

arts

And a merry old Cole was she

by Richard Lim

The time-worn classic from any old live concert: 'It's great to be here — I love you all.' But there's a world of difference between any old live concert, and an evening with the Holly Cole Trio. When Holly Cole spoke to the full house at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium on Sunday, September 19, it took just one sentence to distinguish the trio from any other act which could have been performing that night.

"It's great to be back in the Rebecca Cohn, and it's great to be back home in Halifax."

These words set the mood for the evening. On one level, it was the Holly Cole Trio gathering their fans together to revel in both their idiosyncratic renditions of old jazz favourites and their witty, often darkly romantic originals. But the deeper level of the performance was about private reunions rather than public admiration. Almost every song the trio played was introduced by Holly Cole on personal terms. Her comments always touched upon a few of the many emotions which were also reflected in the evening's playlist, which ranged from the deeply sentimental to the ominously subtle to the slyly sardonic.



Songs which more or less fit the latter description (it's dangerous to categorize anything too firmly) included "Girl Talk", the title track from the trio's first album. In performing the

song, Holly Cole not only dedicated it to all the "girls" in the audience, she also threw in an extra wrinkle — according to the studio version, "the weaker sex [women]...wouldn't trade

you [men] for a sack of gold", but in the live version, some complicated alchemy occurs, and suddenly the truly weaker sex finds itself on par with fungi. In the trio's interpretation of "Que Sera Sera", Cole recalls growing up, falling in love and asking her "lovers" (rather than "lover") what the future will hold.

Since their debut album, the Holly Cole Trio has received some criticism from various self-appointed jazz purists (most of them, crabby and bespectacled men, I'm sure). Regardless what their fans think of the trio's distinctly modern interpretations of jazz classics (they love them), it cannot be denied that the group made every song they played their own. They even added a distinctly Canadian stamp to the music whenever they could. Holly Cole dedicated "Everything I've Got (Belongs to You)" to ex-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, an honour which Cole gleefully brought to the attention of her cousin, provincial NDP leader Alexa McDonough. The audience's laughter grew with each line of the song: "I've got eyes to give you dirty looks. I've got words you won't find in children's books."

Likewise, Cole announced that the trio's performance of "Slowboat to China" would probably appeal to Nova Scotians, since it was about a subject which all Maritimers could relate to, "lust in the ocean".

Something amazing about the Holly Cole Trio's concert: They didn't have any frantically choreographed stage productions charged by lasers and giant screen TVs, they rarely even moved around on the stage except to sneak a sip of water or apple juice, yet somehow they completely charmed the audience and you can't chalk it up to just hometown charity. The answer is in the group's obvious love for their music, and the great amount of fun they have while playing it.

From the first notes of the funky jazzed-up version of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" performed by pianist Aaron Davis and string bassist David Piltch as the instrumental prologue, the trio was clearly having a great time, and all the audience had to do was jump in and hold on. During the string bass solo in the middle of "My Baby Just Cares for Me", Cole peered over Piltch's shoulder as he earnestly went about shaping subtle variations of the song's

main motif, apparently ignoring her and thus belying the meaning of the lyrics. Only when he was approaching the final climbing and descending moments of his solo did Piltch turn his head to face Cole. Dancing eyes and bemused smiles locked, and a wave of laughter spread through the auditorium.

Another fine moment for both music and humour came as Cole introduced a song which she said she'd learned from a childhood friend "who turned out to be a snake". Piltch and Davis then began an extensive and impressive percussion introduction through innovative use of their instruments, Piltch using the different surfaces of his string bass, Davis applying himself to the piano lid and the strings beneath it. The song turned out to be "Trust in Me", which most of us should recognize from the Disney movie, "The Jungle Books" (the snake, Ka, sings it to the boy, Mowgli).

The trio's sense of humour was contrasted by their penchant for darker and more emotive songs. This portion of the group's repertoire was served well by "Don't Let the Teardrops Rust Your Shining Heart", which Cole called "one of the saddest songs [she'd] even heard", a version of Cole Porter's "Get Out of Town" which conjured up images of threatening thunderclouds and long, ominous shadows cast across dimly-lit city streets, and a fascinating interpretation of "Smile". Written by Charlie Chaplin, "Smile" as performed by a jazz great like Nat King Cole came across as softly sorrowful and tinged with secret regrets. When the Holly Cole Trio played it, it was downright spooky. But maybe I'm just letting the song's mood lighting (blue on blue) get to me.

In a heartfelt rendition of "Downtown", Cole wrapped her voice around the strong sharp highs and husky rich lows without ever losing control, while Davis produced an intricately crafted opening phrase out of which the catchy melody of the song just barely peeked. Overall, Davis' impeccable sense of timing enabled him to support the vocals sparingly at some times, extravagantly at other times, never playing too much while displaying both skill and expression. Piltch, too, showed a sense of economy, driving the rhythm to begin a song, taking flight into abstraction when the moment called for it, or simply providing a finely picked foundation.

For all the mood swings from quietly dark to teasingly smirky, the emotion which ultimately took control was that of gentle sentiment, even nostalgically so. Cole dedicated "Blame It On My Youth" to her family and friends whose past support had brought her to the evening's achievement. The tone of the two-song encore was also deeply personal, as Cole introduced "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry":

"I first heard this song when I was growing up, I heard it with my grandfather - he's here tonight."

The evening concluded with Cole allowing her voice to soar once more in a sincerely celebratory "I Can See Clearly Now". After all the shifting sands of the world of love, danger and sorrow had been negotiated, some clarity of vision had been found, and the evening was not about a local "girl" making it big and coming home, but rather, it was the night when a hometown unabashedly fell in love all over again.

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