

## COMMENT

# Genuine Etheridge



Dan Petle/The Spokesman-Review

■ The Spokane Opera House rocked with the energy from Melissa Etheridge's "All-American Girl."

*Rocker enjoys working the audience, playing on her high-energy, high-charm, high-talent personality*

## Concert review

**Melissa Etheridge**  
Saturday, May 6, at the Opera House

By Don Adair  
Correspondent

**M**elissa Etheridge has great rock 'n' roll instincts. Saturday night, she captivated a sold-out Opera House crowd with her big, expressive voice, love of loud guitars and a sense of drama borrowed from Springsteen (who got it from Little Richard and Roy Orbison).

As a songwriter and performer, Etheridge owes a big debt to Springsteen, which she happily acknowledges. Her songs are filled with Springsteen-like images of distances and darkness and his influence is felt in the juxtaposition of small details with anthemic choruses, shifting dynamics and emotional, wordless vocals.

And, like Springsteen, she works hard to connect with her audience. During the opening "All American Girl," she threw herself in a circle and landed facing the audience. She paused there for a moment, staring intently ahead, then flashing a big "hi-there!" grin.

Etheridge is one of those rare performers who can

charm you with a small gesture and move you with a big one. Her understated, Kansas-inflected patter felt genuine, yet she was also believable at her most dramatic.

During "Silent Legacy," which powerfully argues for freeing oneself from the past, Etheridge fell to her knees to play her guitar Hendrix-style, then sank to the floor to lie beside it. Throwing her leg across its body, she caressed the strings like a lover.

Then she rose, microphone in hand and, without missing a beat, segued into the desperate "Dance Without Sleeping." Only daring performers pull off gestures like that, and Etheridge made it work.

Not surprisingly, when she turned her attention to Rod Stewart's "Maggie Mae," a worn-out rock chestnut if there ever was one, she gave it new life. The song was perfect for her raspy, bluesy voice, which is often compared to Janis Joplin's.

There's another quality that places Etheridge squarely in the great rock tradition — she has an outsider's passion for living honestly, and it elevates her music and her show beyond what the mainstream normally produces: "Remember how they taught you," she sang in "Silent Legacy." "How much of it was fear/Refuse to hand it down/The legacy stops here."

## Highlight

"Silent Legacy"/"Dance Without Sleeping"

Etheridge has used a different band at every stage of her career, and though this was just the second night of her current tour, her small group had the feel and heft of a real road band. It's just a four-piece, with Etheridge holding down the rhythm-guitar spot, but they made plenty of noise, without ever overwhelming the star.

Good as she was, though, Etheridge's show fell short of greatness. The show lacked the pacing and variety that more originality in the arrangements, additional instrumentation or backup vocals would provide. Not even Springsteen tries to carry the show singlehandedly the way Etheridge does. She has the potential to step up to the next level; time will tell if she succeeds.

"Until I see you again, and I know I will see you again," she told her fans before her final encore, "be strong, speak true and have a good time."

The show was opened by Joan Osborne, a petite, big-voiced singer who led her sharp, young band through a wicked, bluesy stew of a set. Her music blends sexuality and spirituality in a way that eludes most white musicians, and she presents it onstage with a raw vigor that's fascinating to watch.

"We're just the hors d'oeuvres on the plate," Osborne cracked, but there isn't any question that she could easily be the main dish, the salad and the dessert, too. If there's any justice, we'll hear much more from Osborne, whose first major-label release is out on Island. Watch for her.

## Petty keeps cold, wet fans entertained

### Concert review

**Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers**  
Sunday, May 7, at the Gorge

By Jim Kershner  
Staff writer

**T**he Gorge in early May can be a risky proposition. About five songs into the Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers concert on Sunday, the wind-driven rain began to slash. Since most of us had already been sitting around for three hours in down-jacket weather, this might have been the last straw. It wasn't.

Somehow it served only to make the night that much more memorable. A little booging to "Last Dance With Mary Jane," and the cold was something to be forgotten, or even celebrated.

Besides, the rain blew through quickly, and the only thunder in the last half of the set came when guitarist Mike Campbell fired off the cannon-shot intro to "Runnin' Down a Dream."

One of the great things about Petty's musical style, which could be described as spare, is that it can be reproduced beautifully on stage. The material from Petty's latest album, "Wildflowers," sounded particularly fine, especially the ethereal, chiming title cut and the crowd-pleasing "You Don't Know How It Feels," with its ever-popular themes of youthful alienation and recreational drug use.

The show was heavy on "Wildflowers" material, ironic since it is billed as simply a Tom Petty album, not a Heartbreakers album.

They performed "Cabin Down Below," "Time To Move On," "You Wreck Me," "Honey Bee," and "It's Good to Be King," all faithful to the album versions.

In a two-plus hour set, they also did a fair sample of greatest hits, including "I Won't Back Down," "Free-Falling," "Learning to Fly," "American Girl," and an odd version of "The Waiting." The latter showed evidence of having been played too many hundreds of times by this band.

"Drivin' To Georgia" certainly didn't have this problem. It's an unreleased song from an upcoming album, and judging from this incendiary, hard-driving version, destined to be the band's next hit.

Some of the best moments were neither new nor old Petty songs; they were covers. Campbell's extended version of "Diamond Head," which Petty introduced as psychedelic surf music, was a marvel of guitar precision and Ventures-like tremolo. And the entire band's rave-up version of Chuck Berry's "Reelin' and Rockin'" was good-time rock 'n' roll at its purest and most exuberant. The near-capacity crowd, damp as it was, went berserk. (There had been an earlier sell-out concert on Friday).

The crowd itself was a revelation. While all ages were represented, the majority were college-age. Petty, 41, had his first hit when they were about 3, but because of his unflagging songwriting creativity and his commitment to simplicity, his music feels and sounds timeless.

The Jayhawks played a 40-minute set of Eagles-like rock to open. It was solid and enjoyable, but the crowd gave them a chilly reception, in more ways than one.



■ Tom Petty brought his band to the Gorge.



## An evening of Cray

### Concert review

**Robert Cray**  
Thursday, May 4, at the Masonic Temple

By Joe Ehrbar  
Correspondent

**R**obert Cray fans couldn't have asked for better conditions to see the rhythm and blues legend at the Masonic Temple on Thursday night.

It was a chance for his fans to see him and his three musical cohorts in an intimate environment, a rarity, indeed, when considering

keyboard chimed in a way that it created a shiver effect. Cray sent further chills down the spine with his wiry, hair-raising guitar solo.

Though "I Shiver," "Forecast" and "Gun" were indeed early highlights, overall, the Robert Cray Band seemed a bit reserved in its playing, lacking spontaneity. Perhaps the blues unit was waiting for some sign of inspiration.

That sign came during the song "Enough of Me," the concert's turning point. Here, the band's performance turned from great to magical.

On "Enough of Me," Cray stepped out of the confines of the song's mold and let loose an emotionally interpretive guitar solo.

From that point on, Cray and his band didn't