

Shaking and Stirring a Polyrhythmic, One-World Cocktail (*The New York Times*)

AUTHOR UNKNOWN FEBRUARY 17, 2006

Every Hollywood musical of the 1930's seemed to have a band like Pink Martini: a suave salon orchestra with a singer in a formal dress, ready to take up a torch song, tinkle through a light-classical staple or pick up some south-of-the-border rhythms. That's what Pink Martini did in its sold-out concert on Wednesday night at Town Hall. But it's not a Hollywood confection or just a nostalgic throwback.

The 12-member Pink Martini hails from Portland, Ore., and over the last decade it has sold hundreds of thousands of its two self-released albums, 1997's "Sympathique" and 2004's "Hang On Little Tomato" (both on the Heinz label) in Europe and the United States. "Sympathique" was a platinum single in France, a gold one in Greece. The group relies largely on songs by its singer, China Forbes, and pianist, Thomas Lauderdale, though its repertory includes songs from foreign movies and one from Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler. Its lyrics can be in any language from Portuguese to Croatian to Japanese, and it doesn't pretend to come from any past era. One song, about a drunken Lower East Side party, was modern enough to mention a skinhead.

The polyglot songs hint at a one-world spirit that implies we're all in this boîte together. But Pink Martini doesn't stress any subtext. Genial and eager to entertain, it delivers a knowing sophistication backed by skillful arrangements. In its two sets, Pink Martini played arrangements of Ravel's "Bolero" and Lecuona's "Malagueña," along with a Japanese pop hit from the 1960's, a Carmen Miranda vehicle and a song from a 1950 Italian film, "Anna." Its own songs are just as peripatetic. The group dipped into Brazilian and Cuban rhythms, soft-rock and old-fashioned swing; one, "Dosvedanya Mio Bombino," switched between evocations of Russia and Italy.

A string section (including a cellist from the Chicago Symphony) and a harpist provided chamber-music delicacy; a percussion section kicked up sambas and rumbas, and a trumpet and guitar added jazzy solos. Mr. Lauderdale played his piano filigrees with the swooping gestures of Liberace. And Ms. Forbes is an unpretentious, pitch-perfect chanteuse who can be breathy and girlish or sultry. She's ideal for songs that usually revolve around old-fashioned romance; she tempers heartbreak with savoir-faire.

The most pointed song in the set was the quietest: the Brecht-Eisler "To a Little Radio," a surreal vision of life during wartime, ending, "Oh please do not fall silent suddenly," followed by an ominous silence. For a moment, the party was hushed, but it immediately resumed with a swirling, harp-infused version of the Ary Barroso standard "Brasil," returning to the sanctuary of elegant romance.

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