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Jazz fest review: Steven Wilson goes for art and his audience follows



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Published on: June 28, 2015 | Last Updated: June 28, 2015 9:13 AM EDT



MONTREAL, QUE.: JUNE 27, 2015 -- English musician Steven Wilson performs at the Metropolis for the Montreal International Jazz Festival at Place des Arts in Montreal on Saturday, June 27, 2015. Wilson is touring promoting his most recent album *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (Dario Ayala / Montreal Gazette)

DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Near the end of his eye-searing, mind-frying sound-and-vision triumph at Metropolis on Saturday, Steven Wilson (<http://stevenwilsonhq.com/>) acknowledged his Montreal host when he introduced the sinister, genre-busting instrumental *Sectarian*: “We thought we’d better do something a bit jazzy — but we’ve metalled it up.”

Wilson’s art rock belongs at the Montreal International Jazz Festival because of its function, if not its form: very little is off-limits to the English conceptualist. His work with Porcupine Tree — the most familiar of his many collaborations and alter egos — fused progressive rock, metal and psychedelia into a strong

identity, but the further Wilson gets into his solo career, the more outlets he finds for his insatiable musical curiosity.

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The first proper song in Saturday's nearly 2 ½-hour set contained more ideas than some acts can manage in a full show. After a hypnotic scene-setting projection on the stage-length screen — a voyeuristic look upon anonymous apartment windows that summarized the urban isolation explored in the new album, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* — and the lyrical piano intro *First Regret*, 3 Years Older journeyed from staccato guitar heroics to serene harmonies to a strident organ workout and back again.

Right away, one could sense more confidence in Wilson's bandleading than on previous solo visits. A good deal of that confidence came in stepping back and letting his virtuosos shine. Following a prolonged ovation for the tightrope-walking instrumental showcase *Regret #9*, Wilson said: "As I'm sure you've realized, I am by far the worst musician on stage tonight." He sold himself short, of course, but keyboardist Adam Holzman, bassist Nick Beggs, drummer Craig Blundell and guitarist Dave Kilminster regularly left audience members clutching their foreheads and staring agape.



It's a tribute to Wilson's long leash and firm vision that the solos and on-a-dime interplay expanded the borders of his compositions without stealing the spotlight from the songcraft. In one of several entertainingly dogmatic speeches, Wilson spoke of how budding guitarists need to practise acoustic guitar before going on shredding sprees, so that they can learn to touch the heart before they touch the mind. (He also spoke of how he has a signature acoustic guitar for sale; the pitch could have been more subtle.) He clearly took his own advice in guiding his musicians.

For all the fireworks, some of the standouts went straight for the heart. Hand. Cannot. Erase.'s title track found hope and warmth in a direct pop hook. The climactic Happy Returns was a wrenching portrait of emotional connection denied by fate.

Best of all was the complex redemptive arc and deep ache of Routine, prefaced by another of Wilson's jovial sermons. His superficially prosaic "are you having a good time?" got the expected response in the sold-out room. Then: "Why? Why are you having a good time? Because this music is miserable."

After proudly stating that "I don't do happy" and preaching the healing, unifying power of melancholia, he mentioned that his

manager categorized Routine as “the most miserable song I have ever written ... so this should also be one of the most uplifting.”



MONTREAL, QUE.: JUNE 27, 2015 — English musician Steven Wilson, centre, performs at the Metropolis for the Montreal International Jazz Festival at Place des Arts in Montreal on Saturday, June 27, 2015. Wilson is touring promoting his most recent album *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (Dario Ayala / Montreal Gazette) *DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Evolving from quiet torment to cathartic release, accompanied by heart-rending stop-motion animation of a woman denying her own mourning, it was the kind of performance that would normally be reserved for a grand finale. Instead, it was slotted early in the set — a signifier both that Wilson isn’t wanting for showstoppers, and that the progression of the new album was being echoed on stage.

With 10 of its 11 tracks performed, in sequence (with a few detours), *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* was more than just the backbone of Saturday’s show. If the size of the room wasn’t enough of a sign that Wilson’s solo work has emerged from the shadow of Porcupine Tree, the new songs were greeted with as much enthusiasm as the scattered dips into the back catalogue.

The two delegates from Porcupine Tree’s songbook were almost incidental. Lazarus’s nostalgic glow was of a piece with *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*’s bittersweet *Perfect Life*, and *Sleep Together*’s

ferocious metallic surge was echoed in the industrial menace of Index and portions of Sectarian (whose surreal hellfire visuals alone justified the elaborate screen).

As Wilson alluded to in an interview with the Montreal Gazette (<http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/music/jazz-fest-steven-wilson-the-complete-conversation>), he is in the enviable position of having an audience that expects him to create art, not just mere entertainment. He can explore the vintage prog of The Watchmaker from behind a gauze veil, he can proudly offer new music at the expense of a deep catalogue, and no explanation is requested. And as he beamed at his bandmates and signalled quick changes with a flourish, it was clear that art and entertainment overlapped for Wilson himself on Saturday.

Steven Wilson performs again Sunday, June 28 at 8:30 p.m. at Metropolis, 59 Ste-Catherine St. E., as part of the Montreal International Jazz Festival. Tickets cost \$42 to \$67.20 via montrealjazzfest.com (<http://www.montrealjazzfest.com/program/concerts-search.aspx?recherche=steven%20wilson>) or ticketmaster.ca.

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