



Reviews:

Heartless Bastards perform at Chicago's Metro

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It's truly a shame that Chicago doesn't seem to have the same appetite for roots rock as cities like Milwaukee or Nashville.

Aside from Wilco, who made it big on their experimentalist tendencies rather than their alt-country leanings, there are very few Americana success stories who call this city home, and not many major folk rock figures make their way here often when touring. The last time Brandi Carlile played anything besides a festival set in Chicago was in 2012, a story that starts to sound familiar when you look up the most recent Chicago concerts of groups like Dawes, Shakey Graves (who, to his credit, has a show coming up in a few months), and others in the genre.

That's why, when an opportunity came up for me to see Cincinnati band Heartless Bastards at Metro, I was quick to jump on it despite not counting myself as a major fan of the group beforehand. That's how I found myself in Wrigleyville on a Wednesday night, fighting past baseball drunks to get to the venue and figure out whether it was worth the trek or if I would leave unsatisfied with the sound of Heartless Bastards.

The show started off on a rollicking note with a short opening set from Chicago's own Redgrave, a duo led by Angie Mead, who seems born to front a rock band. Redgrave's sound is a blend of early metal and modern garage rock, combining influences from bands as different as Led Zeppelin and X to form an explosive, if somewhat repetitive, live show.

Redgrave brought the energy level up and set the bar high for the second openers of the night, the Brooklyn-based folk rock group Alberta Cross.

The group's signature sound was more of a direct fit for the type of crowd that would turn up to a Heartless Bastards show, with vocals reminiscent of Ben Bridwell from Band of Horses and song structures which bring fellow New Yorkers The Lone Bellow to mind. However, at times it seemed that Alberta Cross tried too hard to fit a certain folk pop mold with their music and appearance, which might have something to do with the fact that their leader and only permanent member, Peter Ericson Stakee, is of Swedish origin and that the band originally formed in London.

While establishing themselves in a European environment not already saturated with other Americana groups, it seems that Alberta Cross may have chosen emulation over innovation and settled for a relatively deriva-

tive overall sound.

Though the group obviously has talent, no particular songs of their set stood out as something that couldn't be done by another group in the genre. In the end, Redgrave's set was more memorable than Alberta Cross's, though not for lack of talent or energy on the part of either group.

A full hour after the beginning of the music, and two hours past the time that Metro's doors opened for the evening, Heartless Bastards finally came on stage. After a quick greeting, the group made the interesting choice of beginning their show with the title track from 2009's "The Mountain" before five songs in a row from their latest album for Partisan Records, "Restless Ones." Though lead singer Erika Wennerstrom took a little time before her voice truly warmed up, by the end of the first set of tracks she was in full force, one of the most powerful altos in rock music today.

Though it's an odd comparison to make, Wennerstrom's upper register is very similar to that of Foxy Shazam's Eric Nally, getting ever more soulful and concentrated as it rises in pitch without ever getting to the point of showing cracks. Though there were a few moments where Wennerstrom had to be careful around her highest notes (understandable,

since the band has been performing nonstop since the beginning of August), her voice never missed or broke.

The rest of the band was in similarly professional form, with current lead guitarist Mark Nathan stealing the show at points with his impressive ability to shift on a moment's notice between bold solos in the style of Dawes's Taylor Goldsmith and contemplatively complex builds à la Adam Granduciel of The War On Drugs. Though the group's between-song stage presence was somewhat lacking (shown most obviously by some half-hearted "we love Chicago" banter from Wennerstrom that wouldn't have sounded sincere to anyone), their performance more than made up for a lack of personal charisma.

The 17-song set spanned the last four albums from Heartless Bastards, peppering in fan favorites with plenty of material from the latest LP, and I'm sure I would have been in heaven if I was a dedicated fan of the group. Heartless Bastards showed that even at the end of a promotional tour cycle, they can bring great energy and perform compelling versions of their songs in a live environment, and while doing so they made a great case for seeing more roots rock here in Chicago.

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