

## REVIEW

by Ralph Fatello

### **Mike Girard's Big Swinging Thing**

Saturday May 14, 2016

Palace Theater Manchester, NH

I have been following Mike Girard and The FOOLS for a very long time. Or, as Mike is fond of saying, since WWII. In reality, it was more like 1976. I was a fan during the infant stages of the FOOLS. As some of you may, or may not know, Mike has fronted the FOOLS from 1976 to today 2016. That's 40 years. I guess at times, it seems like post WWII to Mike and the boys. Truth is, I saw the FOOLS recently and was completely blown away by their show. It's incredible to think that after 40 years, they would still sound as fresh as they do. But they did. With a variety of new material, the band rocked and I mean ROCKED.

Mike's longest living collaborator Rich Bartlett on the guitar, fuels the energy that sparks up the band.

They played new original songs, as well as old originals. And they mixed it up with a few covers. One of which was REBEL YELL by Billy Idol. During that song, Mike called up onto the stage two female back up singers. Alexandria Bianco and Denise Caccione. The two girls singing back up launched that song, and the band, into a whole other level. Mike mentioned that they were singers in his other band, MIKE GIRARD'S BIG SWINGING THING. Say what? We all laughed. The people I was with, looked at each other, and we made mental notes. Mike Girard's Big Swinging Thing? We knew we had to see this.

Fast forward to Saturday May 14th, 2016 to the Palace Theater in Manchester, NH. We are here to see Mike Girard's Big Swinging Thing. Reading this, it might seem to some of you, that we were at some freak side show, at a carnival to see Mike's... you know. But nothing could be further from the truth. MGBST is a 20 piece band, made up of the most talented musicians and vocalists, that I have ever seen Mike play with. There was an excitement in the air at the Palace Theater that night. We had good seats. Two rows back from the stage, as we waited for the show with anticipation.

I knew we were in for a good night when the lights went dark, and a spotlight hit this refined gentleman, dressed as a French waiter. He introduced the band with a

heavy French accent, and kept to his character the whole time. I thought at first it was Mike himself (Mike is always doing the unexpected). Turns out, it was his brother John. Apparently the talent was spread around the Girard household like a bag of the finest organic manure. And that talent, blossomed into some top shelf entertainers.

The curtains went up, and there was the band, kicking into (of all things) “Beck’s Bolero.” What?

Rich Bartlett led that song, and took hold of the reins, and just burned on the guitar. What a great opener, a rocking instrumental. I mean, who the hell plays “Beck’s Bolero” these days? These guys do, and they did it well. The sound was huge. And from that moment on, we knew we were in for a treat.

Rich Bartlett is perhaps, one of the most underrated guitarists in New England, and beyond. Maybe its because he’s always been part of an act, that borders on insane Comic Rock. The FOOLS have never been ones for holding back. They are a band without filters. Mike can be unpredictable at times, and Richie’s playing is Mike’s straight man. His playing follows Mike’s antics, as if they were, somehow connected. His guitar fills and sounds are brilliant. And before this night was over, I would be witness to some of his best playing to date. He’s simply a chameleon on the six string. He can play any style and play it like a pro. Any guitar player on the planet, would give the nod of approval to Richie’s playing.

He’s that good.

Standing next to Rich Bartlett was bassist Joe Holladay. Like Rich, Joe has played with the FOOLS for many years. Joe Holladay is a monster on the bass. And he fit right into this ensemble . Always in the pocket, no matter what tune they played. He’s also a decent back up singer , having played with Brad Delp in “Beatle Juice” didn’t hurt. In MGBST, Rich and Joe were the anchors.

When Mike stepped out in a red suit, it was a visual treat for the receptive audience.

For a man in his mid 60’s, Mike looks half his age. And his voice is like a fine tuned instrument. That man can sing. From loud screaming rockers, to a smooth crooning, with a velvety cool voice. At times I swear he channels Roy Orbison. The Mike Girard standing before me this night, was like a fine wine. He was relaxed, with an air of coolness about him.

Belting out covers like “Time Warp” from the Rocky Horror Picture Show. He was joined by the “Jewels,” back up singers Alexandria Bianco and Denise Caccione, and the delightful bookend Hula Hoop dancers, Nikki Hunt and Michelle Vi. And the show just launched itself from that point on into the Manchester stratosphere. “Do Ya” (Do ya Do Ya Want My Love) by ELO was so incredibly well done. At one point during each set Mike stepped off the stage and let the Jewels take the mic. Alexandria sang a solo on Jefferson Star Ship’s “Jane” and she nailed it. And Denise sang “Goldfinger” and just hit it out of the park. It was crazy good.

When they played The FOOLS hit song “It’s a Night For Beautiful Girls” it sounded great with the horn section. Wow.

And the songs just kept flowing. Bobby Darin’s “Beyond The Sea” was brilliant. The brass section along with Mike’s cool singing, with the Jewels backing him up, was transcendent to an earlier time and space. So cool.

And that brass section? Well, it was led by saxophonist Stephen LeClare, the man who originally approached Mike a couple of years ago and asked him if he wanted to start a Big band. Mike said “Yes under one condition, it must be a FOOLS Rhythm section. “

And that’s what they ended up with. The Fools (light) with a big Band sound. Stephen stood behind Mike all night and conducted the band like a Keith Lockhart with long gray hair and a beard.

Beside Richie and Joe, drummer Jim Taft pounded the drums during the rockers and was a cool jazz player on the softer numbers. Jim played with the Fools for a couple of years, and he also plays with Danny Klein’s (J Geils) Full House.

Keyboardist Denis Cesare was...dare I say? Tickling the ivories on the swing tunes, and laying down a bed of sound on the rockers. Oh, and he’s also a professor at Berkley. Mike says, they don't hold that against him.

Lee Foley on the sax played some amazing solos. And he even did a flute solo during a Jethro Tull classic “Locomotive Breath”. Another notable standout in that smoking rhythm section, was John Abrahamson on the trumpet. The band was smoking. No scratch that, they were on fire!

To hear classics like Sly and The Family Stone’s “Hot Fun In The Summertime,” and Tom Jones staple tune “It’s Not Unusual,” and the coolest of cool songs “Summer Wind” by Frank Sinatra. The list of classic hits went on and on. And the audience

was just eating it all up. This "Big Swinging Thing" was really something. And it was obvious from the crowd reactions that they were all digging it.

By the time they got to ACDC's "Dirty Deeds" the train that is MGBST was running on pure adrenalin.

And whenever they kicked into "REBEL YELL" we were all converts. Then...they belted out Tina Turner's "The BEST!" And everyone in the audience was singing and smiling.

All in all, this show and this concept, had something for everyone.

Mike Girard's BIG SWINGING THING, just might be the BEST THING you see and hear this year.

See them at the BLUE OCEAN in Salisbury Beach on July 8th, 2016. But hurry, tickets are going fast.

And for a very good reason (Just see above).





