

Cowboy junkies — if heaven had a band, then this was it

by Rajkhet Dirzhud-Rashid and
R. Alyx Fain

Cowboy Junkies
Moore Theatre

There is a favorite fantasy many music fans have, that since so many good musical artists have passed on to realms beyond, heaven must have one...really great band.

Certainly, sitting in the Moore Theatre last Saturday night, June 9, listening to the haunting, sophisticated sounds of the Cowboy Junkies, heaven seemed pretty close. The group, headed by Margo Timmins' clear voice, blended the best of all styles of music with an easy intimacy that took me back to the coffeehouses of San Francisco in the '60s.

Timmins' deep, shadowy vocals were reminiscent of greats like Big Mama Thornton, Bessie Smith and a very young Janis Joplin. Her boneless dancing and self-consciousness at the beginning of the set definitely put one in mind of a pre-Pearl or pre-Cozmic Blues Joplin, singing in worn-down heels and fringe shawl. Add to this the mandolin work, accordion play and that eerie lighting, and the Moore was a place filled with another dimension's rapturous delights.

Cowboy Junkies took the audience places it had been and then just when

June 15, 1990

N.B., this is not a play.

The closest it gets to a story is that the show takes place in the blues club of the title. Act I is the final set of a Saturday night and Act II is an after hours impromptu session. So much for the plot.

If the absence of a story doesn't deter you, and you're an R 'n' B fan, it's an evening in heaven. Here a few hours crammed chockablock with 33 songs by those white, Negro-wannabees from Baltimore, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Starting as teenagers, they wrote some of the most familiar rhythm and blues hits, including "Kansas City" (which took, they said, "maybe eight minutes," to write.) In the fifties, when the teenager was invented, they had a long string of hits, bought by this newly-minted class of Americans.

One secret of their success was co-opting Black blues and club music. (Though people who don't know that you can't "steal" culture have a more hysterical assessment of their use of African-American styles.)

Lulu Belle Jenkins (Korla Wygal) the owner, hostess, and BBW love interest at Smokey Joe's, starts the evening with a smoking version of "Alligator Wine," pumping an ample hip at all the juiciest moments. After welcoming a

you were comfortable there, they transported you somewhere else. Their sound dumped colors and smells and sights right in my lap. The web the music wove throughout the evening both surprised and impressed me tremendously. In short, I've seen nothing this good in this city in a long, long time.

But, let's not forget the opening act, guitarist Townes Van Zandt. A long, lean drink of water, this man had been places many in the audience could iden-

band; they're making it their own song.

Part way through the first act, Lulu Belle introduces Reba Mae Elisabeth "Little Reba" Wolcott, played by Margo Lynn. A sweet vision in a shoulderless prom dress, made of peach-flocced net, she's the Carla Thomas for this show.

While all these great voices are dressing the room in sound, they're also working an unbroken stream of dance moves that look like compounded of equal parts Powerhouse Church and God In Christ wedding procession Yoruban party time, and Memphis nightclub. Space stalwart Steve Tomkins choreographed this one and looks like the research was a lot of fun.

The second act is more casual. Street clothes and off-hand are the rule. Sometimes just part of the band play and whoever is hanging out on stage sings. It's time for some of the grittier personal blues that don't fit in a flash act. "Too Much Jelly Roll" gets a sex reading from Jenkins and Wygal. Smith Cannon and Caddell do "Back Door Blues" that I want a tape of for my next long car trip. In fact, the Space could probably retire the capital debt with an album of this show.

Burke, this is a gracious parting gift to your fans and a good summer show for the Space. Enjoy, everyone. □

tify with, and some I'm glad I've never seen. Hailing from the great state of Texas, Van Zandt warmly prepared the audience with tales of trains, lost love and dark, dark dreams.

Still, it will be a long time before a better version of "Blue Moon" or "Sweet Jane" comes 'round this way again. And if rockability comes any better, the I've never seen it. A toast to Cowboy Junkies, who indeed sounded like the name, and then...something so much better. □