

Tin Pan South 2006

Text and photos by Mark Kelly Hall



Tin Pan South, the annual “songwriters festival” in Nashville, is a study in opposites. Since it features groups of professional songwriters taking turns playing their hits and their “hopeful hits” to attentive audiences (often also made up of more songwriters) in nightclubs and cafes, it is not unlike what happens in Nashville nearly every evening of the year. On the other hand, it is part of a week that includes numerous industry events, luncheons and seminars, and a lot of dedicated music fans making contacts and even forming true friendships. This week generates real excitement even among the over-hyped and often jaded residents of Music City, so for those reasons it is a special time. As writer Billy Falcon (“Power Windows”, Bon Jovi), now a Nashville resident, observed, “Tin Pan is what happens here all the time times ten!” Australian-born Kylie Sackley (“Nothin Bout Love Makes Sense,” Leann Rimes) expressed the opinion clearly shared by all those on stage throughout the week: “The crowds are always so enthusiastic and amazing. It is such a fun & intimate gig where people come to hear the SONGS!”

Generally, the nearly-cliché scenario of a solo country singer with a guitar and a story to tell (often involving heartache, passion and alcohol) rules the day (or night). But TPS also features a remarkable variety of performers, male and female, from various styles, including rock, pop, jazz, folk, contemporary Christian and Americana (whatever that is).

There is a smorgasbord of shows to enjoy at TPS, each bound to feature a favorite song or two...but unfortunately one person can’t attend them all (especially when that person has a fulltime job), so choices have to be made.

Personally, it’s exhilarating for me as a fan of “the song” to see and hear the writer’s take on the 3 ½ minute creation that has brought him or her to that stage...one that speaks a redemptive truth or brings a crowd to a hush. But of course as a performing songwriter who has still maintained his “amateur status”...I’d usually much rather be on that stage myself. But until then, I’ll share my impressions of TPS 2006 from my point of view as a mere audience member.

Tuesday, March 28



The early show at the Curb Café on the campus of Belmont University (former stomping grounds of Trisha Yearwood and Brad Paisley) kicked off the week for me. The set featured Ginny Owens, Ed Cash, Dave Barnes, and Jill Phillips with husband Andy Gullahorn. Owens is the best known of the group. Her voice is familiar to CCM radio listeners, and she has had wide exposure through Lilith Fair, the Sundance Film Festival and on National Public Radio, and TV shows such as "Felicity" and "Charmed."

While introducing the round, Owens confessed that the Belmont grads on stage (including herself, Phillips and Gullahorn) were envious of the "cool new stuff" the current students enjoy thanks to the growth of the university since the performers' time on campus.

Owens' award-winning talents were evident, in her songwriting skills and her soulful and reflective delivery of lines like "you only live once, so you better think twice." Owens earned a Music Education degree while at Belmont, and occasionally hosts workshops for aspiring songwriters (such as at the 2005 NSAI Christian Songwriters Retreat). I didn't see anyone taking notes in the café, but class was in session for any student who wanted to learn how to deliver a message in a gentle yet powerful way. Owens has been blind since the age of two. While "Wonderful Wonder" ("I can hardly wait until the time/When you turn my darkness into light" and "when my faith will finally be sight") might under other circumstances be a cliché, in Owens' capable hands it is both an especially poignant expression of one obvious reason she looks forward to heaven, and a sobering confession of a lack of spiritual vision inherent in the human condition.

Multiple Dove winner for his production skills, Ed Cash displayed the same passion in his singing as he has brought out of others (Amy Grant, Steven Curtis Chapman) in the studio. When Owen teasingly asked him if he was related to Johnny Cash, he surprised us all (including those on stage) by saying that yes, as a matter of fact he is related, as his dad (named Steady) had found out from the Man in Black himself. Thus reinforcing my Nashville motto: "You just never know."



The late show at Mercy Lounge, though it's a much larger venue, proved a greater challenge in the scramble for seats. Even with a press pass, I felt fortunate that a friend and I found a table with another songwriter friend and her husband. This show featured former Sixpence None the Richer ("Kiss Me") vocalist Leigh Nash. Sporting a golden pageboy hairstyle that was a thing of shimmering fascination in itself, Nash proved a charming host, supplying some memorable off-the-cuff comments to fill a brief unexpected delay just after going live on a local radio station. About her talented company on stage, she later said "I feel like I won the Tin Pan South lottery -if there were such a thing." That company included other lead singers for successful bands: Dan Haseltine (Jars of Clay), and New Jersey native Cameron Hart (Tonic). Solo artist (equally talent but

not yet as famous—but just wait) David Mead claimed his spot on stage with his sometimes Beatle-esque, often quirky and always soulful songs. I was surprised how cool a man with a ukelele could be. Haseltine confessed a former (pre-marital) crush on Nash, to which Nash responded by teasing him for missing his chance. Hart hushed a buzzing crowd by baring his soul in a deeply personal parable ("I am trawling the ocean for the soul of my father...he's waiting for me"). Other than the random light changes, which made me wonder what show the operator was watching, the evening was stellar.

