

Live

GEORGE BENSON

Auckland Town Hall, February 8.

When I was nine, a man appeared on *Ready To Roll* and funk'd his way through a song called 'Give Me The Night', and I didn't know what had hit me. Like 'Stomp', by the Brothers Johnson, and the Commodores' 'Brickhouse', it was a song that supplied a rush of pure joy, unequalled by any other stimulus that occupies a mind not quite into double figures.

So, many years later, it's my first opportunity to see George Benson really play, and the feeling of anticipation reaches unreal heights in the sold-out Auckland Town Hall. He strolls on wearing black trousers and shirt, a royal blue blazer, and cradling a blood red Ibanez attached to a rhinestone-encrusted guitar strap. This cat has all the style.

With his spirited six-piece band, he launched straight into two lengthy, swinging instrumentals, before pausing to make his introductions. Overall, he didn't chat much, but that was cool — the less said the more sung.

The first tunes to really shake up the crowd were the smooth and deceptively powerful 'Turn Your Love Around', and the flowing groove that's wrapped around 'Love Times Love'. Played almost back-to-back, it was obvious Benson was going to make this a 'greatest hits' show.

Midway through, he changed the mood to mel-low with 1983's 'In Your Eyes' and 'The Greatest Love Of All' — schmaltzy to the extreme, but it was a brilliant display of Benson's vocal range, and not at all "colourless", as was suggested by a pretentious review in the *NZ Herald*.

As the cruisy instrumental 'Breezin'' wound to a close, Benson flowed on to the intro of 'Give Me The Night', and immediately I'm frothing like a rabid hound. As he hits the second verse, the sad sacks who've been clapping politely downstairs finally leave their seats, the fans near the back rush the stage, and the place is bursting with energy. Benson, grinning from ear to ear, adds three extra choruses and still it's not enough. Moments like these should be never ending.

For the encore, Benson has changed into a light brown blazer. He only does one for the road, an epic version of 'On Broadway', before the house lights go up. Admittedly, I'm disappointed 'Never Give Up On A Good Thing' wasn't given a whirl, but in the scheme of things, that notion was surrendered insignificant. This was a tremendous show, and there's nothing quite like seeing a childhood hero deliver in the flesh.

JOHN RUSSELL

DAVE DOBBYN

Powerstation, January 27.

Being the last night of a nationwide tour, you can excuse Dave Dobbyn and crew for celebrating with a few handles of indulgence. It was as he said, "a party".

A slightly unsteady-on-his-feet Dobbyn strikes the first chords of 'Rain On Fire' just before 11pm, and the tables upstairs, reserved for REM, remain unused. It was their major loss.

Through the years Dobbyn hasn't lost any of his vocal chops, and tonight, armed with the rhythm section of Auckland band Breast Secreting Cake and percussionist Jay Foulkes, he swept and

rocked gloriously, from the old school charm of 'Be Mine Tonight', to the fresh visionary tales collected on *Twist*, to the desperate ballads 'Loyal' and *Lament For The Numb's* 'Don't Hold Your Breath'.

'Whaling' — the best sea shanty in the world — was given a huge reception, as is normal, but a big surprise tonight was the number in the crowd who knew word for word songs lifted from *Twist*. It appears Dobbyn has swayed the faithful, who usually demand he play more than a fair share of old favourites.

He found himself accompanied by 600 voices on 'Lap Of The Gods', 'Naked Flame', a sublime version of 'It Dawned On Me', and the huge sounding 'What Do You Really Want'. Earlier, a stomping cover of 'Sweet Jane' led into *Twist's* first single, 'Language', and when Dobbyn and the assembled fans joined forces on the opening line, "my hands are tied...", it seemed the strength of the combined voices could lift the roof. Repeating it as an encore was a perfectly played ace.

When I last saw Dobbyn at the Powerstation, the *Loyal* album had just been released and I held a false ID in my back pocket. He had a band called the Stone People in tow, who were far too flashy and more of a hindrance than a plus. The current three-piece definitely serves him better, and there's a rawness and freshness about the new songs that suggests an entertainer still living large near the top of the pile.

JOHN RUSSELL

ALT

Powerstation, February 11.

Mostly curiosity was responsible for drawing a crowd that half-filled the Powerstation on this night — Tim Finn was making his first appearance within a band since his departure from Crowded House. As a member of the trio called ALT, he contributed to moments that were either tremendous or tragic.

The L in the equation, Liam O'Manolai of the Hothouse Flowers, graced the stage first for a double dose of acoustic Irish folk, before he was joined by A, guitarist Andy White. Sounding unbelievably like Mike Scott of the Waterboys, White was undoubtedly the hero of the evening, exercising a subtly controlling hand that held things together.

Two dreamy pop songs later, on came Mr T, and the first ridiculous combination of the evening. 'I Hope I Never' was ruined by O'Manolai nervously tapping at the drums, and it was a relief when they tapping into the first ever ALT single, 'We're All Men.'

A stunning version of 'Many's The Time' followed, and it was here they peaked. First heard on Finn's *Before And After* album, 'Many's The Time' was transformed tonight from a sweeping ballad to a glorious, intensely powerful epic.

Later on came the poignant section — the ballads 'I Decided To Fly', 'What You've Done' and 'Favourite Girl' — with Finn and O'Manolai trading instruments, T proving a more competent skinsman.

The first encore was the boisterous sing-along 'Halfway Round The World', and the second was provoked by an impromptu football chant from the fans. The trio were immediately called back for a third, where upon Finn careened round the stage,

either fuelled by speed or euphoria, playing one instrument for 20 seconds, then leaping to the next. Unfortunately 'Lean On Me' crashed messily into a directionless, self indulgent jam session, that threatened to sour an otherwise fun performance, but judging by the smile on Tim Finn's face, he's unperturbed, just happy to belong.

