

The Moody Blues in a Great New Venue: Michael's Rock and Roll Posse

Last Spring, Tina and I attended a solo show by Justin Hayward at the renovated Houston Heights Theater, and as I reported at the time, it was a truly engaging and interesting concert, stripped down with just him and two supporting musicians, but no other members of his group, The Moody Blues. This week, at the new-ish Smart Financial Centre in Sugar Land, a Houston suburb, I attended the group's "Days of Future Passed" 50th Anniversary Tour performance, with Posse member and my former UHLC student, Leah Gross. (Tina had to teach on Wednesday night, and urged me to invite Leah.) It was a Wednesday night, but ice storms in Houston actually shut down the City and UH for Tuesday and Wednesday, even though it was 65 degrees yesterday and today (I write this on Sunday). I have had bad weather affect concerts before, but almost always outdoor events, not highways so slick with ice that the authorities cannot even answer accident calls. On a meteorological note, Santa Fe, NM, at 7,500 feet, had less snow than did Houston through this season. Go figure.

First, the arena: <http://smartfinancialcentre.net/about/about-the-venue>. This beautiful and accommodating music theater seats 6,400, and has just celebrated its first anniversary. I hadn't been there before, as it is a 20+ mile schlep from downtown Houston, on Hwy 59, and evening concerts during the week mean you have killer traffic with which to contend. But, boy, it is not because they aren't trying. If you go to the website, you will see they are becoming among the most popular locations for groups, and will compete mightily with Toyota Center for attracting major acts, especially during the NBA season, inasmuch as the Rockets play there. (I offer a shout out to UHS Regent Chair Tilman Fertitta, who just purchased the team.) And because the Mitchell Pavilion in the Woodlands is outdoors, and also a major schlep in a different direction, it will be eclipsed by the Smart Centre, notwithstanding the pretentiousness of naming it "Centre" instead of "Center." It has great parking, and tremendous sight lines—neither of which describe the downtown Toyota Center. They ran out of disability parking, which matters for an aging fan base of 1960's groups such as The Moody Blues. On nights like this, they should have roped off another lot and directed people with disability stickers and plates to use it. They also need more elevators, as not all of us can navigate the three levels of stairs. The line at the elevator was almost as long as the food lines, but they seemed to sell their food and beer more quickly than the elevators moved.

All that in, it was a very good, but not great evening of music. Set One was a short greatest hits show, and the 7 songs didn't even begin to scratch the surface. After a break, they played the entirety of their 1967 "Days of Future Passed," which I have always thought was a failed attempt at a concept album, but which includes Tuesday Afternoon and the sublime Nights in White Satin. The album is pretentious and had not aged well overall, and its 8 other songs are a mishmash, wrapped around by new age poetry, melodically intoned by Jeremy Irons on screen with a bunch of flowers, fields, swirling psychedelic backdrops, and other 1960's motifs. Spurred

by The Beatles' towering "Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" in 1967, other major artists followed with their own rock opera/concept albums, such as the Rolling Stones in "Their Satanic Majesties Request" (also in 1967), The Who in "Tommy" (1969), The Kinks in "The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society" (1969), and later concept albums such as Marvin Gaye's 1978 "Here, My Dear" and various Stevie Wonder albums. They ended with Question and Ride My See-Saw as a (very) short encore. (In case you are keeping set list score, that is 11 wonderful, A grade songs.)

A note to the Smart Centre: turn down the sound for backdrops. It was blaring far too loudly, especially for the spoken narrative and background music. I am surprised more rockers, especially those eligible for full Social Security, have not been deafened after so many years of playing in front of those huge amplifiers. I also noted how helpful the ushers were. Often, their efforts seem begrudging and desultory, but these folks were genuinely courteous and informed. In college, I often ushered at the Columbus Veterans Memorial, and loved the bargain: I got you to your seats quickly and efficiently, and then we all watched the show. And keep your joints hidden from the rest of the audience. With this basic contract, I saw The Who, playing the aforementioned "Tommy" straight through; Cat Stevens; Blood, Sweat, and Tears; CSNY; Lou Rawls; Peter, Paul, & Mary; Aretha, and many other 1960s groups, in the actual 1960s.

I could not help but judge this concert by the recent Justin Hayward event, which was much more intimate (fewer than 300, in a restored movie theater) and had no flashing lights and backdrops. He sang most of the Moody Blues classics, with a half dozen of his own more recent songs, but none had the sense of "filler" that were evident here, inasmuch as "Days" was not their best album. Drummer Graeme Edge is the only original band member (they began in 1964), and Justin Hayward (lead guitar and vocals) & John Lodge (bass and vocals) joined in 1966. They were joined by two organists (Julie Ragins & Alan Hewitt), a second drummer (Billy Ashbaugh), and a very accomplished flute player (Norda Mullen). I was saddened by flashing pictures that depicted the late flute player and original member of the group Ray Thomas, who died just three weeks ago, after many years of illness. In addition to the sheer virtuosity and longevity, the group was very innovative and unusual in its featuring the flute, especially as played by Thomas. Only Jethro Tull has rivalled their use of the flute, featuring the incomparable Ian Anderson. Relatedly, I note that JT began in 1967, about the time that The Moody Blues were at the peak of their powers, and just after Ray Thomas left the group.

I have now seen the group as a collective 5 times, and Hayward twice as a solo performer. Because the statute of limitations has tolled, I can confess in public that I feigned illness while in law school to get an exam rescheduled, and to allow me to attend my first Moody Blues concert, at one of the DC-area basketball arenas; it was in 1979, and I am not proud of it. I am not a fan of classic groups celebrating entire albums on some anniversary, but hey, I go to see groups and music I know and love. Hearing almost a dozen songs I very much enjoy and to which I know

every word, is a pretty good tradeoff for the half of the album that I do not really like. These guys have lived their professional careers for over 50 years, and that is a lot of nights in white satin played to grateful crowds. I am even inured to the idiots who pay these prices and then spend all their time yakking and bothering everyone else in the audience, or dancing badly; Leah and I laughed at this poor clueless young woman in front of us, swaying out of sync to the music and flailing her arms around, like she was warning us of a fire in the building.

Soon this Spring, The Moody Blues will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a long-overdue recognition. Now, the only serious omission is The Zombies, and then all will be right with the world, or as Michael Corleone said in "The Godfather," "Today, I settled all family business." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjY4tx4ZTJc> . I know it is not the perfect metaphor, but it is a great line from an extraordinary movie, with a wonderful score by Nino Rota. And to my students: if you cut an exam and the real reason is you have great tickets for a concert, you get a one-time pass. Even better, get an extra ticket, and I will join you.

PS: iphone pictures attached

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