity at such a rapid rate. Not many people, however, give him the props he deserves for how much his vocal ability has also grown. I suppose when you are as good at guitar as Billy is folks don't tend to notice your vocals as much. However, I cannot ignore them. In the early years of his career it almost seemed as if he was resting on his instrumentation to carry him through his shows, but his vocals have grown exponentially in the last couple of years. Vocally, he carries himself in a manner that make it easy to forget he is still a few years shy of turning thirty years old. It may be hard to do, but next time you see him try to focus on his singing ability and you too will realize that he has also grown into one of the finest singers in bluegrass music today.



Four: The sit in. Too often when an artist welcomes a special guest to the stage, the results aren't as musically exciting as they could be. Often times the hosts take it easy and don't try to push boundaries when someone is sitting in. However, playing it safe does not seem to be in Billy and his band's vocabulary. Case in point, the pair of songs they did the other night with special guest Mimi Naja, of the aforementioned Fruition. She joined them midway through their second set for a take on the old Flatt & Scruggs number "Don't That Road Look Long and Rocky" and a scorching version of Billy's own "Meet Me At The Creek." The Flatt & Scruggs cover was about as standard as they could have offered up with Mimi taking the lead vocals and Billy occasionally adding harmonies while the band played very subtly behind her mandolin strumming. "Meet Me At The Creek" (or as it was lovingly dubbed by Billy "Mimi At The Creek"), however, was other worldly. Mimi fit in perfectly and somehow managed to elevate the intensity of the already intense show. Like I said, while a special guest sit in is normally exciting for those witnessing it live, oftentimes it doesn't hold up when revisited afterwards. I guarantee this "Meet Me At The

Creek" is the exception to that rule. It was hands down the highlight of the evening. Billy's mandolin player Jarrod Walker and Mimi gave a two-mandolin assault that was almost too much to handle while Billy, and his other band mates took turns adding to the mandolin driven madness. On more than one occasion during the sixteen-minute jam they sounded more like a psychedelic rock band than a bluegrass band.

My only real complaint with Billy is that I feel he really needs some new material. I know it may seem like a selfish request, but his lack of original songs make each show a tad too similar to the last. Of course, like I mentioned, he's barely 26 years old, so I'm sure he's got a lot more creativity ahead of him in his hopefully long career. Seriously folks, if you've yet to catch a Billy Strings show, do yourself a favor and get to one as soon as possible. Your chances to see him in intimate venues seem numbered. Also, a public service announcement, if you do decide to go see him when he comes to your town, get your tickets early as they will probably be gone well before show time.



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