

March 9, 2009

Hi guys-

Here's the Scarlet's Well review. A bit ferny for my taste.

I took the pix, so don't worry about credits.

Hope yr all ok, talk soon, Big P

Scarlet's Well
Diavlos Music House, Koukaki
March 7, 2009

Scarlet's Well: Personal Dignity is for Weenies!

Scarlet's Well is a seven-member acoustic-electric band that play folky-twangly smart rock a la Roger McGuinn, Byrds, mid-period Tom Petty, acoustic period X, etc. It's an unusual occurrence in rock when the band includes more female members than male ones. The 1990s sirens Hole and the bookish Indigo Girls being the two I can remember off the top of my head. Of the seven band mates, five are women, with the lead vocalist Bid and lead guitarist Peter Mumtchicoff being the designated poster boys. They are all outstanding musicians who play short, verse/chorus constructed, pop-format, fantasy-themed art songs. It is the ideal, and I mean the ideal music to play in the background of a brainy, indie-rock dorm room at Vassar college, while researching the life of Gerald of Wales for a master's degree dissertation in Medieval studies. Their lyrics tend to be quite clever, although excessively descriptive at times. Harmony vocals, especially by the women, are sterling in their delivery and their stage presence is confident like seasoned Julliard music instructors. It is, in a sense, dignified folk-rock music. But it leaves a funny taste in my mouth, like artificially-flavored chewing gum residue on the tastebuds. Their lead singer/rhythm guitarist Bid, formerly of the post-punk group Monochrome Set, has been active in the rock scene since the late 1970s. His delivery and playing this night at the Diavlos Music House in Koukaki was seasoned, relaxed and well-paced, like an ivy league lecturing professor who is only a few years away from retirement. You can see he likes what he's doing, is professional to the max, but is incapable of getting out of personal autopilot mode. The band's JRR Tolkein meets George Harrison playing style seems to be appealing to young art and drama school types. The club was full of thin, early 20-somethings with big heads and little bodies. The indie-rock/thrift shop look was de rigeur at this show and mixed perfectly with the band's presented material.

Fortunately for the players, Diavlos has a good-sized performing stage. The group members had room to move freely and not collide with each other as often happens in smaller clubs. Second vocalist Alice Healy is the perfect foil to Bid, as her bright blonde hair and cherubic voice mix in nice contrast to his more FM rock, adult-look delivery and timbre.

Back-up instrumentality is the key to their niche success and connection with their folk/fantasy

genre fans. Keyboardist Sian Dada puts textural background and minimal soloing into their songs, while bassist Deb van der Guten adds blues scale foundation with occasional high-end glissando garnishes. However, their real secret weapon is multi-instrumentalist Helena Johanson, who switches between violin and mandolin on selected pieces. She is the most understated, team playing musician I may have ever seen perform live in concert. She only adds timorous background instrumental support, giving each track a nice curtain of minimalist, almost Velvet Undergroundesque, string-based tone color.

However, despite their fine musicianship, great ensemble playing ability and friendly, genial nature, something just makes me want to snarl at these guys, no matter how much I want to like them. They remind me, especially Bid the singer, of the kids who went to prep school, good colleges and grad school. Then they married the right girls, or guys, got good jobs and had a passel of germ-free, picture perfect kids and never questioned the system. Bid was a punky kid in Monochrome Set. He now has become a distinguished, 12-string guitar twangin' subculture smart-guy who presently doesn't have to work too hard at being a groovy bohemian icon. He's reached the dignified part of his career, which is always a dangerous thing, because assuming one's self to be hot stuff and the sleep of such a mindset invariably begets monsters.

In my book, veteran guys like Ozzy Osbourne, Alice Cooper, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Iggy Pop, Sun Ra and Wayne Kramer are the ones people should be using as societal measurements of dignity. They were and are psychotic old freaks who had the guts and intelligence to keep screeching their brains out into the void as it is the only acceptable way to live your creative life. Guys who do the right, nice, acceptable thing, because it's considered the proper thing to do, tend to be forgotten in short order by society when their time is up. People may smilingly accept the guys who do the right, dignified things as they age, but history will be kinder to electroshock freak-out types of people like Alice and Iggy who keep telling us to look behind the curtain, than Bid and Bono who tell us everything will be alright in the end.

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