

MUSIC

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Spinal Tap: Unwiggled and Unplugged

(Wiltern Theater; 2,100 seats; \$59.50 top)

By STEVEN MIRKIN

Presented by Live Nation.

Band: Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer. Guests: C.J. Vanston, Judith Owen, Annette O'Toole, Nell Geisslinger. Reviewed April 26, 2009.



'Spinal Tap: Unwiggled and Unplugged'

The jokes started coming even before the band hit the stage for Spinal Tap's Unwiggled and Unplugged tour at the Wiltern Sunday night. Following the usual request to turn off cell phones, it was announced that "the part of Christopher Guest will be played by Michael McKean and that Harry Shearer will be played by Christopher Guest."

OK, it wasn't a knee-slapper, but it set the gently satiric tone of the evening and served as a reminder that Guest, McKean and Shearer appear as themselves and not as David St. Hubbins, Nigel Tufnel and Derek Smalls of Spinal Tap, the self-proclaimed "England's Loudest Band" introduced 25 years ago in "This Is Spinal Tap," or, for that matter, as the Folkmen, the '60s folk revival trio at the center of "A Mighty Wind."

The show puts the spotlight firmly on the trio's musical talents (while they perform under their own names, all three are careful to credit each song to its fictional composer). Over the concert's 90-minute running time, it becomes apparent the songs are more than just parodies; they are wonderfully crafted takes on the last 50 years of pop music, with lyrics that move from the mundane into the ridiculous with perfect comic timing.

There are showtunes such as "A Penny for Your Thoughts" (from "Waiting for Guffman," featuring Judith Owen, Shearer's better half, on vocals); the potted folk of "Old Joe's Place" and "Blood on the Coal," a comically overstated disaster ballad; and various styles of Brit rock -- the whiny blues of "Gimme Some Money," the psychedelia of "(Listen to the) Flower People" and the metallic "Majesty of Rock."

There's even the Oscar-nominated "A Kiss at the End of a Rainbow," a straightforward romantic duet performed by McKean and wife Annette O'Toole (who also gets a chance to show off her big growling voice on "The Good Book Song").

Which is not to say humor takes a back seat. Studded among the songs are fan-made YouTube videos, including a wacky stop-animated Lego version of "Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight," a mock travelogue of Scandinavian cheese-rolling that was a trailer for "This Is Spinal Tap" plus a dramatic reading of an NBC censor's notes on edits needed to make the movie acceptable for airing. And "Stonehenge" returns, with a video featuring the famed mini-prop-on-a-string and troll dolls.

Two radical reworkings of songs are also included -- the Folkmen's bluegrass version of the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up" and "Big Bottom," a Tap favorite that was performed by 19 bassists at Live Earth, now arranged for Shearer's solo bass and turned into a slinky, '50s hipsterish finger-snapper, complete with a black-clad Nell Geisslinger (O'Toole's daughter) performing an interpretative dance.

It was probably inevitable for Spinal Tap to reunite. But it's hard to imagine another reunion as charming as this one. Show plays New York's Beacon Theater on May 27.

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