

Jammin' with the Sultan

Act: Mark Knopfler

Venue: NEC Arena, Birmingham UK

Date: 04 June 05

Review by: Moody Blue

Mark Knopfler



I have been hooked on rock concerts ever since I moved to the US, catching such diverse acts as Aerosmith, America. And Men at Work However, I had never been able to see my hero Mark Knopfler in action in all of my 8 years in the country. He had only toured once, to support his album, "The Ragpicker's Dream". On that tour, he did not have any stops in Florida where I live, so I passed on that opportunity. Which is why when I noticed that Mr. Knopfler was going on the "Shangri-La" tour this year, I made the resolution to see him in concert, no matter how far I had to fly to make it. And it all fell into place when I was scheduled to be in Birmingham, UK, on work-related travel, where he was performing on the 4th of June.

The show was at the NEC Arena in Birmingham, a venue capable of packing upto 10,000 people, I assumed. And it was nearly packed for the concert.. not surprisingly, since Mark Knopfler has been one of Britain's favorite home grown musicians. However, the cabbie that took me and my brother to the arena didn't know who Mark Knopfler was. He must have been one of them at the Destiny's Child concert at the same venue a couple of days before. Obviously times had changed and the new generation in even the UK hadn't been touched by the magical Knopfler musical persona. Too bad for them.

Knopfler started to the packed house with “Why Aye Man” from the “Ragpicker’s Dream”, the title of which sounds rustic, but the music was as rocking as any of the Dire Straits oeuvre. Though as a later work of his it is not one of my favorites, it was almost a transcendental experience for me to feel the power of the notes emanating from his guitar directly into my auditory senses for the first time. From there he moved on to “Walk of Life”, a big Dire Straits hit that was performed with consummate ease. And then came “Sailing to Philadelphia”, his duet with the silken voiced James Taylor on the record, but without him on stage, a tour de force nonetheless.

After another new song that I couldn’t recognize, came Straits’ unmistakable signature tune, “Sultans of Swing”. As a diehard Dire Straits fan, this song has been a staple on my playlists and I have all the different recorded versions of it from the studio version to the one on the live record, Alchemy. The one he played most closely resembled the version played at “Live Aid”, my personal favorite. It was fabulously done. Knopfler did forget the words at one point and made “Guitar George” “save it up for Friday Night” when he should have “Gotten up under the lights to play his thing”, but who cared? Having labored through the difficult notes of the second guitar solo thousands of times in my life, it was a treat to watch the maestro make it look like a walk in the park. It was like getting a personal lesson from him.

Romeo and Juliet was the next song that caught my attention, with Knopfler quickly switching guitars mid-song from the acoustic one that he played the initial

solo with to an electric that produced the notes of the concluding solo. The concert continued along the same lines, with Knopfler speckling some of his old Dire Straits fare with his lesser known solo offerings, mostly from the 90s. Then came “Telegraph Road”.

I first got acquainted with the music of Straits with the album “Love Over Gold” on which “Telegraph Road” is the first of two cuts on Side A. Though I was awestruck by the entire album, over the years I have come to form the opinion that “Telegraph Road” is nothing less than the equivalent of a modern rock symphony. This rendition only underscored my theory. From the resonating first note on the guitar to the blistering heat of the crescendo, this one can stand on its own by the other progressive rock masterpiece, “Bohemian Rhapsody”, without a doubt... and maybe, just maybe, could make Beethoven roll over as well.

As a guitar player myself, I have been a fan of both Eric Clapton and Mark Knopfler ever since I started seriously practicing the religion of the six string, however this concert was an affirmation of why, though according to popular legend, Clapton is God, that to me, Knopfler will always be “THE God”. Clapton can roll out of bed and weave a solo that lasts until eternity without missing a note and make it sound effortlessly clean, but Knopfler can do pretty much the same thing and also make each note seem wondrously alive. A Clapton solo, to me, seems like experiencing a hallucinogenic high in a smoky bar, but on the other hand, a Knopfler one is like a white water rafting trip down the Colorado, with patches of serene and pastoral notes

interspersed with the roller-coaster effects of lightning fast licks, all in the space of a 5 minute record cut...okay 7 minutes. While Clapton seems content for the most part to confine himself to the three corners of the Blues Chord Triangle, Knopfler takes you on something like a journey to the edge of the galaxy and back, traversing styles from plain old boogie-rock to rockabilly to progressive rock and even Latin (of late).

The concert continued in Knopfler's laid back style, with him sitting down for a tea-break with his backup guitarist, an accomplished performer himself. The jokes about the "tea breaks" brought an element of levity to the event. The sit-down session featured mostly works from the 90s to later, mostly slower and traditional influenced work. But at the end of it, the players stood up again and Knopfler announced that they were gonna play some more "rock 'n' roll"...a stint that featured some more rocking cuts such as "Boom Like that" from

Shangri-La. "Boom.." rocked harder than on the album.

After about 100 minutes of high-quality performance, the players left the stage, resulting in loud stomping of feet on the wooden floors by the audience. And quite predictably, the master returned for an encore, performing some of his most familiar works, from "Brothers in Arms", "Money for Nothing" and "So far away", finally ending with the cult favorite, the theme from the movie "Local Hero" .. all done flawlessly.. Brothers in Arms featured the more evolved version of the solo that has been heard before on other live performances, in which Knopfler's fingers explore the scales to produce a swirling, almost dizzying effect.

The foot-stomping continued for more time, however to no avail this time. The two hours of Nirvana had come to an end, and I returned, of course, with a souvenir T-shirt to mark the moment in time.