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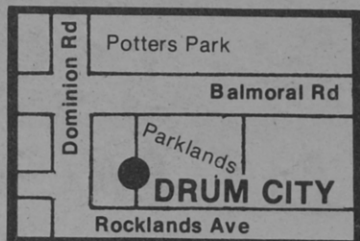
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Cult Come to Life

Judging by the quite remarkable interest in his recent New Zealand visit, Leo Kottke makes a better living out of being a cult figure than most.

Certainly, it would have been a brave pundit who was prepared to bet that he could attract around eight hundred Aucklanders out on a Saturday night, and it must be a real comfort to the promoters, Australian Concert Entertainments, in view of their string of forthcoming attractions.

Kottke was relaxed, if a little saddle-weary, at his Auckland press conference, where he answered the obligatory questions about his singing ability and lack of classical training, his days in the navy, and whether he had been 'down this way before'. I didn't hear anybody ask him what he thought of Godzone, but I wouldn't have been surprised.

At that stage, though they probably weren't telling the star, seats were selling about as well as two-piece bathing costumes in July, and everybody who wasn't looking worried was probably just putting a brave face on it. Signs that things were on the up came with the interest of the *Auckland Star*, who even went so far as to pose a special outdoor shot in the threatening drizzle for publication the next night.

In fact, whether because Leo Kottke fans are late bookers, or because a lot of people decided to try their luck at something a little different, the foyer of His Majesty's was quite respectably full as the lights went down for the beginning of Lea Maalfrid's opening set. Ms. Maalfrid certainly oozes confidence at the keyboard as she runs through her repertoire of songs, but I can't help wishing for a little more variety in subject matter. Three or four songs about snarling sexy young men I can take — my attention had begun to wander by the sixth. Still, there is no doubt that she has the chops — her piano playing is strong and her voice was at times quite remarkable.

Certainly, the crowd gave her a rousing reception — a lot better fate than she has suffered at the hands of other audiences in her stint as an opening act. I suppose Leo Kottke attracts a nicer type of person than Lou Reed.

It's not really surprising. The most striking aspect of his personality from the stalls is a rather large-scale affability, which extends to good-natured remarks about his singing and a constant flow of muttered asides which were not there, as in many cases, to put the performer at ease, but rather to help the audience along.

Between the jokes, anecdotes and background information, Kottke delivered a re-

markably varied show. While I had been expecting something a little more mortal than the 'virtuoso's virtuoso' promised in the pre-concert bumf, I was still surprised by the vigour and energy of his playing. Sitting on a high stool was his only real concession to the concert hall. In most respects, like Englishman, John Martyn, he treated his show as if it were taking place in a folk club.

He played quite a large proportion of things that were in some way influenced by ragtime and country music — from Tom T. Hall's 'Pamela Brown' to his own guitar pieces, and sang in what was really a most impressive country and western bass baritone. Despite the references to his inadequacies, and his famous likening of his singing to 'geese farts on a muggy day', Kottke has, to my ear at least, a better voice than the likes of Johnny Cash. On some things, like the quite spectacular version of Roger McGuinn's 'Eight Miles High' which introduced his voice to the audience, he showed considerable skill as an interpreter.

His guitar playing was in a similar vein. Rather than dazzle with lightning runs, he preferred to stay with the basic chord sequence and melody, and work more and more complicated rhythmic patterns into them. When he turned to a classical guitar to play the Bach fugue which he claims as a blockbuster hit in Poland, he showed no more than average ability in the more academic format. It was on the twelve-strings, with and without bottle-neck, that he shone.

Where the occasion demanded, he was quite willing to strum along through the chorus of a song in his best play-in-a-day manner, but there was always some touch in the playing — more often than not leaving the audience admiring not exceptional dexterity, but wit or appropriateness. While he didn't do much that many guitarists in the audience couldn't have understood, he did a lot they probably would never have thought of.

After remarkably unrestrained demands for first one, and then two encores, Kottke shuffled out of sight, clutching his guitar and looking almost sheepish. No-one could deny that he had worked hard, perhaps as hard as any musical purist through town in the past few months. Not for him the guaranteed thirty thousand at the Springs. Just another Saturday night in another small concert hall — making a living as a cult figure.

Francis Stark

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