Wednesday, March 29

Wednesday night was exciting for me because 1) I had a date and 2) I was finally about to see Women in the Round all together for the first time. The core members of this group were at the Bluebird Café. They are Grammy winner Ashley Cleveland, Karen Staley ("Keeper of the Stars") and Tricia Walker. Pam Tillis is another WITR member, but was not in this round. In her place were two very brave men, one an instrumentalist and one a new talent invited by Staley to make his Bluebird debut (he is probably still finding out what a privilege that was, given the hierarchy most have to work through to play the legendary venue). As honorary "women" the two were presented with wigs that were quickly discarded after a few compromising pictures. I knew that laughter and great songs are the



key elements for the members of WITR, and this show was no exception. Cleveland drew special applause from the crowd at her story of how she gained “instant credibility” from her kids when the family saw an American Idol contestant perform one of her Gospel rockers (“Power of Love”) on the show.



I left the intense intimacy of the Bluebird to experience the crush of the crowd at 3rd & Lindsley, a larger club. This late show featured a high-octane mix of performing writers: the smooth Chuck Cannon (“American Soldier,” Toby Keith), energetic crowd-pleaser Jeffrey Steele (“These Days,” Rascal Flatts), Ambrosia’s David Pack and the legendary Mac Davis. Any of the others would have been the stars of another show, but this evening it was Davis, with his seniority, familiarity through the TV show that some of us would admit to remembering, and the

songs ranging from “In the Ghetto” to “Lord, It’s Hard to Be Humble.” His sense of humor was in full swing, as he not only did his best songs, but shared some of his unfinished “gems” that will not likely be available anywhere, ever. He expressed his admiration for the other writers on stage. David Pack admitted to feeling a tad out of place as a pop keyboardist, but the crowd clearly didn’t agree as he erased the years and won much applause with “You’re the Only Woman.” My only regret at this show was choosing a seat directly under an A/C vent, which made it tough to enjoy my coveted place in the SRO show. I gave it up eventually and reluctantly left early, realizing that, since it was only Wednesday, I had to pace myself!

Thursday, March 30

The Thursday late show at Douglas Corner was a more restful but just as talent-packed affair. Gathered around a low-hanging lampshade (which gave the place a slightly sinister casino look) were Wayne Kirkpatrick, one of my heroes who’s written for everyone from Eric Clapton (“Change the World”) to Michael W. Smith (“Place In This World”) to Garth Brooks (“Wrapped Up In You”—Garth’s last single before his “retirement”). He’s also a key factor in the success of the group Little Big Town (“Boondocks”); it seems the world is finally catching on to his vision for this group. He is as almost as well known in music circles for his shyness as for his genius, but his co-performers more than made up for that.





Gordon Kennedy and brother Bryan Kennedy kept everyone in stitches with their congenial humor (Bryan shared that Gordon, when asked if he believed in reincarnation, replied “No...but I might have in another life!”). And Phil Madeira (“If I Was Jesus,” Toby Keith) balanced it out with his dry wit, such as in his offbeat pub singalong about NOT coming home for Christmas.

Friday, March 31

On Friday night, after a hearty dinner of Texas barbecue, I was at 12th & Porter (naming clubs after locations seems especially helpful in a music town frequented by tourists) to see a show featuring several artists familiar to radio listeners: Jimmy Wayne (“Stay Gone”), Jennifer Hanson, Carolyn Dawn Johnson (“Complicated”), and James Dean Hicks. Hicks is not as “famous” but has had songs recorded by such luminaries as Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard. Again it was a standup show for most of us, but at least I had a place to lean comfortably. On stage, Hanson was perched on a stool in heels high enough to make the average person dizzy...but then none of the talents on this stage was likely to be called “average” for any reason. Jimmy Wayne greeted a social worker in the audience who had helped him in his troubled childhood. He reminds me a bit of Phoebe on “Friends”; he’s an apparently normal person who cheerfully tells the most unexpected—and not always pleasant—stories, and has a perspective on the world all his own. Only along with the laughs, he reveals the redemptive power of truth with unparalleled “been there, done that” credibility.



At this point in the week, the shows started to suffer (for me) from the principle of diminishing returns; there were still some great shows to attend, cool people to meet, and the after party for those wise enough to have bought show passes...but the adrenaline was being depleted. I did get out to a couple more shows and enjoyed them of course, but no further details demand being shared without risk of overstating the obvious: Tin Pan South is a wonderful experience for the writers, for the clubs, for the audience, for Nashville and for music in general.

See all the pics: <http://picasaweb.google.com/markkellyhall/TinPanSouth2006>