

The Voice: Justin Hayward of The Moody Blues (Michael's Rock and Roll Posse)

Last night, Tina and I went to see Justin Hayward, lead singer and major songwriter of The Moody Blues, at the Heights, a recently-renovated venue in Houston. It first opened in 1923 as a movie theater (one story says 1929, but it is clearly very old, in a city that does not keep old movie theaters as theaters), and is on a mixed residential-business district street in the Heights, a gentrified part of Houston about 2-3 miles from downtown. I have attached a copy of the original film projector, not in use, but on display in the funky, somewhat tattered lobby. Although it has been reopened since fall, 2015, I had not heard of it, but after last night, I suspect we will return. It was gutted, left very *razcuache*, with padded folding chairs and some fixed balcony seats. Groups such as Ricki Lake, 10,000 Maniacs, Los Lobos, and other small-audience acts are drawing crowds. It serves some bar food and drinks, has great nearby street and lot parking, and is located near several restaurants. We had great soup and carrot cake, both homemade, at Maryam's Café, which is about 500 feet from the Theater. (I had not realized the Café was dog-friendly, but we lucked out in a light rain, with no pet owners bringing their damned dogs in to eat at the time. I suspect it would not be the same for breakfast or with better weather.)

I had ordered tickets the minute I heard Justin Hayward would be playing, from the Moody Blues fan news. (We had last seen the group about 8 or 9 years ago, at Sandia Amphitheater in NM.) The Heights tickets were online, even with accommodations for my knee and cane, and they thoughtfully put us in the front row of the non-drinking section. The first 25 feet in front of the stage are arrayed with tables, 4 to a party, and the bands are within reach. In other words, we were 25 unobstructed feet from the musicians. Mike Dawes came on for 30 minutes to play acoustic and electric instrumentals, of what I would call skiffle music—playing solo guitar, but in a fashion that sounded like lead guitar, bass, and even drum or percussion parts. He had the longest fingers I have ever seen, and was entertaining.

After a break, JH came on, with Dawes backing him, and keyboardist/vocalist Julie Ragins. He performed about 15 or 16 songs (not yet posted on the invaluable setlist.fm, but his Dallas show had 14 songs and one encore, and he had two encores last night), about half and half Moody Blues and his own solo songs. I made notes that he sang “The Voice,” “Tuesday Afternoon,” “In Your Blue Eyes,” “Forever Autumn,” “Your Wildest Dreams,” “Question,” “Nights in White Satin,” “I Know You're Out There Somewhere,” with the crowd

fully engaged and singing along, myself included. He was in full throat, hit all the high notes, and the stripped-down trio captured the full Moody Blues sound, even without the flute player and drummer. I have seen the full band play 6 times, all in larger arenas or venues, so I had not realized what an accomplished guitarist Justin was, along with Dawes, who did not sing all night.

Justin was not an original member of the Moody Blues, and stepped in when Denny Laine left 51 years ago. Laine went solo, and then formed Wings with Paul McCartney. It is Denny's distinctive voice on "Go Now," the first breakout hit for the Moody Blues, and the group leader Mike Pinder invited Justin to join. After a number of fits and starts over the years, he and the other members (Graeme Edge, Justin Hayward, Ray Thomas, and John Lodge) still tour, and I recently saw that they would be performing on a cruise ship along with other 1960s-1970s vintage groups. No way am I going on a cruise to hear classic groups, but The Moody Blues are a wonderful group, who deserve to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Indeed, I consider them the best 1960s group NOT yet in the Hall.

I had bought Justin's newest CD ("All the Way"), from which he drew a number of the songs last night, and was struck by how beautiful they were, and how the 1960-1970 album and radio and tour rotation style architecture of song support would have enhanced their value. Today, even active and productive stars such as he do not get their due, notwithstanding the GREATEST HITS-type tours. He and the Moody Blues were rock royalty, with a half dozen songs at the very top of the charts, and they hold up upon my listening all these years. His voice is immediately recognizable, and his guitar playing in the stripped-down trio is exceptional. I admire the *veteranos* who slog it out even in the many small venues such as The Heights, after so many years. He must have sung "Nights in White Satin" thousands of times, yet it was still life-affirming to hear all over again, and I have played the 1967 album *Days of Future Passed* several times while writing this for my Posse, relishing every single song. I would have liked to have heard "I'm Just a Singer (In a Rock and Roll Band)" and "Ride My See-Saw," but it was a wonderful concert by a great artist, in a new/renovated theater. At 66, I was smack in the middle of the older group, and if they were like me, a great time was had by all. I am not recently-renovated, but I have a lot of these songs playing inside my head.

There will be more reports, as we have tickets for Santana, John Mayer, U2, and Brian Wilson. Life is good, at least for birthright U.S. Citizens.

Take care, all,

Michael
Houston, March 5, 2017

