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SHOW REVIEW

by Jim Tanner

DIAMOND DOGS

The subject of cover bands has caused angst in Chattanooga this year, with lots of online criticism of the Riverfront Nights concert series, which features a headline lineup composed exclusively of touring tribute acts. This lineup has caused more than a small amount of vitriol from local music fans on social media, and the subject was even called out on these pages in a recent column by Livewire's resident curmudgeon Chuck Crowder.

Tribute acts can have a complicated relationship with music fans. Bands devoted to reproducing the hits of popular artists certainly draw crowds wanting to enjoy live music featuring songs they know and love, and the large crowds each Saturday at Riverfront Nights are evidence enough of the popularity of these shows.

However, the critics of these shows also make a good point about how cover bands can be detrimental to the local music scene. Tribute bands (particularly out-of-town touring acts) take opportunities from local musicians and limit the ability for new bands and new sounds to find an audience for original songs and new ideas.

Then there's the Diamond Dogs, who took the stage at Songbirds on July 18 to take the concept of a tribute show in a different, delightfully weird and unexpected direction.

The Diamond Dogs are a local band devoted to the music of David Bowie. Formed in 2016, shortly after Bowie's death, the band is made up of some of Chattanooga's top local musicians. The band features Eric Scealf on vocals; Eric Young, on keyboard and rhythm guitar, Mike Courter on bass, Matt Courter (Mike's son) on lead guitar, and Terry Montford on drums.

"We feel that choosing Bowie is more of an artistic appreciation than a tribute," Mike Courter said in a recent conversation. "As an artist Bowie always expressed themes that were relevant to the realities of life and beyond."

The Songbirds show was billed as "Stardust to Ashes: A Night of David Bowie." For this show, the band played two Bowie albums in their entirety. They opened the show performing 1972's "Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars" and after a short break (and full wardrobe change) the band performed "Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)," which was released in 1980.

These two albums were chosen to represent how Bowie entered his superstar era at the start of the 1970s compared to what and who he had become in 1980 after his artistic detour with musician Brian Eno and producer Tony Visconti for the Berlin Trilogy albums ("Low," "Heroes" and "Lodger"). Additionally, "Scary Monsters" was released just three years before Bowie's "Let's Dance" album catapulted him into the MTV limelight in 1983, making him a musical and fashion icon for a new generation of fans. Each set was introduced by longtime Chattanooga radio personality Jeff Styles, who helped put the work into context of where it fit into Bowie's career and the history of that era of music.

Scealf threw himself into the role of Bowie, wearing a silver jumpsuit to embody the Ziggy Stardust alter ego and later wearing a Perriot costume similar to what Bowie wore on the cover of "Scary Monsters." He threw himself around the stage throughout both sets and even into the crowd of 60 to 70 fans, who were fully immersed in the show.

The rest of the band also dressed to represent these two aspects of David Bowie's evolution as an artist and performer, with big hair and shiny suits for the Ziggy Stardust era followed by stark black suits for the "Scary Monsters" set. The music was performed flawlessly, but not so precise as to make it unexciting. The solos had energy and passion that had the crowd engaged with the performance, sometimes dancing, sometimes singing along and sometimes just entranced with the music.





Photo by Jim Tanner

All of the Diamond Dogs are accomplished musicians with their own original music legacy in the Chattanooga region. Scealf is the lead singer for the legendary hardcore band The Unsatisfied, Mike Courter was a member of Musical Moose, and the other members have had extensive careers in other bands and as musicians beyond the Diamond Dogs. Montfort and Mike Courter also run recording studios helping other artists get new music recorded and released in the area.

While the Songbirds show featured songs even casual fans would know, such as "Starman," "Suffragette City" and "Ashes to Ashes," the Diamond Dogs' decision to play both albums from start to finish allowed the band to explore some of the lesser-known songs from these two albums. Performing tracks such as "Hang onto Yourself" from "Ziggy Stardust" and "Scream like a Baby" from "Scary Monsters" give depth and perspective to the performance. "Rock and Roll Suicide" finished out the "Ziggy Stardust" set in the way Bowie intended by bringing the Ziggy persona and the crowd together at the end. These are songs not likely to be heard from a traditional tribute act show at Riverfront Nights (or anywhere else).

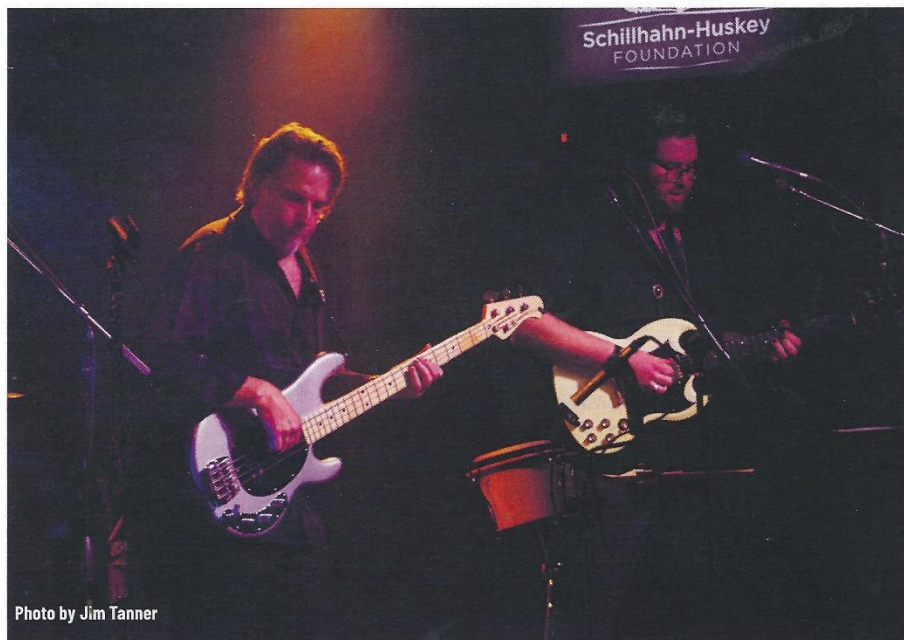


Photo by Jim Tanner

In the end, it's this devotion to the entire David Bowie catalog that distinguishes the Diamond Dogs from other "just play the hits" tribute acts. Leaving Songbirds, everyone felt like they had a better understanding of who Bowie was beyond his best-known songs as well as how this work inspires each of the Diamond Dogs in their own musical careers.

"Bowie is not just a chart topping pop idol, though he was that, too," Mike Courter said. "He wrote serious music and always used great musicians, so the music is always challenging."