

Sound Checks

P.J. HARVEY,
BEN HARPER
THE WILTERN
OCTOBER 2
BY REBECCA KRAUS

The Harper/Harvey show sounds like it might be some comedy duo who knock each other around, suckering their partner into slapstick situations. But last week at the Wiltern there was no such obviously light fare. This was a bill that proved to be an astounding, deeply impassioned musical experience. Maybe not a knee-slapping frenzy, but intensely satisfying.

Ben Harper took the stage in the Wiltern's interior, aglow in Art Deco with a lone chandelier hovering elegantly from above stage right. Opening with "Oppression," the first track off his acclaimed second album *Fight for Your Mind*, Harper appeared to be drenched with pain. A master slide guitarist, he plays music that wrecks of a power struggle which he has apparently found in the Inland Empire, his home turf. A skateboardist, lyricist and producer, Harper is most significantly a purveyor of personal truth. Perched with an assortment of guitars on his lap, Harper sat accompanied by a drummer, percussionist and bass player whose lines are as dark as midnight. Not two songs into the set, Bob Marley's words found their way into song. And then more songs from this latest album and the earlier *Welcome to the Cruel World*.

Harper's guitar sounds can range from a chorus of violas and a muffled zither to an angry mandolin. When "Ground on Down" kicked in, his stage persona shined; with a white light cast upon his face, he lifted his head and tilted it back to hit a note while his voice trailed away from the microphone. This is when Harper is loudest – passionately crying out a lyric, looking upward for some divine intervention, not unlike headliner Harvey. The power of these moments was surpassed when Harper finally decided to put down his guitar, put aside that folding chair and actually get up, stand up. With power salutes, he and the band could easily seem like other musicians who seem injured or bitter. But Ben Harper and his blues-filled world find resolve in the music, and this empathic crowd responded with an uproarious standing ovation.

This night also marked the return of P. J. Harvey to L.A. After a spring gig with Tricky and opening for Live this summer, it was her turn to entertain her own audience. And she was as seductive as ever – mesmerizing and enchanting. Exchanging her recent stage attire – pink skintight jumpsuit – for a more sophisticated black pantsuit and turquoise bustier, it appears her fall collection is now showing.

Polly Jean Harvey is brilliant at fusing the visual with the aural. She toys with this diva role – the Morticia doo, dark makeup. She prances, percusses and poses, never letting up on the severity of her music. Harvey allows the macabre sounds to filter into her songs while treating us to the moodiness from her recent album *To Bring You My Love* as well as the past three she has recorded. The P.J. Harvey show was sensational; sights, sounds and lights aside, the emotions are seeped in desire and longing, and with their best hooks may get you crying for the Lord as well.

When she's not personifying the tormented characters of her songs, she is almost lanky, walking around stage, waving and smiling to the crowd, and like a shy school girl, ever so politely thanking us. As a swirling Spanish dancer, a religious apostle or a sultress cracking her whip, P.J. Harvey knows how to use theatricality in a gorgeous sonic display.