

ELEVEN p.m., the Roundhouse, Chalk Farm. You can always tell the best gigs by the expressions on the faces of the crowd. Filing past me here, most everybody is wearing an exhilarated grin, eyes sparkling. Lots of arms are intertwined.

Backstage it's the same scene. Artists shaking hands with artists, with promoters, journalists and anyone else within grasping distance.

There's no phoning or posing going on back or front, nobody has anything vindictive or malicious to say about anybody, nobody's depressed or disappointed.

In short, it's been a good gig. An extraordinarily good gig. Easily one of the best concerts I've ever attended.

Right here and now, I can't remember any performance by any other singer/songwriter that's moved me as much as John Stewart has tonight.

And Stewart's performance was but one of innumerable highlights in an incredible six hours-plus of sustained rapport between musicians and audience.

Special

Take a bow, John Tobler and Pete Frame, the organising enthusiasts behind this very special event, put together to celebrate five years of continued growth for *Zig Zag* magazine.

Billed as "The Zig-Zag Fifth Birthday Party," that's just what this has been — a great party.

But mostly these partygoers haven't been the typical Roundhouse people — that dedicated pocket of hippy resistance that generally throngs this one-time engine shed, all clad in diellebas and cloaks.

This delightful crowd has been composed of a wide cross-section of people from far flung places, all bound in a common love of something other than the superficial in rock music.

This triumphant day began around four, with an ovation for the bill openers, the very groovy Starry-eyed And Laughing, dancing and bouncing around the stage.

Tons of youthful energy, and fine harmonies. Their delight in singing out their name, loud and proud, as they jingle-jangled through Dylan's "Chimes Of Freedom," was plain for all to see. They'll go far, as has been writ.

Helpless

I'm much less sure about AJ Webber, a lady with a guitar and an unexceptional voice, who capitalises on being coy and helpless. The extremely fair-minded audience listened politely, but this writer breathed a sigh of relief when she made way for the inimitable Chili Willi and the Red Hot Peppers in usual barnstorming form.

The Willi's transitions from bluegrass to Robert Johnson's "Walkin' Blues" and on to Garcia-type improvisation (via Jesse Winchester songs and thirties swing) makes far more sense in reality than on paper. Unashamed eccentrics, they do everything with a good natured finesse.

All members of the band played well, with guitarist Martin Stone, front man and multi-instrumentalist Phil Lithman, and drummer Peter Thomas standing out.

Thomas returned to the stage for the next set, moving to the kit to form the third part of an under-rehearsed trio with John Stewart and his bass player/harmony vocalist Arnie Moore.

The drummer looked uneasy initially. An hour later he strode off, having proved himself to be up there with the best.

What happened in the sixty minutes in between was one of those rare, rare occasions in rock music, when an artist just transcends mere entertainment and achieves a degree of communication that goes deeper than words can possibly record.

Nesmith shakes off a ghost

...but it was John Stewart who stole the show at London's Roundhouse on Sunday. Steve Lake was there.



MIKE NESMITH: intimacy

Stewart took the Roundhouse audience with a minimum of theatrics. Alternating between an amplified jumbo and a solid electric guitar, he mostly stood rooted to the spot, a

statuesque figure dressed plainly in denim and a burkasin waistcoat. But whether scratching out dirty, funky guitar licks or singing in a rich yet emotion-charged tenor, he

was simply masterful. With such sparse, stripped-down accompaniment, the truth inherent in every line he sang just could not be denied or ignored.

No embellishments to distract, all attention focusing on Stewart's vividly visual word-wielding.

"Never goin' back, uh, to Nashville, anymore," sung Stewart and Moore, over and over until everything dissolved in warm, tumbling chaos.

It felt so good, so ridiculously good, and as demands for an encore accelerated into a crescendo, there was scarcely a dry eye in the house.

Stewart bounced back, his fine dark blond hair flopping across his eyes, delivered another brief rocker and was away, almost before we could catch our breath.

Roots

Wow. What could possibly follow that? Certainly not Help Yourself, bless their working class roots. Reforming just for this one blow, the original incarnation of the band, featuring Messrs Ken Whaley, Dave Charles, Richard Treece, and Malcolm Morley, opened their segment.

"This is our favourite place, this," quoth they. "It's good to see yer."

And, having said, they began to play, rather raggedly it has to be noted, as though the passing of time had taken the edge off their compatibility. Whaley, usually excellent, gave up totally in one jamming piece. Just stopped playing bass, and the number slid to a grinding halt.

Enter Deke Leonard who patched up the holes with commendable imagination, and from here on home they were fine.

Rhythm section nicely fluid, nice solos, nice vocals; basically superior boogie, resulting in another ovation. But there's no time for encores now, much to the disgust of a small minority a handful of unfortunates not into the spirit of the day.

So, Michael Nesmith stands motionless, stage centre, hands around the machine heads of his acoustic, the butt end of which rests squarely on the floor. Next to him Red Rhodes, pedal steel guru. Nesmith delicately thin and tall, Rhodes muscularly solid.

Once again this amazing audience roars its enthusiasm. Nesmith doesn't move, his blinking face behind a trim full beard is a study of bemused bewilderment. All this furor is for him? Sure is.

Times are clearly changing, the ghost of the Monkees now long shaken off, a Nesmith renaissance would seem to be upon us. Michael almost seems to object to the reality, quietly taken aback by the continued cheers.

He urges that we be civil, and then cuts off the monitors to eliminate a malevolent buzzing noise and in the process renders his between song raps inaudible to those of us at the back of the stage.

"Never mind," whispers Tobler, "you'll hear all the chat on the record."

Mobile

Yes indeed, a day captured for posterity by the Pye mobile.

Nesmith fumbles a couple of times, has to start a couple of numbers twice, but somehow that just seems to add to the intimacy that he's created, simply by being Michael Nesmith.

And Red Rhodes is being Red Rhodes, too, casually throwing away killer pedal steel solos.

Rhodes dominates much of the time, due of course, to the absence of sound on the stage with the monitors off. But it's absorbed and cherished off front.

Old songs, new songs, selections from "And The Hits," and the rest of Nesmith's rapidly rising repertoire.

Two standing ovations later, it's all over. Nesmith was in fine form, certainly. It'll be good to hear the album, and hopefully a tour by the whole Nesmith band.

But that John Stewart