

Tin Pan South 2007

Text and photos by Mark Kelly Hall

Tin Pan South, the annual “songwriters festival” in Nashville presented by the Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI), is a study in opposites. It is not unlike what happens in Nashville nearly every evening of the year, 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. On the other hand, it is a special time because it is part of a week that includes numerous industry events, luncheons and seminars, and a lot of dedicated music fans from all over the U.S. forming friendships; a week that generates real excitement even among the over-hyped and often jaded residents of Music City.

As writer Phil Madeira (“If I Was Jesus,” Toby Keith) points out, Tin Pan South “raises consciousness and money for NSAI and the concerns of that wonderful organization. The fact that every [TPS] performance in every club across town is a benefit speaks volumes for NSAI.”

Canadian native and now Nashville resident Victoria Banks also had high praise for NSAI. “As songwriters, we are a notoriously disorganized and insecure bunch. It comes hand in hand with being creative. We don't tend to stand up for ourselves, and we can easily be taken advantage of in the industry. That's where NSAI steps in and plays a really important role - they stand up for our rights, lobby on our behalf, and keep tabs on changes in legislation that can profoundly affect our ability to make a living.”

For an attendee, especially one who is a songwriting enthusiast or aspiring professional, the heady experience of Tin Pan can be exhilarating. To use a phrase from a former pastor of mine, “it's like drinking from a fire hose.”

Tuesday, March 27



On my agenda for Tuesday's early show, the official kickoff for the Tin Pan show schedule, was a benefit for the New Orleans Songwriting Community. Dr. John, best known for his 70's hit “Right Place, Wrong Time” was the featured act.

I arrived at the Mercy Lounge venue early to find a relatively short line of pass holders (I was uncharacteristically early), and quite a few planning to pay admission. To add to the potential confusion there was also a contingent of fans in line to see Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora, Jewel and Big & Rich play a benefit at the adjoining venue. As we were sorted out and admitted, I had the thrill of saying hello and choking out “I appreciate your music” to Ray Stevens (“Gitarzan,” “The Streak”) on the way in.

Before the show I met Curtis Anderson, proud father of Brent. This was the first TPS show I remember that was not performed as a round, which put Anderson and Grayson Capps in the position of opening acts. Not a positive change in my opinion.

Anderson's voice and songs demonstrated why he was on stage at his first TPS show, though his first song, a ballad, was a less-than-electrifying way to begin the set. Capps, exuding the persona of the hillbilly hippie fresh from his cabin in the Loo-siana swamp, was well received as much for his politics as for his backwoods-folky songs.

Finally the big blue Baldwin grand was pushed into position for Mr. New Orleans himself. Dr. John's familiar voice, a jambalaya of funk, growl and gravel, along with his jazzy piano stylings, kept the crowd entertained through a humor-injected and understated performance.



Wednesday, March 28

Since I was unable to get reservations at the Bluebird Café for the late show Wednesday to see my first choice of shows (Mac Davis always offers lots of laughs and familiar songs), it was "lady's choice" for my friend who accompanied me. She chose well; we saw Jennifer Hanson, Mark Nesler, Blue County, Tim Johnson and "special guest" Blaine Larson at 12th & Porter. The precious few seats were taken so we headed for a good standing spot.

The congenial and laid-back Nesler comes across onstage as the strong, silent type, but his songs spoke well for him. He presented some of the smash hits he's written for Tim McGraw ("Just to See You Smile") and Darryl Worley ("I Miss My Friend") kicked off the proceedings with "Living and Living Well" (George Strait).

His wife Jennifer Hanson could easily be confused with Jennifer Garner of "Alias"... except I'm not aware of that other Jennifer writing and performing such impressive songs. Tonight's offerings included "Leave The Pieces" for The Wreckers (Michelle Branch and Jessica Harp) and "Beautiful Goodbye."



Tim Johnson was next in line and provided solid country songs all night, some serious ("To Do What I Do," Alan Jackson) and some, not so much: his list of "Things That Never Cross a Man's Mind" included "watchin' all this football is sure getting old/Wish I was workin' this weekend/Not on the lake reelin' my line." That American Idol contestant Kellie Pickler had chosen to record the song seemed to be a pleasant surprise to him.



Musical duo Blue County (Aaron Benward & Scott Reeves) joked among themselves and the rest of the writers enough to dub themselves the “bad kids” of the round. Their rowdy hit “Good Little Girls” would seem to support that (“Good little girls make some mighty wild women”)...but on closer examination (MUCH closer) it’s actually supporting a traditional approach to romance that even a Southern Baptist like myself can say “amen” to: “She’s waitin’ for a gold ring, before she tries her wings/That’s what I’m waitin’ for.” They also showed a serious side, in what I hope will be a “serious” hit: “I Get To,” a song by Sherrie Austin

that is about choosing a thankful attitude toward things we easily complain about, such as hugging Dad, going to church, etc. (“I don’t have to/I get to”).

Thursday, March 29

Thursday saw the traditional round featuring Gordon Kennedy, Wayne Kirkpatrick and Phil Madeira, with special guest Aussie Melinda Schnieder joining them under the lamp at Douglas Corner. I skipped the early shows just to make sure I had a good seat for this one, and the plan was a success. The usual genuine air of camaraderie among the three men (GK: “Wayne, do you have any...songs?”) was extended to include Schnieder. Having a mother who was a yodeler and a father who was a cop has given her a unique take on life; she shared one song that included just enough yodeling to be fun without being obnoxious. Two things that are sure crowd pleasers at the Grand Ole Opry are yodeling and patriotic songs; this is at least partially the case at Tin Pan South (though for the latter the politics seem to lean the opposite of the Opry crowd).

