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The Best Concerts of 2011

Article MUSIC

By Jim Fusilli



Thom Yorke of Radiohead. dapd

Despite my stash of scribble-filled notebooks, I've lost count of how many bands I saw in 2011 – most likely the result of running around at industry events like South by Southwest in Austin and CMJ in New York, as well as major festivals like Coachella in Indio, CA; Ultra Music in Miami; and Lollapalooza in Chicago, where you see scores of musicians in a blur over a long weekend. But a few events stand out; they would have in any year. Here's a list of my half-dozen favorite sets and concerts of 2011. I've included links to fan videos on YouTube so we can share the experience.

Patti Smith, Feb.2, Carnegie Hall: There were several fine performances at an evening that celebrated the music of Neil Young – DeVotchKa brought a Gypsy flair to “Only Love Can Break Your Heart” while J Mascis’s reading of “Cortez the Killer” soared and

seared. Toward the end of the show, Smith appeared on stage accompanied only by her daughter Jesse on piano to sing Young's "It's a Dream," a tender song about how life, despite its beauty, moves inexorably to its end. Perhaps Smith is thinking of her late husband, and Jesse's father, Fred "Sonic" Smith and other lost loved ones when she loses her place in the lyric. Jesse continues to play until her mother is ready to resume, adding poignancy to an already fragile moment. (Audio only)

Nik Bärtsch's Ronin, March 1, (Le) Poisson Rouge, New York: I've loved the recordings by Bärtsch's Ronin, a Zurich-based combo that places his piano at the center of precise, almost sterile jazz-funk that lingers obsessively on relentlessly repeated riffs that become hypnotic as the songs unwind. But I've never seen his group live. On this night, everything works: Drummer Kasper Rast and percussionist Andi Pupato toy with time and find all sorts of spaces to add unexpected accents. Bärtsch remains the calm at the music's center, but the drummers try to knock him to the edge of chaos. He never falters.

Anna Calvi, June 7, the Troubadour, Los Angeles: After learning that Brian Eno called her "the biggest thing since Patti Smith," I listen to, and am knocked out by, Anna Calvi's debut album and her live "Attic Sessions" videos posted online. Now it's time to see her in concert. She plays this small venue with her band, which consists of two percussionists. It's a bravura performance as her big voice and electric guitar fill the room. Calvi embraces melodrama and knows how to drive a song to its crescendo and bring the audience along with it. It's the kind of show not only delivers on her promise, but also hints at what she may become.

Radiohead, Sept. 28, Roseland Ballroom, New York: A concert so dazzling I'm still not sure I'd taken it all in. The group all but abandons the standard rock-concert format and plays its singular blend of rock and electronica as if its members were in the thrall of improvisational bliss. With two drummers – newcomer Clive Deamer joins Phil Selway behind the kits – the percussion swirls. But it isn't only the drummers who swing and clack: At times, every musician onstage is making percussive sounds on synths and guitars. (How does Thom Yorke find his tone amid music that lacks a melodic platform?) Bassist Colin Greenwood turns in a memorable performance and the guitarists Jonny Greenwood and Ed O'Brien offer thick waves of sound but nary a solo, save a few bars for color. Extraordinary night.

Björk, Oct. 25, Harpa Concert Hall, Reykjavik: I travel to Iceland to spend a day in the studio with Sigur Rós and am invited to see Björk in the round at a venue that holds about 850 people. Better yet, I'm in the front row. The music is phenomenal: Using some of the invented instruments she and her team developed for her new album "Biophilia," she energizes compositions new and old with crackling Tesla coils, an electronic pipe organ, programmed pendulums and harpsichord as well as a battery of synthesized swooshes and pulses. A choir of 24 young women adds power and depth to the vocals – and joy to the experience as they dance gleefully in long robes and barefeet as the sounds swirl. At the center is Björk, a commanding performer in absolute control of what seems an uncontrollable environment. At one point, she sings alone on the stage

accompanied by only the sound of a pipa coming from an iPad. Later, the entire ensemble returns for an explosive finale. (Audio only; recorded three nights earlier.)

Feist, Nov. 2, BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, Brooklyn: On her album “Metals,” Leslie Feist seemed to walk away from her pop past. Here, she confirms she had. Not a single song from previous albums is delivered with its familiar arrangement, and she declines to perform her massive hit “1 2 3 4.” Instead she rips into her new material and brings its sound and attitude to her older tunes. Her band excels as does Mountain Men, a trio that provides backing vocals. But Feist, whose voice is as vivid and affecting live as it is in the studio, is the alluring attraction, both coy and confident in this thrilling show. In step with her approach to rock and pop, the audience loves her. By the time, she revives an old Nina Simone tune as “Sea Lion Woman,” it seems half the crowd has joined her onstage.

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