

**Legends share the stage at JazzFest:
Béla Fleck & The Flecktones and
John Scofield's Combo 66 (June 28)**

by Rory O'Donoghue



“I wouldn’t be here without this man,” pianist/harmonica player Howard Levy said, gesturing to Béla Fleck. “I wouldn’t be here without me either,” Fleck retorted.

With bassist Victor Wooten and percussionist and “drumitarist” Roy “Future Man” Wooten, they form the “extraordinary initial lineup” of Béla Fleck & The Flecktones. The quartet closed the night on June 28 at the

KeyBank State Theatre, a Tri-C JazzFest double-feature that opened with John Scofield’s Combo 66. It was an evening of legends, only getting better with age.

Scofield has a huge body of work spanning bebop, jazz fusion, blues, soul, and acid jazz, and he’s played with Miles Davis, Joe Henderson, Charles Mingus, and many other notable acts. In 2018, the guitarist/composer endeavored to commemorate his 66th year with twelve original compositions and a new swing group, and Combo 66 was born to record and tour the new music. The group is intergenerational — Scofield’s long-time collaborator Bill Stewart heads up the drums, while emerging talent Gerald Clayton takes the keys and Vincente Archer completes the quartet on bass.

Combo 66 felt timeless — the music was fresh yet familiar, and it sounded like the new group has been together forever. Scofield himself was captivating, guitar singing and eyes closed for most of the night. Clayton alternated between piano and B3, both of which were heavily featured throughout the compositions. His playing was cool, cascading through different modes with a tasteful flair. Archer’s bass lines were rock

solid, moving along neatly. Stewart and Scofield connected deeply, sharing the same energy (and a smile or two) throughout the music and keeping an airtight drive.

*“There’s a picture that I carry
One we made some time ago
If they ask who’s in the picture with me
I say just a girl, I used to know”*

Scofield recited these lines to introduce George Jones’ *A Girl I Used To Know*. He said the words plainly, but wrapped in tenderness, and their arrangement unfolded with the same care. He spoke and played directly from the heart.



Every possible thing to say about Béla Fleck & The Flecktones should already have been said over their groundbreaking 30-year career, but they keep the conversation alive by continuously reinventing themselves. With Levy’s return to the ensemble in 2011, the group released *Rocket Science* to widespread critical acclaim, with [one critic](#) saying that the album “fires on all cylinders, and comes off as a fresh and exciting reintroduction to a newly energized Flecktones.”

Fleck’s banjo playing was, as always, stupendous. His scintillating control and boundless technique are matched only by his humorous ear, which he showed off by inviting Scofield back to the stage to trade fours. The two volleyed back and forth as if it was child’s play, quoting and building upon each other. Levy cooked the groove along on harmonica, indulging in a few wailing solos that were sheer brilliance.

Victor Wooten delivered a showstopping solo during the encore, whipping his bass around his neck by its strap only to dive right back into blistering runs. His brother Roy primarily played the “drumitar,” a hand-crafted MIDI controller he invented that is used as a percussion instrument. With the expanded palette of drum noises the instrument affords, the whole set bounded along with crisp, exciting energy. Nearly a decade after their most recent album, the quartet has still got the stuff.

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