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Jul 22, 1998 12:00am PT

Plastic People of the Universe

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By **David Sprague** ▼



Although little-heard and never seen on these shores, the Plastic People of the Universe have long been the stuff of legend among underground cognoscenti.

At its first-ever American show, the most striking thing about the Czech band's performance was its sheer power. For more than 90 minutes, the Plastics operated at peak intensity, zig-zagging through vivid psychedelic freakouts and raucous rockers with equal aplomb.

The power of the Plastic People's vision shone throughout the joyful set, imbuing even those who didn't understand a word of the Czech-language lyrics (there were a sizable number of expatriates in attendance) with a sense that they'd witnessed something special.

Formed during the Czech student revolts of 1968, the band acted as a lightning rod for cultural and sociopolitical change in its homeland — and its members spent hard time in prison as a result.

Thirty years on, with former collaborator Vaclav Havel elected president of their home country, the Plastic People might not seem as dangerous as they once did. But at their performance, the sextet displayed a revolutionary streak undiminished by trials, tribulations or time.

Founder Milan Hlavasa took the lead on more pounding tunes (like "Intoxication"), while open-ended songs (like the noir "By the Window") were buttressed by potent dueling between violinist Jiri Kabes and tireless sax player Vratislav Brabenec.

The band's darkest numbers bear traces of the Velvet Underground (whose "Sweet Jane" was covered during an encore) and its more ornately arranged songs recall the dissonant elegance of early Mothers of Invention. But the confluence of elements, like Middle Eastern drones, Motown rhythms and free jazz-styled improv, elevates the Plastics to another level altogether.

The Plastics' performance was preceded by a series of brief sets from fellow fringe dwellers, ranging from the ridiculous (an out-of-touch spoken word performance by Tuli Kupferberg) to the sublime (a gently mesmerizing turn by guitar innovator Jim O'Rourke).

Plastic People of the Universe

Irving Plaza; 900 capacity; \$15

Production: Presented by Tamizdat. Reviewed July 18, 1998.

Crew:

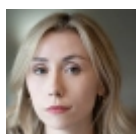
Cast: Band: Milan Hlavasa, Josef Janicek, Jan Brabec, Jiri Kabes, Vratislav Brabenec, Joe Karafiat.

Music By:

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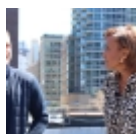
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