

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

CONCERT REVIEW: The Sweeter Side of Blue : Veteran bluesman Doug MacLeod, a sensitive guitarist on the brink of a new career high at 64, put on a sweet show at Warren Hall Saturday

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Blues fans of any depth know that the music rises higher and moves wider than its stereotyped image suggests. Yes, the music is rife with tales of pain and suffering of "baby done left me" and more social injustice and existential angst by any other name variety. There will be excessive drinking and carousing involved, and innuendos by the handful, sure. But, lest we forget, there's plenty of sweetness, partytime dance fever, and even good old fashioned philosophical feelgood spirits built into the essence of the blues.

A full house at Warren Hall got doses of all of the above, and never skimping on the positivity side of the cultural equation, St. Louis-born acoustic bluesman Doug MacLeod held court for a strong musical evening on Saturday. Officially, Mr. MacLeod was the main attraction, a commanding self-reliant guitarist and singer-songwriter with a commanding musicality and easy-fit charisma. He doubled as the house performer in the Society's annual "Member Appreciation Night."

He has appeared in various guises for the Society in the past, going back decades to a show as sideman with Pee Wee Crayton and George "Washington" Smith. MacLeod is the rare blues-devoted white musician, with copious respect for the black musicians who invented this music. He has either performed or recorded with many of those blues forefathers, including some of his originals: "Your Bread Ain't Done," which the late, great Albert King covered, and which was one of the more memorable songs on Saturday's set list.

He also understands the nature of the blues beast. The veteran musician, sounding fine, wise and gutsy at 64, pointed out that the Santa Barbara Blues Society is an important American institution by now, enjoying status as the oldest blues society in America, nearly 34 years old. The organization's boon to the community was seconded by the fund-raising subplot of this evening, with a silent auction and an actual live auction of various gifts (including an Epiphone guitar and demin jacket signed by many blues greats who have performed for the society), aimed

at the Society's outreaching "Blues for Youth" program.

While Mr. MacLeod hunkers down in the true-blue blues tradition, currently in the acoustic country blues corner of the music, he also has distinguishing points in his favor. For one thing, he is adamant about performing and building on his original songbook, in a genre often reliant on old classics. He also slips and slides around the usual structural clichés of the traditional three-chord, 12-bar blues forms, instead riding atmospheric, swampy vamps with a muted, stewing dynamic energy level, out of which his flexible low-high voice and key guitar riffs jump up out of the pulsing vibrations.

In other words, he gets his groove on in a unique, hypnotic way, to the point where we might not immediately notice that a song has spread itself out over 10 minutes or so. That pattern was established immediately at Warren Hall, with his undulating train song "Long Black Train." Sex — and the war/dance between the sexes — had its sway in the show, too, in none-too-secret carnal ditties like "(If You're Goin' to the Doghouse)" (refrain punch line: "remember where you buried your bone") and "My Black Pony."

Mr. MacLeod's careerist cloud may well be rising shortly. After recording for European labels for the last nine years, he has a new album coming out soon on the FRESH arm of the audiophile label Reference Recordings, out of San Francisco. Judging from the several songs Mr. MacLeod played from that album, including the affirmative-spirited title track, "Brand New Eyes," the 64-year-old is hitting a new creative high right around the old school retirement age (operative term "old school").

A fine slide guitar player, he broke out his bottleneck, to great expressive effect, on the slow-brew beauty "The Sun Shine My Way," late in the second set of the night. He ended the set and the night with another engaging new song, "Welcome in Your Home." Mr. MacLeod has been plenty of places in his time, and appears to be heading to yet other places as an artist. At Warren Hall, he gave out an inspiring lesson in the blues, as a music of commiseration, consolation, originality, celebration and all-American, nasty good fun.

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