

John Mayer and Sarah Brightman (with a cameo by Luciano Pavarotti)

We were going to be in New Mexico when John Mayer came through, so quite a while ago, we bought tickets to see him at the Pavilion, a very good Albuquerque outdoor venue. (My long-time readers know the place—I was there the night it opened, front row for Steely Dan, as well as Dylan/Willie Nelson/John Mellencamp, Los Lobos/Neil Young, etc.) Mayer's 2006 "Continuum" is a great album, with no bad song on it, and I play it a few times a week in rotation; I also am a fan of his 2008 live concert album, "Where the Light Is," although I think his patter is bothersome. These artists should take a pointer (one of many) from Van—start on time, no talking in between songs, and (my favorite) no liquor in the venue. (On the other hand, Van the Man is a surly SOB in real life, but he is an authentic genius, so we make provisions for him.) Although it is not as perfect or balanced an album as "Continuum," the 2012 "Born and Raised" is also very good.

As much as I have liked Mayer's music, his new "Paradise Valley" is too-countrified for my tastes, although two of the songs struck me—an interesting yin and yang. First, he covers—unusually for him, as he mostly performs and record his own work—JJ Cale's "Call Me the Breeze" from "Naturally," a favorite JJC album that I have loved since I graduated from college and entered graduate school in English in 1972. I had not heard the song in many years, and he did not say it was a Cale song, but expect to get a copy of "Naturally" in digital format. (Cale died in July, so I would have expected a shout-out.) Second, he scores a hit against his former girlfriend Taylor Swift for her having dissed him with her songs "22" and "Dear John," with his "Paper Doll":

He retorts:

Paper doll, come try it on  
Step out of that black chiffon  
Here's a dress of gold and blue  
Sure was fun being good to you

This one we made just for Fall  
And Winter runs a bit too small  
This mint green is new for Spring  
My love didn't cost a thing

You're like twenty-two girls in one  
And none of them know what they're runnin' from  
Was it just too far to fall?  
For a little paper doll

Fold a scarf, Moroccan red  
And tie your hair behind your head  
Strap into some heels that hurt  
You should've kept my undershirt

You're like twenty-two girls in one  
And none of them know what they're runnin' from  
Was it just too far to fall?  
For a little paper doll

Cut the cord and pull some strings  
And make yourself some angel wings  
And if those angel wings don't fly  
Someone's gonna paint you another sky

'Cause you're like twenty-two girls in one  
And none of them know what they're runnin' from  
Was it just too far to fall?

Yikes?!?! He appears to have completely recovered from the same kind of surgery for vocal cord nodules that Adele recently had—a somewhat miraculous and delicate surgery that helped Julie Andrews as well. He is among the great young guitar players, and I have admired that he has collaborated with Clapton, BB King, and many of his blues and rock

influences. If he comes to town, by all means see him and his very tight group. One final Note to Self: “In Albuquerque during October, wear a coat to outdoor concerts or you will freeze your sorry-ass off.”

He was preceded that night by another very tight band, Phillip Phillips, whom I had heard of but had not heard. Apparently, he won American Idol last year, but I do not watch any of the televised vocal contests, so I did not know that. He is a very talented singer and songwriter, writes his own music, and has a very good backup band, including a trumpeter who is exceptional and not show-offy. I include a youtube performance of “Home,” and urge all of you to keep an eye on him and his work. He is from Georgia, and at first, when he spoke, I thought he was English, but I am not sure why. he speaks with a Southern accent, but, like so many singers, it disappears when he sings. (Have you ever heard Adele or, to use another example, Roberta Flack, speak English, and noticed how their distinctive low-caste accents disappear into their singing voices?) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoRkntoHkIE>

On the subject of accents: One singer who recently disappointed me, in part because her pronunciations during singing were so dreadful, was Sarah Brightman, whom we saw on Friday in Houston with Carrie Criado, my friend and UHLC media goddess. I had really high hopes, as Tina and I had seen her in the original “Phantom of the Opera” at the West End in London in 1987, when she played the original Christine Daaé. (She was married to Andrew Lloyd-Webber, who wrote the part and several others for her.) She has since had an admirable career and sung light opera and reconstituted herself as a *chanteuse*. I have not kept up with the career, but when she was coming to Houston in March, we got tickets early on, only to have the concert tour delayed until October, 2013. I had not realized she was now a world-music singer, with only about 3 or 4 of her 20+song set in English. She sang in what I identified as Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and, I think, French. Honestly, it was the most off-putting choices of songs imaginable, as she is not fluent in those languages—certainly not in Spanish, where she sang “Lo Luna” for “La Luna,” which I knew she was going for because she had these

psychedelic screen savers with moons flying all over the place and the kind of klieg lights that the Fillmore West used to have for Santana and other 1960s groups. (It was more distracting than Diana Krall's recent screens of Steve Buscemi singing and dancing that were, at the time, the worst backdrop I had ever seen at a music venue. Diana now is in second place for that insipid trophy.)

She has collaborated with many male singers, which allows her voice to soar quite beautifully—see her on youtube with any of the various Phantoms—my favorite being Michael Crawford—or with Andrea Bocelli, Placido Domingo, or any number of others, including the most recent, the Swiss tenor Erkan Aki. Aki performed with her on a few songs, including the excellent “Phantom” centerpiece. She had two interpretive women dancers who galumphed across the stage as she arose from a pneumatic mini-stage. I kept wondering why she was showing old John Glenn and Soyuz pictures on the back-screen, until I learned she had rented a spot on a 2015 Russian space tourist ride. (I had thought perhaps it was a commercial for the recent Sandra Bullock/George Clooney movie, “Gravity.”) But she is just wrong for “Nessun Dorma,” even if she has sung with great tenors. It is not that a woman cannot do a great job—look at Aretha in a last-minute replacement for Luciano Pavarotti:

<https://www.google.com/#psj=1&q=nessun+dorma+aretha+franklin>.

The Queen just killed that night, in English and Italian (listen to her soaring *Vincero!* at the end). Sarah trilled, but did not kill. I give her a B-/C+ for the night, not nearly good enough for \$65 tickets.

I will end on a true Pavarotti story: several years ago, we were in Toronto for a meeting, and I had just come out of a sauna. I was wearing a terrycloth robe, and had my hair plastered over, and was sitting at a table, when a woman came over and asked me for my autograph. I signed her paper, and we talked a bit. Then, she said, “Mr. Pavarotti, I always imagined you would speak English with an Italian accent.” I said, in a bad Italian accent, without a moment's thought, “I am traveling *incognito*.” She said, “Well, I understand, and that makes sense.”

Moral(s) of the story: everyone has a doppelganger. Double check any Pavarotti signatures you might buy on e-Bay. And if you are going to sing in a bad Italian, and Spanish, and Japanese accent, Sarah, stick to English.

Next up: Movie review: "Muscle Shoals"