Insight - Outasight

Loudness, crowd prove music hassles

If the Debaskers have been absent from these pages in recent weeks, they haven't been away from live entertainment. The reverse is true; we have seen a quantity of top entertainment, marred only by some artists' propensity for loudness and one overcrowded bar.

It all started with the last Saturday in March. Until the afternoon of that day, we had nowhere to go. An acquaintance advised us that the Johnny Young blues band was scheduled for that evening at Oshkosh's Wage Peace. Young, a roly poly man of more energy and stage magnetism than true blues genius, plays blues madolin — a dying breed. He has an integrated group, including a top-rate harp player, and before the evening ended, the Debaskers were jiving, as was the rest of the packed hall. When we first arrived, Young was nearing the end of his first set, and attendance was sparse, which was disappointing, because we like to see the blues draw well so more will come around. Just about the time Young really got cooking, a large crowd materialized, almost, and the evening was very satisfying.

With favorable memories of that evening still fresh, we traveled to Madison shortly thereafter for a Monday night B.B. King concert at Dewey's; it was an event to which we had been looking forward intensely. Soup was also on the bill.

Through no fault of King's, the evening was a bummer. B.B. was great, but the beer bar was packed well beyond capacity. I have been told that Madison fire code restricts Dewey's to 250 persons, which seems too few for the size, but for the King concert, this same source informed me that 1,400 were jammed in. He also said the place got busted for overcrowding.

We really had trouble enjoying the night. Both Deborah and I breathe frequently (at least we must if we're to be happy) and the air in the hall was not fit for inhaling, nor was there room to get much of it. We hung out near the back door, both to get a little more breathing space and to be near an exit in case who knows what might have happened. We had to leave before B.B. ended his set. We had had it.

Several blacks tried to rush the back door or to talk their ways in. Nobody without an advance ticket was permitted in. One tall black man had an energetic struggle with a large white freak guarding the door and failed to get in. Later, he talked his way in. He was carrying an old B.B. King album cover and a set of bongo drums.

Dewey's was such a mess that two nights later we went to Milwaukee's Performing Arts Center for a formal concert in plush Uihlein Hall. Talk about contrasts; they were there. It seemed unreal that this could have been the same group we had seen just two nights earlier in a packed, smoky bar. Yet the music was the same great blues. This time we could dig it more.

Both of us are pleased as punch to see the PAC book contemporary acts. Hopefully, King's appearance was the first of many such formal concerts.

Also in recent weeks, we've seen a spectacular Luther Allison gig at Wage Peace, an abominable Hooker 'n' Heat concert at the Brown County Arena and a good, if overloud, Johnny Winter set at Lawrence Chapel.

Allison, whom we've seen four times in the past 18 months, gets better and better. He's leading a sextet at the moment, which is definitely his best combo to date. Luther is branching out from B.B. King-influenced blues to include more jazz (especially) and good r&b (to differentiate from the boring formula kind). If Luther doesn't make it really big, talent is not being served.

Poor John Lee Hooker. The outstanding blues artist, with his ominous approach to songs, is really being dragged through it by Canned Heat. Since Al Wilson died, Heat has no apparent ability worth discussing. At Green Bay, Hooker opened with a short, but great, set of genuine blues. Even the unaware audience which attended (taking up only about 1,400 out of 7,000 plus seats available) was getting into Hooker. Then Heat played a set which was notable only for its audio overkill. Playing at a volume which pushed pain for the nearby observer, Heat raped the boogie form (which is supposed to be light and infectious), murdered the blues and butchered rock in almost every way possible by nearly every instrument in the group. I suspect the loudness was to detract from ineptitude, but the lack of skill was so overwhelming, no amount of volume could disguise it.

Overloud speakers also detracted from Johnny Winter's Lawrence appearance, but at least Winter is twice the musician all of Heat put together is, even if he is overrated.

Apparently, groups make no distinction between playing the 1,200 seat Lawrence Chapel and the 15,000 seat International Ampitheater when it comes to volume. Maybe members need a certain amount of volume to get off.

The Sam Lay Blues Band laid down a much more listenable set, even if it was formula stuff, prior to Winter's appearance.

So it was a busy, loud mouth. Next time, I plan to go into more detail on the evils of loudness at rock concerts and the generally bad attitude some performers have toward their public. Look for it; these will not be the obvious comments and cliches about a certain number of decibels damaging ears or artists forgetting the people who made them.

Darwin Debasker

Spotlight: Hollywood

Days of giant closeup over

Movie queens, be warned — the day of the overpowering, giant closeup is gone and there doesn't appear to be the slightest chance of it coming back in the near future.

At least not as Hungarian cameraman Vilmos Zsigmond sees it in his Tarot cards, crystal ball and tea leaves.

Zsigmond is familiar enough with the old Hollywood rite of training one camera on the face of a screen goddess and taking all day if necessary for that Mt. Rushmore-sized shot of eyes, wet lips, nose, cheekbones and pores.

It was pretty, he concedes, but he isn't about to waste his time concentrating on the facial symmetry of Ali McGraw, Carrie Snodgress or Sally Kellerman.

"You had to completely re-light when you went for a closeup," says Zsigmond, a slight man with long hair and scruffy beard. "Today the accent is on performance, not beauty. Two and three cameras are used. The director believes that the magic, powerful moment will happen only once and he uses the cameras to capture something that wouldn't be possible otherwise. There's no time for closeups, no time for re-lighting."

The European cinematographer, whose credits include Joseph E. Levine's "The Ski Bum," Peter Fonda's Pando Production of "The Hired Hand" and Hal Wallas' "Red Sky At Morning" for Universal, and "The Presbyterian Church Wager" with Warren Beatty and Julie Christie, is one of the most sought-after of Hollywood camera wizards.

There was no demand for his camera magic, however, when he arrived in the U.S. as a Hungarian refugee some 15 years ago with his close friend Laszlo Kovacs, whose own stock as a cameraman shot up with "Easy Rider," "Five Easy Pieces" and Dennis Hopper's forthcoming "The Last Movie."

Vilmos Zsigmond

Zsigmond and Kovacs, both trained at the government-subsidized State College of Motion Picture and Theatre Arts, escaped over the border in 1956 with 9,000 feet of 35 millimeter film on the Russian occupation.

"We shot through windows, doors, behind walls, wherever we could," Zsigmond remembers. "We would have been killed on the spot if the Russians had caught us. Two months after we escaped, we came to the U.S. Our film footage was used by the Columbia Broadcasting System in their 20th Century series on the revolt in Hungary."

Because of Hollywood's closed-ranks union system, the two friends lived from hand to mouth for five years before they were allowed to touch a camera.

"We worked for nothing just to be able to do what we had trained for, then for $50 a day, then $100 for a day's work. If Laszlo got a camera job, he'd persuade them to hire me for the camera crew, and if I got a job, I'd get them to put him on. I did so many low-budget pictures, all of them shot in two or three weeks. You really have to work and struggle for quality, but you learn so much.

"The low-budgets are never shown in big cities or before professional audiences. It was hard to get my next job from one of them. I first attracted attention with my work on an Academy-nominated short, 'Prelude,' which was done by John Astin. But Laszlo landed 'Easy Rider' and then everything opened up. I got 'The Hired Hand' because Laszlo wasn't available. Peter Fonda said 'Okay. I'll take the other Hungarian.'

"Peter did marvelous things directing the picture. I was worried the first week or so, then Peter became very selective and strong as a director. He went opposite from the choices given him. His approach was to make it good even if it cost him more money. I have the feeling he used some of his own."

Orin Borsten