

Las Vegas Sun

Music:

Cheap Trick performs original homage to classic Beatles album



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Robin Zander of Cheap Trick sings almost all the lead vocals in “Sgt. Pepper Live,” without trying to imitate the voices of John Lennon, Paul McCartney or Ringo Starr. The Beatles tribute show is playing at Barry Manilow’s showroom at the Las Vegas Hilton.

By [Joe Brown](#) ([contact](#))

Thursday, Sept. 17, 2009 | 2 a.m.

How do you prefer your Pepper?

That was the question last week among Beatles devotees deciding between newly released CD versions of “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.”

Do you prefer the familiar stereo remaster of the 1967 album?

Or have you been fiercely arguing the superiority of the original mono mix, available as part of a \$300 box set?

Las Vegas locals and visitors now have another option when picking a Pepper fix: The veteran American power pop band Cheap Trick is performing the entire record live on stage at the Las Vegas Hilton, in the showroom also known as The Home of The Manilow®. The band has also just released a live CD and DVD

of its version of the pop culture monolith, making the pile of Pepper platters that much higher.

This unique event offers the chance to experience the full, undiminished power and pleasure of “Pepper,” which the Beatles never performed live, having abandoned it in the studio because their multitrack experimentation was beyond the capabilities of a four-man band. And it’s more intimate and immediate — also cheaper — than Cirque’s revelatory “The Beatles: Love,” which starts at \$100.

The beginning of the show brought to mind “The Ed Sullivan Show” or the mid-’60s package tours that would collect a mix of the stars of the day, before the Beatles jumped off the bandwagon and blew everyone’s minds on vinyl.

The lighting and colors suggested black and white, and a lugubrious announcer introduced the show’s “girl singer,” Joan Osborne, who applied her finely textured rasp to “Can’t Buy Me Love” and “The Long and Winding Road.” Singer-songwriter Rob Laufer was joined by the Clark County Children’s Choir, which crooned the celestially high parts of “Across the Universe.” Ian Ball, lead singer of the British band Gomez, assayed a leeringly Lennonesque “I Am the Walrus,” and the song ended with a dark, churning drone, which led into ...

Side One

Three onstage platforms revolved to reveal the members of Cheap Trick: Guitarist Rick Nielsen, sporting a red-and-black striped suit (and baseball cap), with his arsenal of oddly shaped instruments, including his famous five-necked guitar. Drummer Bun E. Carlos didn’t dress for the occasion, and ace bass player Tom Petersson wore a shiny purple jacket.

Lead singer Robin Zander appeared in a paisley-lined blinding-white frock coat with magenta sequined cuffs, topped by a white captain’s cap, which Zander kept pulled low over his eyes the entire show.

With few exceptions, Zander sang almost all the lead vocals, including Ringo’s in “With a Little Help From My Friends,” and he didn’t distinguish vocally between John and Paul — Zander sang as himself.

Nielsen flicked his signature guitar picks into the crowd throughout the show, but when he started shooting lysergic sparks during “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,” adding snapping, growling attacks to the guitar (laminated with the portraits from the “Sgt. Pepper” album gatefold) on “Getting Better” and “Fixing a Hole,” it became clear that this joy ride to Pepperland is not a mere stunt for Cheap Trick.

The performance is not a conventional “tribute” imitation or impersonation, but a loving labor from a road-worn working band. Cheap Trick is not pretending to be the Beatles, but the band is playing in the spirit of the Beatles, as if that group were looking back on “Pepper” late in their career, reassessing it and going even further with it musically.

The basic band is augmented by a 25-piece orchestra in a choir loft above the stage, plus a six-person choir that supplied angelic “aahs” and “oohs” as well as crowd sounds and farmyard noises when needed. The orchestra is buoyantly conducted by Edwin Outwater, nattily sporting a military bandleader’s jacket with silver lapels.

Outwater led a string section through “She’s Leaving Home,” and the woozy, careening carnival sounds of “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite.”

Side Two

For “Within You, Without You,” George Harrison’s fantasia with Indian philosophy and instrumental colorings, they rolled out a tie-dyed futon bearing a seated sextet of Indian musicians, who created sitar shimmer and tabla throb, while Laufer returned with a baby blue acoustic guitar and conjured Harrison’s

daydreamy nasal drone.

“When I’m Sixty-Four,” “Lovely Rita,” the cheery cacophony of “Good Morning” and a reprise of “Sgt. Pepper,” brought us, too soon, to “A Day in the Life,” which Nielsen rocked up quite a bit and Atwater conducted into the orchestral freakout frenzy of that Big Bang piano chord.

And there was more — the band charged into the Side Two suite from “Abbey Road,” from “Golden Slumbers” to “The End,” complete with snarling three-way guitar duel. For this listener, this dessert surpassed the main course.

The production’s attention to detail will keep rock obsessives happy: Carlos, for instance, plays a Ludwig drum kit in black oyster finish, set up in Ringo’s configuration; the Cheap Trick logo on his kick drum seems to have adapted the Beatles’ typeface.

True Beatles nerds will enjoy knowing that the sound booth was manned by Geoff Emerick, an engineer on the original album. (The sound seemed two notches overloud and favored lead vocals for much of the program.)

The Hilton may have hit upon a novel kind of draw for the showroom when it’s Manilow-less. Several rock artists have been performing their classic albums in entirety recently: Van Morrison did “Astral Weeks” at the Hollywood Bowl, and Lou Reed performed “Berlin”; Beck just announced he’s recording “do-overs” of classic rock records, starting with “The Velvet Underground and Nico.” So there’s a supply of artists willing to reconsider their milestones, and there’s demand from Mojo-subscribing classic rock followers who will travel to experience their idolized, iconic albums.

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