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HOMESPUN HARMONIES

Local musicians, singers and producers come together for Monte Schultz' 'Seraphonium' album and live event

Scene

THE BIG SCENE: There came a time, on stage and on record

Monte Schulz' ambitious 'Seraphonium' project was a major live event of 2015, and the album that spawned the live show is a sweet, polished jewel

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent
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As the year turns the retrospective impulse invariably kicks in, and we naturally index what has gone by in the year now committed to the annals of history. It's just the way of the world, especially the world according to journalists, critics and everyday historians - locally and beyond.

Clearly, one of the major musical happenings of a locally brewed sort during 2015 was the multi-headed thing - call it a concept song cycle - known as Monte Schulz' "Seraphonium," made manifest

onstage at the Marjorie Luke Theatre and on record. Mr. Schulz, son of Charles Schulz of "Peanuts," is the creative force behind the project, a songwriter and mastermind who assembled a few handfuls of his nicely crafted songs along pop, folk, new age, country and rock lines, sometimes with epic-leaning dimensions.

Lois Mahalia, left, and Kymberly Ford, performing at the Seraphonium Live concert extravaganza at the Marjorie Luke Theater on Nov. 20, are among the rotating cast of singers on the Seraphonium album.
Tom Vollick photos

With the help of producer-multi-instrumentalists Brian Mann, David West and Byl Caruthers, and a veritable who's-who cast of top grade musicians (mostly Santa Barbarans), Mr. Schulz wended through various local studios to realize his ambitious vision.

Many were called and chosen, produced and rehearsed into shape for a grand concert in late November, filling the Luke Theatre stage with a large cast. In this case, the proverbial act of getting the band to "play it like the record" required heroic and passionate efforts of a multitude, given the elaborate arrangements and production features on the album, "After Many a Summer."

There are mini-epics in the works among these varied tracks, including the opening "Song of You," a folk-pop tune with a Celtic tinge and sense of longing, and the song late in the sequence, "Good Evening, America," a song of resignation and melancholy which zooms outward from the romantic personal mode to a socio-generational statement.

At the thematic core is a reflection on the difficulty, and importance, of letting go and moving forward - on the micro and macro levels of life.

Defying the notion that a pop album needs to have a consistent, single lead singer presence to maintain cohesion, Mr. Schulz instead fanned out into the idea of an ensemble entity.

He called on a rotating cast of singers including the primary vocal heft and glow of Shawn Thies, Tina Schlieske, Lois Mahalia, Kimberly Ford, George Friedenthal (on his co-written "Jacaranda Tree") and the pleasant-toned Joel Dalton in the vocal cast.

Mr. Schulz put in one cameo appearance on his own album, as the understated vocalist on "Don't Say Goodbye," with soulful singer Ms. Mahalia literally running in R&B riffing circles around the leader's bedrock coo.

Variety is also the spice when it comes to the idiomatic factor of the songs, ranging from the Latin-rock-esque feel of "Pyramids of the Sun" to the Euro-cafJ societal plushness of "If I Love," adorned with Mr. Mann's accordion and strings, and sounding like a big, sweet Celine Dion/Andrea Bocelli holiday special anthem.

More Mann-ly string arranging acumen graces the mysterious beauty of "Glass Mountain," also boasting hocketing, interweaving vocal parts, but everything goes giddily to the islands for the breezy Hawaii-ana of "On the Beach at Lanikai."

One of my favorite tunes on the album is "Everything We Know About Love," with Ms. Thies drawing on the purer terrain of her varied vocal palette for a deceptively simple melody which suggests an Anne Murray song gone left of center as the song structure progresses.

Her vocal is amended by the clean, lean voice of Mr. West, a natural man multitasker who also plays most of the country-leaning instrumental parts, except for Gabe Witcher's colorful fiddling and drummer Tom Lackner's well-placed thwack track.

Bringing the album's carefully paced and vaguely narrative sweep of songs to a finale, penultimate track "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" wears its shamelessly romantic themes (melodic and lyrical) and coats them with strings and a chorale-like wash of voices. (Bread fans, listen up, and enjoy).

Finally, the country-ish lilt of "Gonna Come a Time" seems to summarize the album's ideas of accepting time's and life's passages toward a greater good. A warm buzz of a chorus wraps itself around the mantra-like refrain: "Life is more than happenstance/Step outdoors and take a chance ..."

"After Many a Summer," presumably Volume 1 in the ongoing story of "Seraphonium," is a kindly, ear-friendly bath of sound and song. And most of it is grown, proudly, of local musical soil.
