

THE ASPEN TIMES

Potter, Nocturnals make soulful first impression

A Review

By Stewart Oksenhorn
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Aspen audiences haven't tired of the North Mississippi Allstars. Having established Aspen as a primary tour stop with appearances at the old Double Diamond, the Jazz Aspen Snowmass Labor Day Festival, and even the Wheeler Opera House since their inception in 2000, the No-Miss Allstars concluded a two-night stand at the Belly Up Wednesday night. This followed single shows at the Belly Up in October and at the Wheeler last March. Though the club was reportedly less than packed Tuesday night, the band was met with a full, enthusiastic house Wednesday.

Grace Potter may be the next name to count on that kind of reception in Aspen. A 22-year-old singer, organist and guitarist, Potter and her band the Nocturnals made their Aspen debut opening for the Allstars. Word was that the reaction from the crowd the first night was moderate. But on Wednesday, Potter and the Nocturnals were given the sort of embrace that should mean a quick return and good buzz. By the time the four-piece band finished its good-sized set, the floor was jammed and jumping.

The Vermont-based Potter sang a hippie-drenched take on soul music - akin to Susan Tedeschi, though with the blues turned down and the jams turned up. Backed by a crack trio - drummer Matt Burr, Bryan Dondero, who played the upright bass, and Scott Tournet, a standout musician who plays guitar with slide and without - Potter was all smiles and high energy. The Nocturnals are another piece of evidence that the jam-band scene is not stocked with bands nodding off as they play meandering jams. And Potter is proof that a fresh-faced, white hippie from Vermont can dream about delivering an emphatic take on soul.

Potter didn't exactly come out of nowhere for the Aspen appearance. She has appeared on stages with the Dave Matthews Band and Robert Cray, and is booked to play Tennessee's Bonnaroo and Kansas' Wakarusa, two of the bigger music festivals, this summer. But the band's latest CD, last year's "Nothing but the Water," a good effort, doesn't quite match the level of Wednesday night's performance.

Among the fans who turned up for Potter's set Wednesday night was Luther Dickinson, the lead singer and guitarist of the North Mississippi Allstars. Dickinson apparently had some other business to attend to: As soon as Potter's set was over, he ducked out of the club, not to reappear until minutes before the Allstars set. But Dickinson made it a point to be around to answer the call when Potter invited him to join the Nocturnals onstage. Trading licks with the Nocturnals' Tournet, Dickinson helped Potter establish her name in Aspen.

Dickinson's own band, meanwhile, proved why fans continue coming back for more. The band - a trio again, after a short run as a two-guitar quartet with Duwayne Burnside - has stepped up another notch, which puts them roughly in the blues-rock stratosphere. Luther Dickinson, in particular, keeps on finding new places to take his guitar-playing, while the rhythm section of brother Cody Dickinson on drums and bassist Chris Chew, are active participants in creating multidimensional grooves. And the Allstars have more good material than ever to draw from; their strong recent album, "Electric Blue Watermelon," yielded songs like "Hurry Up Sunrise," a relatively breezy tune on the album that turns into another guitar-led workout for the band.

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Grace Potter and the Nocturnals opened for the North Mississippi Allstars this week at the Belly Up. (Stewart Oksenhorn/The Aspen Times)



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