JOHN RUSSELL

THE CRAMPS

Palace Hollywood, January 27.

It's a great and wondrous thing, this rock 'n' roll, and the Cramps are living proof of this. Ably supported on this night by Big Sandy and the Flyrite Trio's straight up rockabilly, and the retarded folk-blues of Tucson's Doo-Rag, it was a truly celebratory atmosphere by the time the headliners hit the stage. For all their flamboyance, the Cramps know how to keep things simple and powerful on the musical front. The new kids, Harry Drumdini and Slim Chance, had the beat nailed down tight. Ivy strutted her very fine stuff, and Mr Lux Interior showed everyone exactly what a real frontman should be like. No speeches on inequality from a guy earning six figures, no stories on how bad his childhood was. There's just a simple "let's all do some drugs", and the band drive into a version of 'Bop Pills' that makes you realise the golden age of punk was probably 1956.

Naturally, the new material was given a serious workout and it stands out well. 'Mean Machine', 'I'm Customised' and 'Sado County Auto Show' made up a nice hot rod triptych, while 'Naked Girl Falling Down The Stairs' was simply pure artistic genius. It's nice to hear this stuff stand up to 'Daddy Drives A UFO' or a mighty 'Garbage Man', which drove the crowd into a near frenzy. No easy crowd to impress either, for every hammered college boy or alternokid there was a serious freak, most of whom were as entertaining as the band, especially if you're a fan of big hair or ornate fetish wear. Stand out moments had to be a most twisted introduction to 'She Said' and show stopper 'Surfin' Bird', during which Lux indulged in his usual orgy of microphone destruction, nudity and downright threatening behaviour, while the band ignored him and blistered through some serious feedback. It mayn't sound like high art to you, the tender reader, but believe me, we all left the seedy confines of the Palace as believers that night.

KIRK GEE

POI ON HEELS

Starfish Enterprise, January 26.

The gin has left the details hazy. On a hot February night it enhanced a wonderful show. So did the unexpected raucous quartet of strangers at my table.

Mika is brilliant. He can dance. He can sing. He is the mistress of his cabaret. He wore the ab-fab heels. There are some who will say, platforms? Enough retro! Likewise the stilettos. Why not throw both extremes together. A decidedly dangerous stiletto heel, it would go clean through one ear and out the other, a massive platform forward. Shiny black, patent leather, held together elegant scuff stylee. I was assured of their comfort, having been hand made in New York. The best frock went to Carmen, resplendent in full length refractive

sequins. But this is not a drag comp', it's a show.

Mika is the star, though ably assisted by his bi-cultural posse of backing singers. The whites, 'the Blokes', were Arjan Hoeflak and Jason Heap. The brownies, 'the Ahuras' were Taiaroa Royal and Taane Mete. There were guest appearances throughout — the aforementioned Carmen singing 'Summertime', and the inevitable drag thing, lip syncing. Dalvanus did a no-show but dispatched young man Leon Wharekawa, who did a number from Dalvanus' up coming musical. Opera singer Mary Astin put in an appearance.

Being a cabaret, everyone was given a chance to shine, so the songs kept coming. 'Juiced' produced the actual *Poi On Heels*. Others were camp classics. 'Say A Little Prayer', 'I Will Survive', the turgid 'Endless Love' and 'Can't Hurry Love', and a brilliant piss-take of Dame Kiri Te Kanawa doing 'Pokare Kare Ana'. How did he get so high and all that vibrato? Mika's new single 'Marina' got showcase treatment. But it wouldn't have been so lush without the extravagant wigs and costumes. Te Mika Aue!

BARBIE

KING LOSER, SHAFT

Squid, February 15

The best rock 'n' roll story of 1994 goes to King Loser. Loser land tour support for cult international band. They, the very famous Celia and the equally infamous Chris Heazelwood search again for a drummer. They've had a few. Steve Pikelet was superb. Original banger (am I really saying this?) Duane Zakarov had style, as did Sean O'Reilly. Guy Treadgold, as I heard it told, wasn't really a drummer at all, hence the free jazz label, but he was badly in need of a lift to Auckland. Time was running out, speed burn was setting in. Why not kill two birds with one stone? The merry trio play their way from Auckland to Dunedin. They did not live happily ever after.

Their 95 follow up? There is no bullshit about drummer number 13 Lance Strickland. The stacks of dishes aside, this is a working musician with an impressive track record — SPUD, Freak Power, Rainy Days and his own Virginia Reel. A tribute to Lance — power, precision, lots of presence — all on the basic Loser kit, the drumming is not. Mr Strickland still throws in the signature fills.

The Loser sound is basic too. Either guitar, bass, drums or guitar, keyboards, drums. The singing is shared between Celia and Chris. Chris plays most of the guitar. Mr Heazelwood, though appearing loose, is very in control of the guitar sound. Clean use of his whammy bar as pitch variation contributes greatly to Loser noise. Nolsy it is, see I don't reckon they rock. King Loser groove, down and dirty. They laugh a lot. They write classic songs, especially their surf numbers. 'Surf's Up In Malibu', 'Surfarama', the finale, and 'Surf Lost'. There were some new songs. I liked 'You Follow, You Fall'. Just for good measure, some covers too. 'Morning Dew' showed off the dueting style of Celia and Chris. So did the banter: "Chris, I spilt piss on your guitar."

"That's all right. I spilt piss on your keyboards." Version 13 of King Loser is one fine Mama of a plaything. Shaft played support. I don't like Shaft. They annoy the fuck out of me. At least they're not forgettable. Make up your own minds.

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