

No Sugar Tonight delivers soulful and soaring tribute to The Guess Who and BTO at Town Park



As advertised, it was "pure Canuck rock nostalgia" on display at Town Park when No Sugar Tonight took the stage on Wednesday evening.

Amid overcast but pleasant end-of-July conditions, more than 1,500 attendees were treated to the quintet's classic rock tunes—an engaging, spot-on tribute to The Guess Who, Burton Cummings, and Bachman-Turner Overdrive.

The two-hour show was the latest in the Town's Concerts in the Park Summer Series and Town Park was astir with No Sugar Tonight's ability to present the musical genius of Burton Cummings and Randy Bachman.

I was fortunate to see Bachman and Cummings perform their greatest hits at Budweiser Stage during the "Together Again" tour on July 19, 2022. Originally scheduled for July 27, 2020, the much-anticipated concert in Toronto was postponed two years due to the Pandemic, but was well worth the wait. The iconic Canucks charmed their audience on a warm summer night by delivering hit after hit and so did No Sugar Tonight at the bandshell in Aurora on Wednesday.

Lead guitarist Russell Pye opened the concert with Bachman's muscular riff from "No Time" and Cummings's hypnotically-high flying vocals were replicated by front man Michael Wilson.

No Sugar Tonight pivoted seamlessly into the Bachman-Turner Overdrive catalogue—showing off the band's musical versatility. Keyboardist John Burns captured Bachman's vocal stylings in "Hey You" and Roy Belisle supplied the song's throbbing baseline at the heart of the BTO hit.

Belisle also provided comic relief by providing the husky voice of Wolfman Jack in the band's rendition of "Clap for the Wolfman." Wilson's vocals and John Burns's keyboard work impelled the gimmicky song and the catchy chorus elicited timely clapping from the savvy audience.

Pye, who has helped anchor the band as its lead guitarist since 2009, was impressed by the classic rock fans gathered at Town Park who clapped in unison to the fourth song of the night, filled the dance floor from the outset, and sang all the words to all the songs.

"The best part of the night was the crowd and how they embraced the songs. We could hear the audience singing the words along with us—they knew them all. It shows how timeless this music is."

Bassist and vocalist Belisle acknowledged that they were taking a risk by rolling into the thunderous tones of 'Rain Dance' given the overcast conditions at Town Park, but even the big booming bass drum sounds of drummer Rick Hodgson did not elicit a downpour.

The rain held off and lead vocalist Michael Wilson showed off his vocal range when he moved from the campy 'Clap for the Wolfman' to the challenges inherent in delivering 'Laughing.'

Wilson went up the ladder effortlessly to capture the poignant lyrics about love gone wrong and showed the same capacity as the band covered Cummings's first solo hit 'Break It to Them Gently' both songs supported so ably by keyboardist Burns.

The fine three-part-harmonies of Wilson, Belisle, and Burns were evident in 'Share the Land' the performance of which peaked with Pye's urgent guitar solo. Pye, with his long locks blowing in the July winds that prevailed at Town Park, provided the energy for BTO's 'Ain't Seen Nothing Yet' with bassist Belisle covering the Bachman vocals nicely.

Lead singer Michael Wilson, who scaled Burton Cummings's considerable vocal range all evening, was motivated by the filled venue: 'We fed off the energy of the big crowd tonight. We could see their smiles on the dance floor and they were singing all the words to these great songs. That kind of energetic crowd made us better as a band tonight.'

The crowd was particularly animated for the last song of the first set and Cummings's 'My Own Way to Rock' did not disappoint. The dance floor filled, Burns' vibrant keyboards filled the air with energy, the show stopper showed off the band's big sound, and the dancers headed to the food trucks and beer tents for half-time sustenance.

During the third song of their second set, the quintet's chemistry on stage was particularly evident in their delivery of 'These Eyes.' Wilson's soaring, soulful vocals were complemented by Burns' piano work because sometimes it just takes two musicians to present what Cummings delivered on his own.

On its own, the brilliant rendition of 'These Eyes' would have made the trip to Town Park worth it, but No Sugar Tonight's talents were fully on display in their carbon copy version of 'American Woman' that served as the climactic point of the concert.

Burns, Wilson, and Pye moved in unison with the lead guitarist's long locks being lifted by yet another Town Park zephyr. Pye took genuine joy in delivering Bachman's epic riff at the centre of the The Guess Who's most influential song. It was the highlight of the night.

Percussive magic was provided by bassist Belisle and drummer Rick Hodgson who in tandem filled up the summer setting with throbbing rhythm, especially during the hard-driving BTO hit 'Let it Ride' during which Burns's cover of Fred Turner's raspy, soaring vocals was sublime.

Equally sublime was the catchy keyboard work by Burns during the delivery of 'Shakin' All Over' the oldest Guess Who song that was released in 1965 while the Winnipeg-based band was still named Chad Allan and the Expressions. The denizens of the dance floor 'got the shivers in their backbone' possibly in the knee bone, too-- as they gyrated to the classic 60's piano stylings of Burns and the soaring vocals of Wilson.

The versatile Burns, who played keyboards, acoustic guitars, electric guitars, and covered the Randy Bachman vocals, acknowledged the band's role as the only Canadian group authorized to perform The Guess Who's music.

'We're keepers of this part of musical history' we're carrying the torch and I agree it's a kind of public service. It felt great to meet Burton Cummings when he invited us backstage after his show at Casino Rama. He was really pleased with our performance of his songs and his endorsement really meant a lot to us.'

Bassist and the vocalist Roy Belisle, who blasted through the encore number 'Takin' Care of Business' and exhorted the audience to

sing the chorus so loud that 'Newmarket can hear you!', succeeded in creating a thousand voice choir. He thanked the audience and told them, 'We live for this' playing in front of big crowds in the summer time.'

His lively spirit on-stage manifested itself in our post-concert interview at a Town Park picnic table.

'We love these big events' there so much energy for the band to feed off. It was great to see how much people were enjoying the show tonight.'

The secrets underlying the band's cohesive stage presence were revealed in our post-concert chat.

Pye disclosed, 'We've all played together for 16 years now. We're all just good friends and that's helped create the chemistry.'

Wilson added, 'We can disagree and no one gets upset. We've never had an argument in sixteen years.'

In a closing insight, Burns supplied the most important ingredient that has created the kind of unity evident on Wednesday night: 'None of us have egos. If there's going to be problems with egos, it's usually going to be the lead singer.'

The three vocalists looked at one another and no one disagreed.

Band harmony to the last syllable of our discussion.

By Jim Stewart