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Psychedelic Satirist Will Franken on *The Jonah Kit* - Folk Music with Blood in its Veins at the Du Nord

[The Jonah Kit](#) plays [Cafe Du Nord](#) Thursday, Jan. 5 (9pm)

Folk music is a tricky entity in San Francisco. Despite the fact that there's such an enormous glut of folk musicians in the Bay Area--or perhaps, because of it--there's little to be found in terms of originality, legitimate passion, and just plain talent.

Too often, the folkies in this area fall into one of two categories. There are those who weigh their lyrics down with pretentious and embarrassingly overt political messages until discerning listeners begin to feel that they are in the middle of a seminar on leftist politics instead of a folk performance. Then there are the folkies who have honed their delivery into a calculated and smooth, hip swaying, and slightly raspy voice (males) or a throaty warble that leaps octaves like an equestrian show-jumper without any apparent purpose other than to say "Look what I can do!" (females).

On their guitars, they seem to pick a note per minute, dragging out their stylishly tortured mini-epics to upwards of twelve minutes hoping their studied attempt at conveying passion will bely their lack of musical talent.

But Jonah Watchman (and his band, The Jonah Kit) barrel along on the highway of musical innovation, knocking these two camps into ditches on either side, stopping long enough only to switch on a neon sign that reads: "This way to the future of folk." Will they follow? Most likely no. Because Jonah Watchman doesn't use sexuality, self-pity, or politics to sell his music, which are undoubtedly the calling cards of his competition. With a voice like Wild Man Fischer, lyrics like Lou Reed, all served up with a steady rockabilly rhythm, The Jonah Kit has only one overt purpose: to have fun.

Whereas the message musicians want to burden you with thinly veiled references to the war in Iraq or the plight of third-world countries, The Jonah Kit wants nothing more than to shed all these pretentious accoutrements that folk music has gathered over the years like so many barnacles. We're right here at this moment--his music seems to say--we don't want to change the world. We want to change this MOMENT. This moment is stale, it's stagnant, I'm bored to tears--give me the fucking guitar. And for that quiet minority who are likewise disgusted with the endless local parade of musical benefits aimed at "bringing together the community" and "raising social awareness" and other such ego-driven drivel, we applaud vigorously when The Jonah Kit takes the stage and reminds us all that there is something deeper and more spiritually resounding than current events: the human condition. Consider the closing refrain to what is fast becoming The Jonah Kit's signature piece: "I've Got Something In My Eye":

" We've all got something in our eye.
Each in our own way.
Sometimes it lasts for years,
sometimes a few days.
Sometimes it's a blessing.
Sometimes it's a curse.
Some wind up at the altar,
and some end up in a hearse."

And there you have a truly universal theme--one that transcends the whims of politics and current events--the tragicomedy of human existence. Something that those who invoke the trendy lyrical crutches of George Bush and Iraq are incapable of--or simply not interested in--conveying.

And where the current crop of younger folk musicians plead in strained arias over wandering dissonant chords for the audience to sympathize with their tragic heartbreak and their "struggles" of being an "artist" (imagine the entire lyrical catalog of Bob Seger, but less Detroit) Jonah Watchman directs his lyrical focus outwards. Not to the lofty concepts of war or capitalism, but to slice-of-life picaresque tales of downtrodden characters. Don't pity me--he says--pity these characters. Pity the sad-sack junkie in his song "Something In Me

Takes To Damnation" who proclaims proudly, yet ironically that he's ". . .got hookups in Truckee!"

When Jonah Watchman does step outside of his characters, which he frequently does in his concluding verses--he doesn't turn the attention to himself. Instead, he addresses us, the audience. With verbal dexterity, he makes the connection we've all been waiting for: We're all in this together. We've ALL got something in our eye.

And if you can't--or won't--make this thematic leap with him, it doesn't really matter in the long run. Because the music is good. It's aggressive and economical. And it's a reason for those barroom customers who might get up and go out for a cigarette whenever the latest clone of Ani DiFranco or Dave Matthews takes the stage for yet another ten-minute long uninspired ballad of self-indulgent self-pity to sit back and have another beer.

Don't leave. The real show is just getting started.