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SHOW REVIEW: "Sgt. Pepper Live" is almost as much fun as the album it celebrates

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It was a little kitschy, a little PBS pledge week and a lot of proof that we have become our parents.

And as they say in "When I'm Sixty-Four," who could ask for more?

"Sgt. Pepper Live" is almost as much fun as the album it celebrates. Even the requisite dose of prom-night formality was all in the name of getting the job done right.

Hearing a massive musical ensemble do justice to "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" -- down to the last satisfying tubular bell "ding" on "Sixty-Four"-- is more of a marvel than maybe it should be with today's technology.

But the marriage of rock band and orchestra celebrates the live energy of music played without computers, ironic as that may be for songs the Beatles never planned to actually perform.

Cheap Trick, whose entire career has been a form of Beatles tribute, anchors the collective effort at the Las Vegas Hilton through Sept. 23. The perennial rockers have pulled off this show in other cities, but on opening night they still seemed a bit rushed at times, looking like they were working hard not to look like they were working hard.

Maybe someone needed to send a tray of Cuervo shots backstage. With a couple extra for the six male singers who stood at attention next to the orchestra, and three for the guy who recorded the goofy voice-of-God narration, which actually introduces guest singer Ian Ball as being from the "critically acclaimed band" Gomez.

By the end of it, guitar Trick-ster Rick Nielsen wandered over to the sitar band to pull violinist Gingga Shankar into the "All You Need Is Love" chorus, perhaps realizing the need for some wild and craziness.

But a little stuffiness goes with the territory for these orchestra-rock pairings. At least this one conquers the sonic Achilles heel of similar efforts over the years -- from symphonic Who to Metallica -- when one lick from an electric guitar could drown a whole string section.

No fears here; original "Sgt. Pepper" engineer Geoff Emerick waves to the crowd from behind the sound board. The budget orchestra may be small in number -- as betrayed by the big finales of "A Day In The Life" and "The End" -- but you can hear every bow on every violin string from players perched on top of a walled set.

The other problem with some of these "symphonic rock" things is knowing when to quit. An orchestral version of "Paint It Black" is cool, but "Start Me Up" makes you laugh out loud.

This one gets that elevator-music affliction out of its system early, with a warm-up medley of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and other early hits. For the rest, we can thank the good taste of the original arrangements.

When Joan Osborne throws her throaty soul into "Long and Winding Road," it's goose bump time. "Eleanor Rigby," "I Am The Walrus" and "Something" (featuring guitarist Bill Lloyd, of the alt-country duo Foster & Lloyd) are added to get the most bang for the orchestra buck.

The "Pepper" album comes in sequence after wind-up songs from Osborne, Ball and Rob Laufer. **The least-known but most Beatle-sounding guest star, Laufer contributes a touching "Across the Universe" with local school children** and later takes the wheel on "Within You Without You" with a six-piece sitar band.

Three walls of the set spin to bring Trick's gear into view, with Robin Zander in a Sergeant outfit that would start a tug-of-war between Elton John and Liberace.

Zander never shed the cap, perhaps in fear of hat hair. Hiding the top half of his face may also have been part of the masquerade of singing all the album's vocals with admirable range, even with a voice battered by a summer of touring.

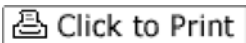
The "Pepper" album is short, so the ensemble roared back with time for the closing stretch of "Abbey Road" before sending everyone home in a tight 85 minutes.

One thing studiously missing is any reference to the Beatles, aside from images on one of Nielsen's guitars. The neglect is surely for legal reasons, but it does prove the music stands apart from the band. Today's classics, perhaps tomorrow's classical.

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