I shared a table with Jim and his daughter Alyssa from Wisconsin. In town to check out Vanderbilt University for Alyssa, they had come to see Michelle Shocked in the early round, and since they had missed it they stayed for the late show. I told them they were about to have the quintessential Nashville experience. Their nods and smiles throughout the show told me they were far from disappointed.

Madeira played his song “Come On Out With Your Hands Up” (a metaphorical reference to surrendering to a higher power), and shared the story Kennedy’s introduction of the song while performing at a women’s prison: “I guess most of you have heard this phrase before.” And of course, there were the hits; Kennedy led the group in his and Kirkpatrick’s Eric Clapton cut “Change the World” and Kirkpatrick played a solo rendition of “Boondocks” (Little Big Town). I was ready to help out on the last bit (“You get a line/I’ll get a pole...”) so he could add the harmonies for the big finish...no such request was made. Maybe next year.



Friday, March 30



Having a day off from the day job on Friday helped me rest up for the remainder of TPS, a vital part of any attendee's plan for survival. My best friend Bob, a lifelong fan of country music, was in town on business and up for the combined challenge and delight that is Tin Pan South. We headed for the Rutledge, a great new nonsmoking venue on 4th Avenue, to see "Radicals in The Round" featuring a couple of my favorites, Don Henry and Craig Carothers, in the round with Angela Kaset ("Something In Red") and rocker Michelle Malone (a new Nashvillian). Bob & I found good seats on the wooden benches (apparently recently made, so they had that nice lumber smell). I put in a request with Carothers for "Open

Mike" ("Open Mike, Open Mike, sang the songs that no one liked") and he nodded and smiled; no doubt this is a standard for their shows...but a good one. Whether the song is a redemption story of a lousy songwriter turned hitmaker, or a comment on the unfairness of the music business, it's a brilliantly funny song. Malone's song and accompanying back-story of meeting an inebriated Tanya Tucker was amusing and relatable, but it was her intense bluesy guitar and her formidable voice that left an impression on the audience.

Bob, who was at the end of a work day, had enjoyed all he could stand for one night, so as he departed to find food and rest I ventured down to the Bluebird to see if I could at least find a place to stand to check out the show. Skip Ewing, Hugh Prestwood and Aaron Barker were on the roster and my friend Dani Carroll was slated to do a song as a special guest of fellow California native Ewing ("You Had Me From Hello," Kenny Chesney; "Love, Me," Collin Raye). I'm always glad when more people get to hear Dani, and she demonstrated why she belonged behind the



microphone, as everyone obviously agreed. Unfortunately the volume was too low for me to catch most of the between-song patter (my favorite part of these shows, really) from where I was standing; this was unusual given the intimate nature of the club.

Saturday, March 31

On Saturday I was especially looking forward to seeing Kenny Loggins at 12th & Porter, along with Richard Marx and Gary Burr. I am especially a fan of Loggins' music from the 70's, and his talents as a writer and recording artist are known worldwide. The latter is true for Marx. Given this, the size and location of the club made chances of a seat almost nil for any given attendee. I could have put all my eggs in one entertainment "basket" and staked out a place in line at a ridiculously early time, but common sense and the desire to see my friends Tim Buppert and Jerry Vandiver in their early show prevailed.



So it was dinner at the French Quarter, with the round made up of Buppert ("She's Sure Taking It Well," Kevin Sharp), Vandiver ("In A Little While," Tim McGraw), Canadian Victoria Banks, and newcomer Misty Loggins. Buppert and Vandiver (known to some as "The Tim and Jerry Show") were in typical form, jabbing and heckling one another in a friendly competition for laughs. Tim performed a somewhat uncharacteristically sweet love song and introduced the woman he'd written it for, and shared how meeting her had provided the needed inspiration to pull him out of a slump a couple of years ago. Such a better story than "I sat down with my friend to

write and we couldn't think of anything else, so we came up with this." Though no less true in some cases, no doubt.

Then it was off to see the Wizard. After circling the blocks around the club, including some very dodgy areas, looking for a legal place to park, I finally found a space that provided assurance I would not be towed plus an opportunity for exercise and fresh air, and walked to the club. I joined a line of about 50-75 people (though I'm not confident of my crowd-estimating skills) and hoped for the best, thankful I was at least in the Fast Pass line, which would receive priority over those paying at the door. People were in generally good spirits, and I had a nice chat with a couple from California in front of me. He is a songwriter who has managed to figure out a way to work at a hospital in southern California and also spend significant time in Nashville to write.



By the time we got through the doors there was already quite a crowd, and I at least managed to find a place to lean. Opting not to give up an early show for a place in line turned out to be a good decision; a woman standing near me said she had been in line for Loggins at 5pm, and she didn't fare much better than me. The small venue was Loggins' choice, and if it was intimacy he was going for, he succeeded. "I'm sweatin' already!" Marx declared after his first song.

And he also succeeded in pleasing the audience, along with Richard Marx and Gary Burr, playing a set of one great "assisted solo" after another, including the hits ("Footloose," "House at Pooh Corner" by

Loggins; "The River" by Marx; "What Mattered Most" by Burr). They also presented some new ones, including one ("I'll Remember Your Name") that, as Loggins explained, had demanded to be a collaboration with Marx. As the audience giggled after Loggins announced his new album was "available now at Target," he demanded in mock protest, "Why do people always laugh when I say that?"

After a nominal amount of time at the TPS after-party, where I made repeated trips to the bar for o.j. and water before moving on to the hard stuff (Coca-Cola, straight), and chatting with friends (and hearing nearly all of what was said), it was time to call it a night, and a week...until next year. Y'all come see us.



See all the pics: <http://picasaweb.google.com/markkellyhall/TinPanSouth2007>