

the pulse

BENT NIGHTS

by Vern Hester

Hester the beauty of geekiness

There are a great many things to be said about geeky people, the kind of people you wouldn't find on the cover of GQ or Vogue. Surprise to me when I caught Wolcott (never heard of them) in an opening slot at a gig at the Metro. Of course I was apprehensive ("do I have to sit through another band and look excited when the bassist looks my way?) but halfway through their first song they got me. And yes, it had to do with their geekiness. Lead vocalist Ryan DeYoung looks like the scruffy side of Johnny Depp after sleeping in the rain. Bassist Ben Mollin looks friendly enough but his explosion of thickly curled auburn-orange hair looks like a put on ("Is that a wig?" someone yelled). And guitarist Eddie Jones, who chainsmoked non-stop, had that little brother look that explained why big brothers don't take little brothers anywhere.

But before I could put them down as a bucket of nerds, they opened their mouths and that's when I found religion. Wolcott is the most disarmingly embraceable band I've seen in years—so open hearted, carelessly romantic, and sincere they make "cool" look stilted. DeYoung's take is to throw himself so completely into a lyric—when he drops on his knees and flings his arms out it's like he's possessed by the spirit of a nerdy Venus. Mollin and Jones are inherently bad dancers, but who gives a shit? They do all the moves you've seen before (knee slides across the stage, stomping in place, hyperventilating jumps) with such sloppy primitive abandon that they make goofiness fashionable. The added treat was a tight horn section and a trio of back-up singers we'll just call the Wolcott-ettes (they may be nerdy, but they're smart).

The brand spanking new "All Aboard" speaks for itself. Hampered by a production that slides toward the high end, the disc sounds thin and abrasive on a first take, but you have to give it a full listen to find its treasures. "Indiana" starts things off with a sucker-punch hook, but at the half-way mark "All Aboard" blossoms into a big ornate Valentine greeting. "Tear-drops" reaches an apex of absurd realism when Mollin begs, "So let's get drunk/let's get naked/let's paint this town tonight ... (this is a break-up song)," and "Halsted Market Days" mines a dramatic operetta of despair at ... Market Days (these are straight boys). Better still, "Saw you through It" and especially the title song encapsulate Wolcott's sound in a distinct fashion. "All Aboard" is the kind of jangly infectious good time single we need now (especially after last week). As DeYoung pleads in his strained upper register, "... if there's a little bit of hope inside your souls..." it reads as naive, he may sound childish in his hope, but as I'm writing this, it feels like balm.

Speaking of geekiness we have a re-issue of *Funny Girl* at the Landmark Century Theater. Last week I got involved in an action-packed discourse on divahood with my co-worker. Clyde, who is just over 30 and saw it that Madonna was THE diva (well, not in those words), but I concurred that she couldn't hold up to Barbra. We argued (not really), but when I mentioned that Streisand's film debut had been re-issued, he got quiet. This isn't a case of duel-gayboy-honeychile one upmanship because, to be honest, I've never been



Ben Mollin and Ryan DeYoung. Photo by Vern Hester

hot for either one. But it did make me pause. To be honest *Funny Girl* is a weenie of a movie—without Streisand and Jule Styne and Bob Merrill's score it runs from pleasant to horrendous. And Gregg Shapiro was right—the movie comes to a screeching halt once Fanny Brice (Streisand) gets Nicky Arnstein (Omar Sharif, miscast in a bland role). But it's still worth seeing, and if you can, it's worth seeing in a theater for two reasons.

The score by Styne and Merrill is wonderful, not necessarily because a chunk of it is still popular, but because the power of the songs are still pungent today. If you have any questions, check out "I'm the Greatest Star," "People" (if you are in love or want to be), and of course "Don't Rain on my Parade" (yes, Streisand belting that song out on a tugboat mimicking Lady Liberty is a solid brass blast, but the song is about liberation and attitude with all cylinders blazing). Moreover, is Streisand, who is not only fresh and new but—geeky. Her performance is mercurial—you can see her range, power, and ambition, and with veteran William Wyler directing it has an invigorating edge. But moreso is the fact that the movie plays on Streisand's "homeliness," but by the finale when she sings "My Man" she has become ravishing, striking, and as Streisand would say in her nasal tone, "Gore-jus." Streisand's wattage is so luminous that she re-taught the world what beauty is and how we perceive it while ushering in the end of the era of Broadway-bred female mega-stars.

Funny Girl was so popular that it knocked 2001: a Space Odyssey out of the 1968 "Best Picture" line-up and Streisand nabbed the best actress award in a tie with Katherine Hepburn (an Oscar rarity).

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