

For guitar lovers, Holdsworth shows how it's done

By JEFF MIERS
NEWS POP MUSIC CRITIC
1/10/2005

Glancing around the Tralf Saturday evening, one noticed that glazed eyes and dropped jaws abounded.

Grown men looked ready to weep. Guitarists in the crowd wrung their hands in the agony of inadequacy and contemplated giving up on the instrument.

Yep, Allan Holdsworth was in town for an extremely rare Buffalo gig, and he reminded anyone who might have forgotten why he's widely considered the most inventive and technically skilled electric guitarist on the planet.

Holdsworth was joined by a six-string bassist and drummer for a mind-blowing set of instrumental pieces that ran the gamut from progressive rock to jazz fusion to straight-ahead jazz. Though Holdsworth and the band played for only 90 minutes or so, the warm response afforded them by the crowd made it clear that no one was leaving disappointed, a fact enabled by the extremely amiable Holdsworth, who chatted with fans and signed autographs for an hour after the performance.

Holdsworth is a stunning soloist, a point driven home by the consistency and quality of the searing, soaring improvisatory flights he ventured on throughout Saturday's gig.

Clearly enthralled with the tone and fluidity of the great jazz saxophonists, Holdsworth has spent his career - beginning in 1970 with English tenor player Ray Warleigh at the famous Ronnie Scott's club and proceeding through groundbreaking work with U.K., Soft Machine, Tony Williams' Lifetime and IOU - on a quest to emulate that fluidity on the electric guitar. He's succeeded. His playing is simply a wonder to behold, both in terms of technique and harmonic invention.

What was most refreshing was that the three virtuoso musicians on the stage seemed content to serve the song and allow space for each other, though Holdsworth was quite evidently the star of the show. Many of the compositions,

bolstered by inventive chord progressions and voicings, as well as hip, perky arrangements, bore a resemblance to the relaxed grace of mid-period Pat Metheny/Lyle Mays, as surprising shifts in rhythm, texture and tempo did battle with pretty, pastoral melodies.

This wasn't just a shredding workshop for guitar-obsessed geeks, but rather, a display of dizzying musicality and inspired songwriting. Top-notch stuff, from start to finish.

e-mail: jmiers@buffnews.com