

Acclaimed Singer/Songwriter Comes to Davenport: Richard Shindell, at the Unitarian Church

Written by

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With a voice that sounds a bit like Michael Stipe gone folk, Richard Shindell's songs feel instantly familiar even if you've never heard him before. Those vocals are magnetic and dramatic, and the singer/songwriter pays as much attention to melody and musical settings as he does his words. But it's his first-person narratives that have garnered him critical praise and a loyal following.

Shindell, who will perform on Tuesday at Davenport's Unitarian Church, has been called (by the *Boston Globe*) "a master builder of songs, yet always leading listeners toward the emotional essence of the moment or character he is evoking."

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Like many folk musicians, Shindell's songs are often topical, yet they're rarely dogmatic or judgmental.

His "Fishing" - from 1994's "Blue Divide" - uses his voice to great effect, employing a breathy urgency that belies the greetings and apologies of the opening: "Please have a seat / I'm sorry I'm late / I know how long you've been waiting."



As the percussion and guitar build, the words take on a sinister air, while the vocals maintain their composure, adding to the threat: "And by the way / Your next of kin / I know which house / She's hiding in / So now that you know / Whose skin you're saving / In this photograph / Who's this one waving?"

There's plenty of art in this core narrative, but Shindell interjects reveries of childhood fishing trips that illuminate the interrogator - "He used to say / That God rewards us for letting the small ones go / Maybe, but I don't know" - and then ties them together. The topic of immigration interviews might sound unbearably charged, but the specificity and storytelling flair of the treatment elevate it, and Shindell seems more interested in the character than the subject matter.

His latest record, this year's *South of Delia*, covers everything from traditional material to Dylan and Springsteen, but that doesn't give a full sense of the songwriter. If you're not familiar with Shindell, you might start, as I did, with his live album

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, which the All Music Guide called "a testament to the power of song, in its entire well-crafted splendor."

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Richard Shindell will perform at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, September 11, at the Unitarian Church, 3707 Eastern Avenue in Davenport. Tickets are \$15, or \$8 for students. For more information, call (563) 359-0816.

New Monsoon, September 7 at the Redstone Room



The San Francisco-area band New Monsoon has been a regular in these parts in recent years. But if you see the group at the Redstone Room on Friday, it's a different ensemble from a year ago, with two percussionists leaving the touring outfit and a new bassist.

Honest Tune magazine said that on the band's new record, *V* (out August 1), those changes are evident: "The sound is streamlined - New Monsoon is now more prototypical jam band, lacking the world-beat feel it had with tabla and bongo - but the intensity and songwriting are still strong as ever.

V does delve into genres other than rock, taking a stab at reggae with 'Neon Block' and bluegrass with 'Romp,' but they're at their best when they're full-speed ahead and balls-to-the-wall."

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I'll agree with that. The vocals - and the way tunes are crafted around them - are the least effective element of the record. On "Copper Mine," for instance, the band finds the right balance between the sensitive, Eastern-flavored instrumental interplay of the introduction and the power of the climactic break.

The warm and soft vocals and lyrics are certainly appropriate to the genre, but they're also largely artless. When the band kicks it in, you realize how superfluous they are.

New Monsoon will perform on Friday, September 7, at the Redstone Room in downtown Davenport with Family Groove Company and Sunny Wheat. The show starts at 9 p.m., and tickets are \$13.