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Review: Electric Hot Tuna

Posted Aug 28, 2019

Asheville, NC

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Back in 1969, as the Summer of Love was on its deathbed, **Jorma Kaukonen** and **Jack Casady** ventured away from their psychedelic roots and formed a little blues based band to occupy their time in between **Jefferson Airplane** gigs. That is where the **Hot Tuna** story began.

Flash forward 50 years and Jorma and Jack are still at it. Over the last five decades Hot Tuna has had many different configurations, both acoustic and electric. In recent years, as the road warriors have grown older, they have seemingly settled into the acoustic side of their musical journey. Oftentimes playing just the two of them, or with mandolinist **Barry Mitterhoff**. However this year, with their golden anniversary upon them Hot Tuna decided to plug back in and take their new electric trio, with drummer **Justin Guip**, for a spin around the country.

This past Wednesday night Hot Tuna's celebratory tour rolled into western North Carolina for a gig at the famed Asheville club, The **Orange Peel**. Warming up for Hot Tuna was the bluegrass duo of **Rob Ickes** and **Trey Hensley**. Rob and Trey are about as perfect as a bluegrass duo can be. Rob's dobro playing is unparalleled and the young Trey Hensley can wow a crowd with both his near perfect singing chops and his masterful command of an acoustic guitar.

Over the course of their hour long set they treated the near capacity crowd with a nice mix of Trey Hensley originals and fitting cover versions of other people's songs. A few songs into their set Rob commented from stage that he viewed his band mate as one of the greatest guitarists on the planet, adding that "If anyone disagrees now, you won't by the end of the night." He wasn't wrong, on multiple occasions, Trey's playing elicited cheers from the fans, most of whom had probably never even heard his name before, much less his music.



Of course Rob is no slouch either. He's widely considered one of the best dobro players in the country, and watching him perform makes it evident why he is held in such high regard by those in the bluegrass community. At times the two players seemed to be in a battle to out play each other, while also leaving enough space in the music for the other to shine. It's truly a euphoric experience watching the two of them work their collective magic.

Based on the reactions from the crowd they made more than a few new fans during their time on stage.

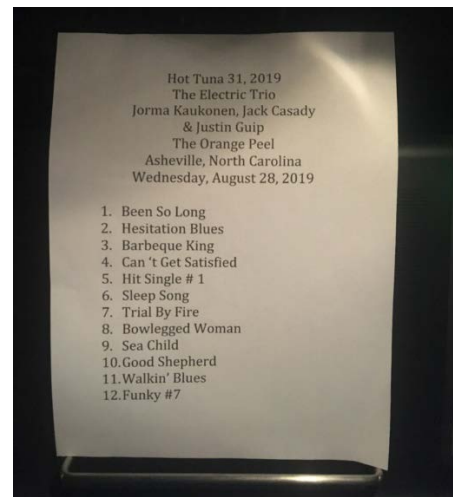
As great as Rob and Trey were, this was Hot Tuna's night, and the anticipation was building all night as we waited for the legends to take the stage. When they finally did grace us with their presence the crowd erupted with applause.

The first three songs were fairly standard blues numbers, that despite the "electric" nature of the show, wouldn't have felt too terribly out of place at a regular acoustic Hot Tuna show. It was on the fourth song, "I Can't Be Satisfied" that things finally took a turn into the direction I had been hoping for. Jorma switched guitars just after the third song, and with it seemed to switch personalities as well. The second he strapped that guitar on and strummed it for the first time the whole scene turned REALLY electric. So loud, and so filthy, that I wouldn't be surprised if a few of the septuagenarians in the audience didn't get a little scared.

Jack and Justin were locked in as Jorma shredded like few can while almost growling into his microphone. We were witnessing, old school electric power trio music at its finest, and the crowd was eating it up.

Jorma and Jack are obviously very used to playing together, but what shocked me was how well Justin sounded adding drums behind these two musical icons. He was the perfect man for the job, adding fills and backbeats, without being too overpowering. He seemed to approach his role with the goal of simply complementing what Jorma and Jack were doing rather than attempting to steal the show. Jorma and Jack would congregate around his kit while they were playing, only retreating long enough to reach the microphones that flanked the stage to sing a verse, before huddling back together at the center stage.

