



SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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**IN CONCERT: Oklahoman Absurdist Rock Gold -
LEGENDARY AND CREATIVELY BENDABLE
OKLAHOMA BAND RETURNS TO SANTA BARBARA ON
THE HEELS OF THEIR DARKISH NEW ALBUM, 'THE
TERROR'**

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent



Michelle Martin Coyne photo



Wayne Coyne, the lead singer and guitarist of The Flaming Lips, onstage in Porto, Portugal
Paulo Duarte photo

November 1, 2013 11:00 AM

IN CONCERT

The Flaming Lips, with Tame Impala

When: 6 p.m. Friday

Where: Santa Barbara Bowl, 1122 Milpas St.

Cost: \$39.50-\$54.50

Information: 962-7411, sbbowl.com



Jason DeCrow photo

Bold, first impressions can be lasting impressions on the condition that subsequent investigations expand upon the initial wow factor. A personal case-in-point: my first live experience with the legendary Oklahoman band, The Flaming Lips, was at the Arlington Theatre back in 2002. While on tour, the band, led by the oddly charismatic, Wayne Coyne, opened the evening and also headlined as the backup band for Beck.

On that enchanting evening, they put on an entrancing set, supporting their great — and rare, commercially-fired album "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robot," with the "hit" song, "Do You Realize?" — which would go on to become a beloved song, and the Oklahoma state song for several years (ending earlier this year). The Arlington show sported bushels of beach balls in the house, as well as a posse of volunteers, dancing in animal costumes. By general consensus, the Lips stole the show that night.

Peculiar as the opener-morphing-into-headlining-backup-band concept might seem, it is in keeping with an iconoclastic band that has been breaking and remaking rules of their own for 30 years. Yes, they have scored commercial points along the way with "Yoshimi" and the 1999 album "The Soft Bulletin." But just as often, they have veered off into corners of sci-fi, quasi-concept albums, neo-psychedelia, experimentalism, and their own brand of Middle American absurdist, rock 'n' roll theatrics.

This year, the band got darker and more serious-toned with their umpteenth album, "The Terror," a kind of artful breakup record and an atmospheric/existential mull, which is nonetheless quite hypnotic, and the basis of a tour that brings this great American band to the Santa Barbara Bowl tonight.

I connected with Lips leader Mr. Coyne last week on the phone, and the affable rock star described a typical, multi-tasking scenario in which he was engaged, even as we spoke. "We are in the middle of a promo video for the film 'Ender's Game' — a song that is going to come out two weeks from now. We leave for Asia in the middle of the night, so we realized, 'oh yeah, we gotta do this.' We're in the middle of doing that, and I'm watching over my shoulder as George does some green-screen things." The strange, and multi-tiered, multi-attitudinal life of the Flaming Lips continues onward, sideways and occasionally upward, commercially speaking.

News-Press: I fondly recall your show at the Arlington Theatre in 2002 on the tour where you opened for and then played with Beck.

Wayne Coyne: Those were phenomenal shows. It was a crazy idea. We played and then reconfigured the stage and came back out as Beck's band. We were his group. It was amazing.

NP: Through much of your time as a group, at least in the past several years, you have seemed to be this elastic, collaborative artist — "working well with others" is the cliché, I guess.

WC: (Laughs) Better with some than others, but that's a good way to describe it, yeah.

NP: Does that process rejuvenate your own creative spirits in a way?

WC: I don't know about the idea of rejuvenating. That energy, that thing that you get, is for me, like just being around and not necessarily collaborating with interesting people, who have ideas and energy and are just interesting. If that doesn't apply, I don't think I would want to work with other people.

There sometimes is a clichéd version of what an artist is — and some of it is true — about the weirdo sitting in the corner, dreaming of a movie or thinking of music in his head, or drawing a picture, or doing a painting. To anybody who comes near him, he says, "get away from me. I'm doing something really important." Part of that is true. It is something that you're extracting from your mind with your outward abilities.

But a lot of that can be happening while you're doing this stuff with other people, too. It's always back and forth. You want to be surrounded by people who are stimulating while ideas are flowing and things are happening, and then you're sort of innovating with ideas. They're not necessarily things that you always have to create. You say you created this and they created that, and that sends you onto the third creation, the combination of all of them, or the rejection of all of them, or whatever it is. But it's another way of saying, "we have colors to paint with." That's what I always say.

That's not true of everyone you work with. Some people end up being people who are introverts and strange or whatever. But it's better to take a chance and see what happens than not to.

NP: Looking at your discography, and I may just be looking at dates and inventing a narrative, but I see you did the "Dark Side of the Moon" project with Henry Rollins and then your next record, "Heady Fwends," had quite a long guest list, but now your latest, "The Terror," returns to a more in-house and personal approach. Is that a fair view of how things have gone, creatively?

WC: Well, "The Terror" has one song with Phantogram on it. When we began to do that, we wouldn't be that aware that we've gone from doing this big thing with a bunch of people to something with nobody. It occurred to us as we went that "oh yeah, we're making a Flaming Lips record without many guests on it."

I would say that our 2009 record, "Embryonic" was the first one where we really sought out people to do things with us. That album has Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs on a couple of tracks, and a German mathematician who we would talk to a couple of times a week while we were recording, and get little conversation snippets. You can hear him throughout the record, in and out.

