

All-star band brings magic of The Last Waltz to Cultural Centre

Music history was made in San Francisco in 1976 when The Band invited iconic friends Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell and more for The Last Waltz, an epic concert painstakingly documented by Martin Scorsese released on film in 1978.

Nearly 50 years later, this legendary night lives on in memory and on film, and next Friday, January 19, the magic will be re-created in Aurora as the Aurora Cultural Centre hosts The Last Waltz: A Celebration of The Band Live at St. Andrew's College.

Assembled by Juno Award-winning producer Lance Anderson, the performance will celebrate the 48th anniversary of the historic concert with Chuck Jackson of The Downchild Blues Band, Matt Weidinger, Johnny Max and Verese Vassell-Bowen backed by a nine-piece band that includes Jerom Levon Avis on drums and vocals, Terry Blerish on guitar, Wayne DeAdder on bass, Rob Gusevs on organ, Steve McDade on trumpet, and Anderson on piano.

'The music really touched especially Canadian souls,' says Anderson, who first produced the show 14 years ago. 'Even though [The Band] was living in the States writing a lot of their music and they wrote about America a lot, they wrote from a Canadian perspective. I always think The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down could never have been written by an American. They wouldn't have seen that perspective - it had to be written by someone who was outside the country looking in.'

Looking back on the evolution of the show, Anderson says it was never his intention to pay tribute to The Band and, at the same time, stresses that it's not your traditional tribute show.

'We don't do this full time - this is an all-star band that just gets together to play this music because we love it,' he says, adding they took their first bow together at the Kitchener Blues Festival in 2010. 'It was supposed to be a one-off when they asked me to put together a special concert that would involve a lot of people, and I thought of The Last Waltz because they had 13 people on stage. We did it, the audience went crazy when we did it, and we enjoyed it so much because this music isn't easy to play. All those players were quite masterful in their own ways.'

'The band members said, 'Why don't we do this again sometime?' 14 years later, here we are and it sells better now than it did 14 years ago. We believe this is part of our shared Canadian musical heritage and to play it live and play it in that spirit - we don't promise that we're going to do it note for note because The Band never played it note for note, they never repeated themselves; we do it in that spirit, we play it in that style, we play those arrangements, but within that we just do our own thing, our favourite things that we want to play, and it keeps it really fresh.'

Over the last 14 years, the show has played across Canada and gets a tremendous reception wherever they go, particularly in the hometowns of original members of The Band. In those venues, they get feedback not just from fans, but friends and family of the trailblazers. Along the way, they've also amassed musicians with strong ties to - and memories of playing with - the founders.

'They are the cream of the crop,' says Anderson. 'We're doing this out of the love for the music and I think that comes across. I think people realize we're so proud of these people and what they accomplished that we want to celebrate it. That's why we call it a musical celebration of The Band. It's not a tribute show in the sense that we're impersonating them; we're just celebrating their achievements and what they were able to do.'

The Aurora Cultural Centre will present The Last Waltz: A Musical Celebration of The Band Live next Friday, January 19, at 7.30 p.m. at St. Andrew's College. Doors open at 6.45 p.m. For more information, including tickets, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca.

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