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Michael Giltz
Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: October 26, 2010 07:48 PM

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Music: Richard Thompson at Town Hall

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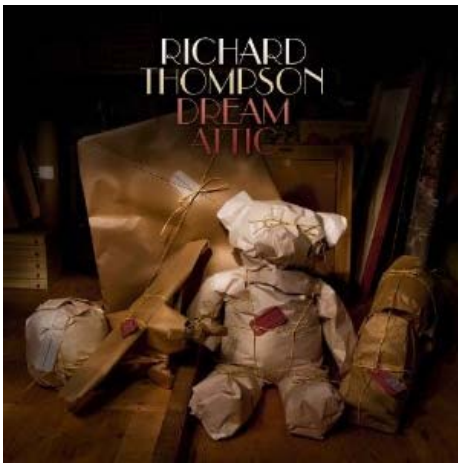
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Richard Thompson tackles two rock cliches in one fell swoop with his current album and tour. When it came time to record *Dream Attic* for his new label **Shout Factory**, Thompson said (like so many touring musicians before him), "Hey, we sound great on the road and whenever we tour a new album the music sounds better by the end of the tour than it did when we recorded it. So why not record the next album live? Work out the songs...on the road!" So, like Jackson Browne and Joe Jackson and too many to mention, that's what he did. The result is *Dream Attic*, which is neither a landmark work of his nor a flop but simply a new album by Thompson, stronger this time melodically than lyrically.

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Now that the album is out, Thompson moved on to the current craze: playing an album in its entirety. (As Addison Steele points out below, this has been going on a long time. I just consider the current fad for doing so a notable revival of that old habit. Has it ever been this prevalent though? Almost everyone is doing it right now.) So his current show begins with all 13 songs from his new CD and then moves onto his vast catalog of brilliant work. (And where oh where is the boxed set of Richard and Linda Thompson, remastered, with a bonus CD or two of live stuff and extras in a nice compact box once and for all?)

I wasn't gutted that my guest and I were late getting to Town Hall (thanks, NYC subway system!) and came in during the second song because the first -- "The Money Shuffle" -- is far and away the weakest on the album, with tepid digs at the financial industry. Not surprisingly, the album's songs sounded better live despite being road-tested by the band because the album's strength is its melody and they could stretch out further in concert. In case you didn't know, Thompson is easily -- yes, easily -- the greatest guitarist in history on both the acoustic and electric guitar. He's certainly right up there in either category alone. Toss in the fact that he's a world-class songwriter and you've got a sense of his skill.

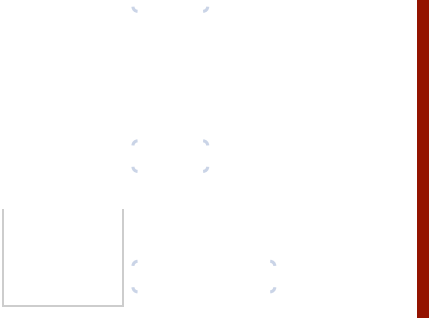
Tonight, it happened first on "Sidney Wells," a song in 9/8 time Thompson helpfully told us. A piercing, driving number, the music built and built and built with Thompson tearing into a guitar solo that virtually lifted the crowd off its feet. (I say virtually because we actually stayed seated so we wouldn't miss a note before leaping and roaring our pleasure.) Thompson was deep into it when he slowly worked his way back out again, finally looking up at his bandmates with a look of pleasure and setting them all off on another fierce passage.

The world is filled with virtuosos, guys who can play the guitar in a fast and flashy manner. What is it about Thompson's playing that elevates it so? First, of course, the solos are musically consistent -- they follow an internal logic (often a mathematical one that we instinctively respond to even if we couldn't parse it). But Thompson's solos are never just about runs or showing off. They're also *emotional* journeys. "Sidney Wells" is about a cold-hearted serial killer who boasts about what he's done when the cops finally come calling. Thompson's solo is a cry from the heart, both a reflection of the violence, the tortured mind of Wells and the women he slaughtered. I'm bringing all that to the music, of course, but the truth is that his solos aren't just impressive: they're moving.



Then show stepped into high gear when Thompson dug into his catalog of songs. "Time Will Show The Wiser" kicked things off, a gem from the first Fairport Convention album. (They're the British equivalent to the Band, but folkier.) Then he blew us away again with "You Can't Win," a more recent tune that's a bit of a workout -- a song the band can stretch out on. Thompson did that again with another coruscating solo that equaled the brilliance of "Sidney Wells."

Another showstopper was "Al Bowley's In Heaven." Once mostly an acoustic number, it was the tune that stopped 'em dead every night, the way "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" does now (Thompson is resting that classic for the moment). Now it's performed beautifully and then gives everyone a moment in the spotlight. This touring band also plays on the album and simply because of where I was seated, I was focusing on drummer Michael Jerome a lot. He's a striking figure behind the drum kit, towering over them (quite a tall fellow) but playing with subtlety and skill and noticeable pleasure. The drum solo is one of the more dreaded conventions in rock but he made it a delight.


"Wall of Death" -- from the masterpiece *Shoot Out The Lights* -- was given a full-bodied treatment and then they wrapped it up with the romp "Tear Stained Letter." For the encore, Richard returned to the stage with his son **Teddy, who has grown stronger and stronger with each one of his solo albums**. They sang a duet on the Tim Finn of Crowded House gem "Persuasion." That's the very first number many people heard from Teddy, when he joined his dad onstage years ago. It's fascinating to see how much




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he's grown vocally. A song that can be gentle this time had an underlying fierceness to it that was quite moving, not to mention the pleasure they took in performing together. Here's video from a much earlier performance, still quite lovely.