I don't think it was because we didn't want to before then. It was just that doing things online and with email and all that sort of stuff just became sonically better. We've done things in the past, and still do, where people just literally call us over the phone and we use that sound of the phone as part of the way that this thing sounds.

NP: An over-arching theme from all the work that you have done is that you're sort of a restlessly creative type, not wanting to settle into familiar patterns or processes of working. Is that about right?

WC: Well, I think with all the things that we do, if they have a process that works for us, it's always useful. But with the very best of the stuff that you're doing — music, art, the video right in front of me that we're looking at — I don't think you can ever say, "It was good because we did this." Sometimes, it's just a bunch of accidents coming together, and it happens to be great. Sometimes, it happens all by sheer luck. You can work and work and work and everybody around you knows exactly what they're doing, but it feels very tired and doesn't do much.

I think we've learned that there is mostly no real way. Having made records and movies and videos for a long, long time now, we are glad that there are great ways to do things and we use every bit of them that we can. But it doesn't mean that we have a "way." To do something that would be comparable to maybe what a craftsman does — and I don't mean this in a bad way — who gets up every day and makes a knife, a type of knife — I don't think we're doing that. But if you watched me from outer space, you might think "he does the same thing every day."

We're curious. I absolutely love some of the things that we've done because we've done them by accident. Even with a song like "Race for the Prize," off of "Soft Bulletin," when we did that, we tried desperately to do it again and again. Some things are just like that. The reason they're so magical is because it's magic. It isn't about recording or your skill or any of these things. We simply heard it and thought, "This is really great."

Sometimes I think we would do it again and again, if we could, but you can't, and you can't figure out how it works. There is a lot of all of that going on at the same time. Somehow, through, you know or have some sense — it's not even confidence — that if you keep trying, something will happen.

NP: By those terms, the great reception and longevity of your song "Do You Realize?" may have been a somewhat shocking experience for you. Or was it? That has really taken on a life of its own.

WC: It definitely has. We helped it along. I don't know if "shocking" is the word. To me, it's like an explosion happening in slow motion. It's always growing, but you don't wake up one day and it has sold a million copies. It's just this little thing that keeps expanding and expanding. In that way, all the things that we had to do with it, the way we had to shape ourselves to make that song, is part of what we do.

It has happened slowly enough that it never seemed like "oh gee, we've gotta' play 'Do You Realize?' at the end of the set tonight ... It's a song that everybody loves and I think its meaning, little by little, has become more simplified as we've gone along. In the beginning, it didn't just seem like this is a great wedding song, or funeral song, or a state song. Those are great things. But in the beginning, it didn't seem like that.

That came out in 2002 as well, so it was quite a while ago, now. Little by little, we have accepted that a good part of our audience believes in that song, and we can say, "Cool. Good for them. Good for us."

NP: That song and the album it was attached to, "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots," are fine examples of this weird balancing act you have achieved between pop music elements and experimentalism and psychedelia. Your music can seem subversive and mainstream at the same time. Is that a conscious, balancing act, in some way?

WC: Well, no. As for the idea that anything is subversive, that has to be part of the things that you like, or else I don't think you could purposely pursue it. It has to be a part of what you do or it's not, or it's part of the way you view what you do. We think of it much like that.

With a song like "Do You Realize?" in the beginning, I didn't know if it was special or derivative. When I played it for Steven (Drozd) in its pretty rough-demo stage, he immediately said, "Oh yeah, that's a classic. Let's not mess that up." There's always that. You've gotta kind of trust that other people are listening and understanding and seeing its qualities.

NP: You have fared nicely in this, just-off-to-the-side-cult, heroic status in music. Is there some part of you that would love to have a mega-pop hit?

WC: Yeah. It's not that we would think about it. If it happened, we would take it like we have most of the bizarre adventures that have happened to us in the past ten years. You reach a point where you have kind of done the things you set out to do, in a sense. And then, if you're lucky, things happened that you never would have said you wanted or could have predicted, or even thought about.

You say, "Let's see what happens here." We can always say no, and if it's great, we say "yes," and keep going that way.

We know, just from the little bit of experience we've had with commercial success that it's a lot of lot of lot of work. You see someone like a Rhianna, or a Beyonce, or whoever and it's not 'nothing.' They're doing their thing and pursuing their music and their love of their own music and what they're doing in the same way that we are. They're not thinking, "I'm just doing this for the money." You wouldn't do that. It's too difficult. There are too many failures along the way.

We don't spend a lot of time pursuing it (commercial success). We simply say, "Well, here's our music. This is what we want to do." But if it happened (a hit single), we would say, "Oh, this is funny. Let's see what happens with this."

NP: It does seem that part of the magic of the Flaming Lips is that you're serious about your work, but you keep your wits and sense of humor about you.

WC: That's just part of who we are. Most of the people who we want to be around and who we like, that's just part of being a likeable entity in the world. We all have horrible things that happen to us and we all empathize with people, but we all try to remember that without laughing and making light of situations, the world can be utterly too heavy and tragic.

That's just part of who we are. I think if you were around us, you'd say, "You guys are kind of stupid, and funnier than I thought you'd be." And I'd say, "You're right." We try to have fun for sure. To me, that's the pinnacle of anybody's success. I always watch people and stand around them and say, "How much are they laughing? If they're laughing, they're rich. It doesn't matter what happened to them or how much money they have. If they're not laughing, something's wrong. They're not doing it right.

NP: They're missing the point?

WC: Yeah, that's it.