

April 5, 2017

By Pete Zamplas –

Music on the Rock celebrates the legendary folk duo that sang “I Am a Rock” —Simon & Garfunkel — with a tribute show by a vibrant duo for the rest of this week in Playhouse Downtown. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Thursday and 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, with 2 p.m. matinees Saturday and Sunday. Tickets are \$30.

A.J. Swearingen and Jayne Kelli were outstanding on opening night last Thursday in singing and harmonizing, his intricate finger-picking guitar, and their historical footnotes between songs. They interact intimately, to enhance the songs’ tenderness.

“I love the vibe and feel” of S&G songs, Kelli said. She admires Garfunkel’s “angelic essence. He was ethereal.”

Swearingen said they are determined to help “keep that (folk-rock) genre alive.

”He sings the Paul Simon parts which are often in lead, and close to the original’s voice. She does Art Garfunkel’s higher range in some leads, and in harmonizing support when they “sing the same line together,” she noted.

But like the lanky curly-haired blonde did with his cohort, she goes lower than her colleague in choice spots. She does so in the sentimental “Old Friends/Bookends” (reflection on innocent youth, with their taking turns on lead vocals) and inspirational adventure “America” in the line about hitchhiking from Saginaw (Mich.) near where Kelli grew up. She said Garfunkel “digs down” on such lines, showing his creative “brilliance.”

Kelli likes such singing in “unison” in dual lead/harmony, among S&G trademarks. They did so for much of “America,” “The 58th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy)” and bouncy “At the Zoo” with clever descriptions of animal personalities. “At the Zoo” and “Fakin’ It” are among several lesser-known, flowing S&G tunes they sang in a creative setlist.

Kelli showcased her resonant country-pop vocals for an earthier touch on tender “Scarborough Fair.” They infuse their style at times, but mostly replicate the S&G style and also Sixties coffeehouse effect by playing unplugged, with three microphones. They stand mostly still, not showboating in a later style. And they moved promptly to encores, skipping the leave-the-stage-to-obviously-return game.

They carry off “Bridge Over Troubled Water” minus the studio symphony and hum the opening of “Mrs. Robinson” after Swearingen jested about Simon submitting a half-written song missing words for “The Graduate” film soundtrack.

They kicked off the show grandly with energetic, up-tempo “A Hazy Shade of Winter” in S&G’s original style. The Bangles electrified a cover of the ’66 hit, toward the top of rock charts in 1988. Swearingen quizzed the crowd about that. Swearingen & Kelli (S&K) deliver S&G’s biggest hits. On Thursday, they performed 18 of their songs and one of their own. They sang the three S&G number one hits — “Sounds of Silence,” “Mrs. Robinson,” and “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” The packed crowd also sounded moved by “Homeward Bound,” sang along in silly “Cecilia” and the ending humming chorus of intense “The Boxer.” Mini hanging bulbs dimmed, for a starry night effect on that song and “Sounds of Silence.”

Their daring second half opener was “Richard Cory” about the wealthy but beleaguered factory owner, narrated by his frustrated laborer. As Kelli told the crowd, such songs show songwriter Simon’s “darker” side. He was “Mr. Alienation,” a counter-cultural hero who often wrote of bleak winter, meager belongings and class conflict. They did his “Blessed” about the meek inheriting the earth.

“Our favorite S&G song can change nightly because there’s such a plethora of good material,” Kelli said. Swearingen’s current favorites are the “The Boxer” about the fighter’s resilience amidst struggle, and adventurous search for “America.

“Now, Kelli best enjoys singing “Keep the Customer Satisfied,” and serene and elegant “Scarborough Fair/Canticle” about a 45-day merchants’ fair in English seaside town Yorkshire begun in 1253. The delicate refrain is “Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.” Simon shrewdly chimes in such anti-war lines as “War bellows blazing in scarlet battalions.”

S&G had 18 Top 100 records — nine top 11 hits — most in 1965-70 then “My Little Town” in ’75 and The Concert in Central Park live LP from Sept. 19, 1981 before a half-million fans. They toured in ’82, later in 2003-04. Their first record was top 50 hit “Hey Schoolgirl.” They recorded it 60 years ago in 1957— weeks before the Queens, N.Y. lads each turned 16. They soon played on American Bandstand. They went by Tom & Jerry like the tall cat (6-0 Garfunkel) and short mouse (5-3 Simon) in TV cartoons.

Kelli chuckles about how Paul Simon reportedly wrote many songs while in the bathroom. She told the crowd Simon noted he wrote “The Sound of Silence” averaging one finished line a day, over six months when he was 21. S&G recorded it acoustically on March 10, 1964. The producer added electric guitar and drums, and the commercialized sound topped the charts in early ’66.

Country-folk duo S&K included a song (“Amends”) from their self-titled debut CD of 2013, in their FRP show. Tom Rush recorded their earthy single “You’re Not Here with Me.” Their second album, which is more country, is The Marrying Kind due out July 23. Others hear in their songwriting shades of The Eagles, Alison Kraus and Lucinda Williams and lovely S&G harmonies.

The duo lives together, in St. Petersburg, Fla. They met in a club there, at a singer-songwriter night. Swearingen noted they were both solo artists. First, they recorded on each other’s next CD. Then they did one together, each contributing songs. They evolved into more collaborative writing on each song.

Musical collaboration is a key to their bond, they said. Swearingen is from steel town Bethlehem, Pa. Groomed on country, he ventured into folk. He did S&G tributes with Jonathon Beedle, later Kelli since 2015. They evolved into a popular coffeehouse act in Greenwich Village in NYC. They fit intimate settings such as Playhouse Downtown (PD). She calls it a “cool venue.” They like the acoustics.

Jayne Kelli, 32, grew up in small town Lapeer west of hand-shaped Michigan’s thumb. She took to folk pop her parents performed at campfires such as by John Denver and Jim Croce. Her voice ranges from sweet to bluesy.

She started writing songs at age 15. Her lyrics are very poetic, and topical. Her song “Sweetness” was chosen two years ago as an anthem for both Victim Services International and Angel Wings Int.

“You have to take risks” and deal with “failing” to attain success, she reasons about musical creativity.



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