

Iowa City Blinded by Galactic Supernova

Written by Tom Swanson
Tuesday, 23 April 2002 18:00

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I must preface this by stating that I knew little of Galactic not long ago. I'd heard them recommended during innocent eavesdropping. I'd heard the ravings among the best of the ragtag new-wave wannabe hippies. I'd even heard some cuts off of one of the band's albums (don't ask me which), and I really liked them. But on April 15 at the Union Bar in Iowa City, I received my schooling. Maybe it was the time of year. Maybe it was the venue. Maybe it was that funny smell in the air. Whatever it was, I finally saw the show that I was expecting to see last fall from jazz-improv virtuosos Medeski Martin & Wood at Hancher Auditorium.

Hailing from New Orleans, Galactic has built a reputation akin to one of its most prominent influences and pioneers of the funk-jazz genre, The Meters, who also rose from the bayou. In fact, it is the opinion of many that Galactic has surpassed its Delta forefathers by generating some of the funkier jams this side of Neptune. That contention is spurred on by accolades from fans and fellow musicians alike, and I would argue that even The Meters themselves know that these guys are bad, bad mammajammas. Galactic earned the impressive title of "Best Funk Band" in the 1997 Big Easy Awards, an honor previously reserved for whom else? The Meters. And that was only three years after Galactic got started. The group has also played with the likes of contemporary standouts Charlie Hunter, Jon Fishman, Skerik, Warren Haynes, and Meters guitarist Leo Nocentelli, just to name a few. I understand why they've earned these credentials.

DJ Harvey started out the evening, and his role as opener/guest was an appropriate choice, as he prepared onlookers for what they were about to see with his blend of electronica and soul-tinged house music. Then came the headliners.

Fueled by the punchy rhythms and extremely articulate playing of drummer Stanton Moore, Galactic started off with powerful beats as intros for the majority of its tunes. Falling succinctly in step were bassist Robert Mercurio and his chunky fingering, guitarist Jeff Raines' jazzy wah-soaked riffs, organist/pianist Rich Vogel's straight-ahead funky keystrokes, and tenor/baritone saxophonist Ben Ellman's aggressive chops, reminiscent of Morphine's Dana Colley. Then there's Theryl deClouet. This guy's vocal musings can even bring snobby white college girls to their knees.

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With this formula, Galactic continually grabbed onto fat beats and infectious hooks and pummeled them until they were black and blue just before dumping quarts of sensational and well-proportioned improvisation over it all. They proceeded to do this for more than two-and-a-half hours without the masturbatory pitfalls of most jam and groove bands.

The show was also arranged terrifically. The first set started strongly with “Cheekybird” and built into a nicely paced mid-energy romp, including highlights “Workin’ in the Coal Mine” and “Witchdoctor,” easily leaving enough of a taste to want another set.

DJ Harry returned to entertain during the short intermission, in which the band joined him in his raving thumps. He left the stage shortly after with Galactic still pumping. Moments later the group burst into the perfectly synchronized “Ice Cold Daydream.” The 11-song second set, including “Blue Pepper” and “Century City,” doubled upon itself until it grew and grew, pounding the chests of the audience into the raucous staccato climax of last song, “Spicoli’s Toe.”

Of course a practically flawless show couldn’t sate the crowd despite the exhaustion that usually accompanies these endeavors. So, as I’m sure they’ve done a hundred times before, Galactic decided to come out and pay homage to those who most inspired and shaped these new champions of jazzalicious funk, ripping out a version of The Meters’ “Africa” for the encore. As my heart reverberated in my chest and my grin put Alfred E. Neuman’s to shame, I thought, “The granddaddies of N’awlins funk would have been proud.”