Two more numbers and that was it. When you see an artist repeatedly, you're not seeing them in concert so much as checking in. What songs are on their mind right now? Oh, "Man In Need," that's a terrific one. "One Door Opens?" Oh and "Tear Stained Letter" still gets 'em moving. Thompson is such a wry, friendly presence that his every utterance draws a chuckle from the faithful (most of the time a deserved one, though sometimes he'll say "thanks" and they'll still be in stitches).

His core audience returns again and again. You don't spend the show waiting for some epic solo -- every song has passages of show-stopping brilliance from someone in the band. But you know that at some point, he'll stop your heart. Maybe it's a lyric that cuts home, maybe it's a strangled vocal or maybe it's hearing an old favorite for the first time in years. But invariably it's also a musical solo that tears you down and builds you up at the same time. You expect it. Heck, you demand it. But it still surprises and moves you every time.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's **available free on iTunes**. Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also **available for free on iTunes**. Link to him on [Netflix](#) and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

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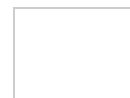


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catcancook 02:57 PM on 10/28/2010



153 Fans

I've seen Richard Thompson solo 3 times and he is one of the greatest performers I've ever seen. He plays the guitar like NO ONE else in the biz, imo. He is always up and in a great mood/energy and is such a humorous man as well.

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addisonsteele 07:49 PM on 10/27/2010

36 Fans

I am a big Richard Thompson fan, but I must correct a factual error. Playing an album in its entirety is not a new rock trend. In the early 1970s, it was commonplace for bands that considered their albums "concepts," particularly the prog-rock groups like Yes and Emerson, Lake & Palmer, to play whatever album they were promoting all the way through and as much like the studio version the better. The effort usually resulted in a stage absolutely cluttered with instruments so that, for example, guitarist Steve Howe of Yes could play five or six different guitars in one song.

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Michael Giltz 02:45 AM on 10/28/2010



59 Fans

Thanks. I should have worded it better. It's certainly been done before but surely the practice has never been this widespread? It seems like EVERYONE is doing it, from major acts to cool indie bands and not just prog-rock acts like Genesis and ELP. Thanks for the reminder. I've tweaked the comment in the story.

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Paul Schatz 10:19 AM on 10/28/2010

3 Fans

First, we saw RT in Wilmington DE a couple of nights before the NYC show. The first set really did showcase the new record perfectly.

Second, I am unsure of the year, but I saw Jethro Tull play several weeks before the release of "Thick As A Brick" was released. Ian Anderson started off by announcing that the band would play a "cut" from their forthcoming LP. That took about 45 minutes! Talk about opening a show with a complete album set! (If you do not get the silly irony here, you are too young.)

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dunedin 09:07 AM on 10/27/2010

8 Fans

I saw the show in DC last week. It will probably my show of the year. I'd seen Richard solo a couple of times but this was the first time with his band. He will be back in NY (solo) next March:

<http://www.richardthompson-music.com/Tour.asp>

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JaneaneTheAcerbicGoblin 02:14 AM on 10/27/2010



145 Fans

There is a box set out of Richard's work called Watching the Dark, 3CD's worth. It has a lot of unreleased live tracks and the like.

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Forman 12:42 AM on 10/27/2010

54 Fans

I first heard Richard back in '72; the album was First Light, with Linda. Still my favorite.

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EuGeneTherapy 11:26 PM on 10/26/2010

22 Fans

I am a mo ron!!!!!!

Heard about the tickets going on sale two weeks beforehand, but didn't act until too late to get in. So sorry I missed the show.

So right about being the best acoustic guitar player as well. Have seen him many times on Long Island in smaller venues where he could only play by himself, and he gets so much out of one guitar I almost want to see him by himself all the time.

Alas, sorry I missed the show and will be much more vigilant next time I have the opportunity!!! Thanks for the post, nice to hear first hand about it.

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Michael Giltz 12:30 PM on 10/27/2010

59 Fans



Go to his website and register your email. They sometimes release good seats at the last minute to frustrate scalpers and fans get a heads-up.

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EuGeneTherapy 12:59 PM on 10/27/2010

22 Fans

Thanks for the suggestion, I'm going to do just that!!!

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greghatfield 10:30 PM on 10/26/2010

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RT is a terrific guitarist, songwriter and performer. I've seen him many times and he always puts on a great show, whether it's him alone, or with a band. Dream Attic is a great follow-up to Sweet Warrior, which was his best album lately, but they're all good. It's odd he doesn't play in LA much since he lives there.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

rabb046 11:38 AM on 10/27/2010

14 Fans



He did an in-store at Amoeba in Sept.

http://www.richardthompson-music.com/catch_of_the_day.asp?id=1275

He'll be at Royce Hall in November.

<http://www.richardthompson-music.com/cabaretofsouls.asp>

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

cungar 08:51 PM on 10/26/2010

56 Fans



Seen the great Mr. Thompson many times and he always delivers. One of the best shows I ever saw was his solo performance at McCabe's guitar shop in Santa Monica. Unfortunately he rarely plays LA anymore. If there's a better combination of songwriter/guitarist/singer in rock I haven't heard it.

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rabb046 11:54 AM on 10/27/2010

14 Fans



RT was at the Grammy Museum in March. Great venue.

http://www.richardthompson-music.com/catch_of_the_day.asp?id=1166

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