

BECK-OLA Celebrating the music and career of JEFF BECK

Friday April 19th, 2024 at The CABOT in Beverly, MA

Review by Ralph Fatello

When Jeff Beck passed away on January 10th, 2023 from a bacterial meningitis infection at 78, the Rock world was sent into a tailspin. We were all in a state of shock. The reason being, is that there was nobody, and I do mean nobody, who could play and write like him. Beck's passing literally swallowed us in a wave of grief that was felt throughout the rock world, and not with just the players, but the millions of fans too. And with his passing, there was this immediate huge void, that could never ever be filled. Or so we thought.

Enter Johnny A. and his band doing BECK-OLA, a show celebrating the incredible music of Jeff Beck.

When I first caught wind of Johnny A. doing a Jeff Beck show, I was not the least bit surprised. I have written a few reviews of Johnny's performances over the years, where I've actually compared Johnny's playing to Beck. I know that's a bold statement. But if you know Beck's music and you know Johnny A.'s talents? It's not that far-fetched. Now for the record, I know a little something about the electric guitar, seeing how I have been playing one since 1964. So, I get it. And as most of the guitar players on this planet already know, Johnny A. is one of the best in the world. That's right, the world.

Johnny can hit notes, bending harmonics, that make sounds on his guitar that only (dare I say) Beck could do. His subtle touches of the whammy (vibrato) bar, and slide work are head turning moments. He plays with such a bold confidence, coupled with a vault of knowledge of his guitars, that sets him apart from so many of the other guitar slingers out there. He was playing two Fender Stratocasters that were custom made for him that feature his own name and model. Yeah, you read that right. Fender has a Johnny A. model strat named after him. If Fender is making custom guitars for you? That would be pretty damn significant.

Johnny's command of the stage, and his interactions with his bandmates and the audience has been honed to perfection, after many years of playing and touring. There were times last night where he almost looked a little like Beck. Dressed in black pants, white shirt, and a black vest. His dark sunglasses and shock of thick white hair gave him a look of coolness as he strolled across the stage. In short, he was enjoying himself as much as we were taking it all in.

Imagine the enormous task of choosing which of Beck's long repertoire of music to choose from. It must have been hard to whittle down all of his songs to one show. There were of course the obvious choices. FREEWAY JAM, CAUSE WE ENDED AS LOVERS, PEOPLE GET READY, and one of my all-time favorites GOING DOWN.

Some of the highlights from last night's show were the hauntingly beautiful TWO RIVERS and the cool rock funkish reggae of BEHIND THE VEIL, and the incredible slide work on ANGEL (Footsteps) where he played those soulful high notes while the band kept this cool groove underbelly. Most Beck fans in the audience were nodding their heads in approval.

Johnny covered it all from all of his many killer LPs. To just name a few, TRUTH, BECK-OLA, BLOW BY BLOW, WIRED, GUITAR SHOP and more. It was a mind numbing show of BECK'S BEST. And Johnny and his band kept the show rolling like a freight train all night long.

It should be noted that all of Johnny's ensembles have featured some of the best musicians in the country. I've often said that there is no dead weight in any of Johnny A.'s bands. And the Beck-ola celebration band was just that. Starting with drummer Marty Richards (J. Geils Band, Joe Perry Project, Duke Robillard). Marty was like thunder last night. What an incredible drummer. He was solid and steady all night, and his accents were spot on. Damn Marty you are one hell of a drummer brother.

Keyboardist Steve Hunt (Alan Holdsworth, Stanley Clarke, Billy Cobham) was smoking last night. From his subtle and dreamy strings, to his rocking piano fills. Hunt was a standout last night. And whenever he grabbed the keytar and traded licks with Johnny it was a treat for all who love to see two talented musicians playing off one another.

Lead vocalist Mike Gill (Livesay, Beyond Purple), did a great job belting out the hits like, PEOPLE GET READY (somewhere Rod Stewart stopped and looked over his shoulder last night) and he did a killer job on GOING DOWN. That boy could really sing.

And the big surprise of the night was bassist Brad Hallen (Nervous Eaters, Ministry, Iggy Pop, Elliott Easton, Roomful Of Blues and the list goes on). It's funny because the original line up had Dean Cassell on bass. I've seen Dean play before and when the band came out I looked over at my musician friend Dave Cropper and said, "That looks like Brad Hallen." Turns out Dean was visiting with his ailing mother in hospice, and Brad filled in on bass. And not for nothing, Brad learned all those songs in just one band rehearsal. He took his homework home with him, and in 7 days learned all of that material. In fact, the band as a whole, only rehearsed three times. Are you kidding me? Nope it's true. Three rehearsals.

I've always been a fan of Brad's bass playing but whenever Johnny told us that he learned all that material in just 7 days? My respect for Brad went up a few more notches. Brad was in a word, awesome last night. In the pocket all night long. He was simply outstanding. The whole band sounded great.

This celebration of Jeff Beck's music did not end with just remembering Beck.

Johnny spoke of each member of the band who had lost someone within the past year themselves. And Johnny spoke of his dear friend Greg Tawa who passed a couple of weeks ago. It was heartfelt and emotional. I knew Greg and was aware of his talents and his personality. He was a beautiful human being. And his loss affected so many.

There were more than a few notable guitarists at last night's show. Including: Jon Butcher, Barry Goodreau, and Billy Loosigian. And as always, Johnny's beautiful and talented wife Beth, and his lovely mother who took Johnny to see the Beatles in 1966, and she bought Johnny The YARDBIRDS album featuring Beck on his 13th Birthday. "I've been listening to Beck since I was 13." He told me over the phone. "The thing about Beck is you just never knew where he was going on the guitar. I'd listen to other great players, and I would know where they were going in their songs and solos. With Beck? You just never knew where he would end up." And for Johnny that was part of the allure and attraction to his playing. Beck was always reinventing himself. And that longtime inspiration has stayed with him right up to this very day.

The CABOT Theater in Beverly MA is a great venue. Beverly is kind of Johnny's hometown, and they all came out to hear one of their own. The CABOT is hands down one of the best concert halls in all of New England.

So while it's true, that Jeff Beck is now gone from this earth forever. And along with his passing, went any new material that his fans will never get to hear, or experience him play live. But this is also true-If you ever want to hear his existing music played live again? Do yourself a favor, and go See Johnny A.'s Beck-Ola, a celebration of the music from the late Great Jeff Beck. It's as close to Beck as you will ever hear, or see live again.

Trust me, if you're a Beck fan, it's worth the price of admission.