

Review: Live Wire! Wordstock edition

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Music + books = very happy nerdy me, so how could I resist the Wordstock edition of Live Wire!? Answer: Couldn't, and I'm glad I didn't try. Saturday's taping of the Portland-based OPB radio sketch/variety show, recorded at the Aladdin Theater, was packed to the gills -- not just with audience members, but with guests: Graphic artists/writers Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel, musicians The Long Winters and Jonathan Coulton, musician and now playwright McKinley (of Dirty Martini) essayist Sandra Tsing Loh, NPR's "This I Believe" producer Jay Allison, author and PC-in-those-Apple-ads John Hodgman and poetry slam champ Anis Mojgan, as well as the usual funny cast of the show.

Whew.

From my POV, the highlight was the conversation between Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry. The two got along so well they could have passed for long friends. In fact, I think they'd only met once before, and not for terribly long then. The conversation was helped by the fact that, as Bechdel put it, Barry is "the most generous person." But it wasn't just a love fest; there was some great discussion about the role of art. Barry talked about the need for art to unclench the phantom fist -- that we all carry a sort of phantom limb pain, and it's art that helps ease that, in a way our physical selves can't. We get crazy when we shunt art over to the elective pile, rather than the necessary pile -- art's a sort of immune system for our mental health.

Unexpectedly, I really enjoyed John Roderick, of The Long Winters. I'd known the Seattle band's music, of course -- melodic, narrative indie pop/rock. But I hadn't known of his background as a humorist. He was warm, charming, funny and -- like Lynda Barry, generous. He'd been frustrated for a writer when he once believed that writing was something done by geniuses only, until he realized, hey, pretty much no one writes the perfect first draft. It was heartening to hear him talk about this; I think there's this pervasive myth that writing is only about the end stage, when really, it's a much, much longer process than that (in my case: much, much, much longer).

Another fun expected surprise: McKinley, of Dirty Martini, who's now added playwright to her resume. She's working on a musical called "Gracie and the Atom," which is, as she puts it on her site, "about physics, God, Catholic school, and death. It's hilarious. I promise." She's workshopping it soon at Artists Repertory Theatre, though the soundtrack is already out. She was joined onstage by a few friends for this, including fellow Dirty Martini Stephanie Schneiderman.

Anis Mojgan was a nice change of pace; I don't know much about the spoken word scene in Portland, and I haven't seen a poetry slam champ in ages. He was low-key, but intense, and he had a certain unabashed romance that was refreshing in its sincerity (can irony please be over? Please?).

I didn't particularly connect with Sandra Tsing Loh. She felt a little too frenetic to me, so

much so that I felt her outsized mannerisms distracted from her work. Having said that, plenty of people in the audience found her uproarious, so maybe this was more a matter of personal taste. She read an essay on aging (menopause figured largely), and she had a "you go girl" kind of vibe that I found a little superficial.

John Hodgman and Jonathan Coulton were a little disappointing, frankly. I only caught part of their slot earlier in the day, at Wordstock proper -- that session was ridiculously crowded, so I bailed -- but the little I did see they repeated at Live Wire. Considering that the act includes a supposedly spontaneous conversation between the two about Coulton's theme song for Hodgman, it felt a little flat to me. Hodgman was far more interesting in conversation, afterwards, with show hostess Courtenay Hameister; no idea if that genuinely was more spontaneous, but it certainly felt that way. The end of the show, with Hodgman (on uke), Coulton and The Long Winters performing "Tonight You Belong to Me," had more of that spontaneous feel, as well, fun and freewheeling and just underrehearsed enough to be adorable.

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