One of the highlights of the night came mid set when they busted out the old Jefferson Airplane song "Trial By Fire." It started off with a bass intro by Jack, that proved why he is considered one of the best bassists of all time, while Justin added little complimentary fills. Eventually Jorma came in at started a playful little back and forth with Jack. Musically bouncing little licks off each other for a few minutes before



settling into the meat of the song. Once they did finally make it into “Trial By Fire” it was as magical as anything I’ve heard them play in the 25 years I’ve been watching them perform. Led by Jack’s spectacular playing, Hot Tuna put on a clinic reminding the music lovers in the crowd that long before there was even such thing as a “jamband” trailblazers like Hot Tuna were paving the way for the music scene as we know it today.

The other high-water mark of the show was “Walkin’ Blues.” Very different than the versions we as Deadheads are used to, this take was a very loud, very electric, and very dirty, distortion filled shred-fest. As Jorma and Jack proved that, in addition to being one of the OG jambands they are also one of the best electrical blues bands that has ever lived. Justin took this song to show us what he had as well. Really taking the time to shine, he carried “Walkin’ Blues” just as much, if not more, than the two legends he had the task of backing. All while grinning ear to ear at the honor it must’ve been to be the man chosen for this specific chore.

The most interesting musical journey of the evening was the set closing version of the Hot Tuna classic “Funky #7.” The song started with a very jazzy drum intro from Justin. Jack eventually joined in and started dropping bombs over the drum beat before eventually settling to a very funky drum and bass jam for a minute or so. Then as the two of them became completely immersed in their groove, here comes Jorma paying straight heavy metal guitar licks over the funky backbeat from the rhythm section. Before we found ourselves at the end of the song the trio had wandered their way through multiple types of jams. They made their way from the standard kind of jam you expect from a rock and roll band, into the kind of electric blues jam Hot Tuna has come to be known for, into one of the most psychedelic things I’ve heard in a long time.

Reminding us that, despite having slowed down a bit over the years, they are still not that far removed from their roles as pioneers of psychedelic music. The schizophrenic nature of the journey worked the crowd into a frenzy. Even the fans that had chosen to enjoy the show from their seats were now on their feet, engrossed in the music, hurling applause towards the stage, and even swaying back and forth a little bit. At the exact moment we were collectively going to explode from joy due to the music they were making they brought it to a raucous abrupt stop, and just like that they put down their instruments and walked off stage. It was one of those “mic drop” moments in which you could tell their purpose was a little reminder that, despite, their age, they still one of the best in the business. Always have been, and always will be.

For the encore Hot Tuna brought our Rob and Trey for a version of “Baby What You Want Me To do.” Oftentimes musical collaborations like these fall flat, or just don’t work for a myriad of reasons. That was not the case this evening. Rob and Trey both added so much to the sounds that it was impossible not to be moved. Trey and Jorma were locked into, what I can only describe as, a guitar duel. Each showing the other what they had. Rob adding to the assault with a few rock n roll dobro licks of his own.

You could tell everyone on stage was having as much fun as we were out on the Orange Peel floor. As the intensity of the jam built, so did the energy in the crowd. It was the perfect way to end a perfect evening of amazing music.

If Hot Tuna’s 50th anniversary tour makes it anywhere near your town, I urge you to make it a point to get to the show. After five decades Jorma and Jack still have it. They can still command an audience with the best of them, and they can still find new and fresh ways to blow your minds. Plus you should ALWAYS go see the legends every chance you get, you never know when you won’t have another chance.

Set list:

Hot Tuna: August 28, 2019 @ The Orange Peel, Asheville, NC Been So Long; Hesitation Blues; Barbeque King; I Can’t Be Satisfied; Hit Single #1; Sleep Song; Trial By Fire, Bowlegged Woman, Knock Kneed Man; Sea Child; Good Shepard, Walkin’ Blues; Funky #7 Encore: Baby What You Want Me To Do (with Rob Ickes & Trey Hensley)