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Suzanne Vega, meet Willie Nelson

SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

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OK, it didn't happen this way.

But it was fun imagining driving New York singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega and her "spookyghost" guitarist, the acclaimed Gerry Leonard, out to the dark edges of Highway 16 to John T. Floore Country Store to see Willie Nelson after their own impressive concert at Charline McCombs Empire Theatre on Friday.

Nelson and his band played a sold-out show at their favorite, most legendary honky tonks Friday.

Vega and Leonard would have loved it – and there was time to make it because Nelson didn't hit the stage until 10:30 p.m. -- but they would've caught a somewhat subdued performance from Nelson, especially for this setting.

There were a couple of factors at play that had nothing to do with the smiling, pigtailed star of the show.

First, anyone expecting to two-step in the crowd while Nelson played or get close to the stage (as is usually the case at Floore when he's there) were likely taken aback by the reserved seating that took over the entire area in front of the stage.

Leave that to Lyle Lovett. Willie Nelson, at his best, is not a recital act.

Then, there was the matter of the audio mix, which was unusually tame. Nelson's signature chromatic ascending licks up the neck of his battered Martin guitar and those slurred, vibrato-flavored notes were buried in the mix.

The vibe was way too polite. Had Vega and Leonard ventured out to the Helotes landmark, they probably wouldn't have noticed. But plenty in this audience of 2,500 were missing the wooly old days.

Still, what's not to love about seeing Nelson, now 81, singing "Good Hearted Woman," "Crazy," "If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time," "On the Road Again," "Night Life," "Me and Paul," "You Were Always on My Mind," "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground," "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys," "Hey, Good Lookin,'" "Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" and "I Saw the Light."

Earlier in the night at the Empire Theatre, and presented by Arts San Antonio, Vega delivered one of the best concerts of the year – charming, lovely, at times delicate, often jarring and always with that exquisite breathy voice and with Leonard's masterful sound-on-sound style that's graced many a David Bowie track.

Vega has never been the rangiest of singers, but she is one of the most rhythmic in phrasing and delivery apart from the melodic structure. The detailed, plaintive vignettes offered syncopation inside the beats of her finger-picked acoustic guitar and Leonard's echoing shimmer.

The duo opened with "Fat Man and Dancing Girl" and "Marlene on the Wall," the former performed with Vega standing center stage without her guitar, the latter with Vega in top hat (think Mick Jagger on the Stones' notorious '72 tour) and strumming open-chords on acoustic.

She could be seductive ("Caramel"), a coffeehouse chanteuse (the new "Fool's Complaint"), hypnotic ("Small Blue Thing"), brilliantly irrepressible (the new "Don't Uncork What You Can't Contain"), a "Little Steven's Underground Garage" fuzz-guitar punk (the new "I Never Wear White"), a reborn "Tommy"-era Pete Townshend (the aptly named "Some Journey") and, of course, the captivating hit maker ("Luka" and "Tom's Diner").

Vega's recent showcases at South By Southwest have always been a delight and her playful performance Friday at the Empire (attended by about 600) was no different, a snapshot of a mature artist creating at an exceptionally high level as evidenced by songs from her latest album, "Tales From the Realm of the Queen of Pentacles."

Download her quick, dig into Leonard's catalog and catch them next time in town. The same is true of Nelson. Do not take the red-headed stranger for granted.

One can only count one's blessings for a night like Friday. But next time, maybe next time: Suzanne Vega, meet Willie Nelson.