

Wolf Krakowski at the National Yiddish Book Center

by Seth Rogovoy

(AMHERST, Mass., December 20, 1999) - My family and I, as well as more than a hundred other concertgoers packed into a standing-room-only theater at National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., Sunday afternoon, enjoyed a remarkable performance by Wolf Krakowski and his band.

The program consisted of works from Wolf's "Transmigrations" album, and the performance featured many of the same musicians (all?) that recorded the album with Wolf several years ago. To my knowledge, this was the first public performance by Wolf of these arrangements.

As I said, the performance was remarkable, and on so many different levels. First of all, as anyone who has heard the original recording knows, Wolf has created a remarkable fusion of classic-style Yiddish theater, folk, and pop song with American roots-rock. In his hands, the fusion is seamless, organic, and appears totally intuitive and logical, even though on paper it seems like it shouldn't work.

In concert, the songs came to life even more than on the recording. The feeling was definitely that you were at a rock concert - much to the chagrin of one or two concertgoers, who apparently fell for the misleading advertising that touted this as a "klezmer" concert. But even the most vocal of the disappointed patrons - an elderly woman who shouted out "This isn't Madison Square Garden!" after the second number, and I thought, "Aha! Now I understand Newport Folk Festival 1965," and refrained from hollering "Judas! at Wolf as a joke - was seen boogie-ing by the end of the concert.

Fortunately and obviously, the vast majority of people there knew what they were coming for - and that's why dozens were left stranded at the door, unable to get in to the sold-out performance (some just stayed with their ears pressed up against the door; others went outside behind the theater and pressed their faces up against the windows behind the stage).

As I said, they heard an amazing rock concert, music steeped in country, roots, blues and reggae, played by a six-piece band with three (very attractive) backup vocalists whom Wolf called "The Transmigrations" but whom I prefer to think of as the "Oy-Threes." At the core of the group were the Lonesome Brothers, featuring guitarist/mandolinist/saxophonist Jim Armenti and bassist Ray Mason. If I were ever to do something as stupid as return to the concert stage of my youth, I would definitely do everything I could to hire these two guys to back me up. They were rock-solid, telepathic and Armenti in particular put his heart and soul into this show -- one of the hidden pleasures was watching him, off-mike, singing the Yiddish lyrics. (Jim is not a total stranger to Yiddish music -- he plays clarinet in the Northampton-based klezmer band, Klezmir).

It was a pleasure to hear these familiar numbers stretched out, opened up. Wolf has found way to make these classic melodies fit naturally in the rhythms and framework of American roots music, in a way that connected Yiddish soul to American soul. This could have been so corny, but this was no novelty show; Wolf was a serious performer, investing the material with effortless dignity (as the songs are extremely dignified, and their new settings did nothing to take away from their dignity), and a depth of passion and commitment one rarely sees from ANY performer in any genre.

Wolf's music reached an audience of multiple generations, from my 6 and 8 year old children to my 70-year-old aunt, who was literally jumping up and down at the end saying how utterly thrilled she was and insisting I tell her when she could see them again. I had to break the news to her that as of now, this was a once-in-a-lifetime event; as far as I know, there are no plans to reprise the show, although I bet Wolf will find it hard not to, given the response he received last Sunday.

I should also note that it was hard not to think of how a bit of history was undoubtedly being made here, at a building and organization which is primarily dedicated to the preservation and archiving of Yiddish culture (unless I am mistaken about the NYBC's mission, and if so I apologize), a certain aspect of Yiddish culture, while rooted in the past, was being reinvigorated. Was this the first

performance of its kind here? Anywhere, for that matter, in the world? I don't know for sure, but something tells me , yes, it was.

I wish all of you were there.

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