

LATIN AMERICA BENEFIT

Slick, Kantner Fire Up Crowd

788C
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Grace Slick looked like a frightened schoolgirl backstage at the Great American Music Hall.

The veteran professional, who sang for half a million people at Woodstock, was worried about singing a solo, accompanying herself on piano for the first time in her career, before a mere 500 fans gathered for a sold-out benefit Thursday at the O'Farrell Street club.

She also worried about the marquee, where she was billed as the headliner. "I'm only going to do about five songs," she said.

"Oh yeah, I'm big in this town," she joked when someone said she had been responsible for selling out the show. "The last time the Starship played here, you could have thrown a bowl across the room and not hit anyone."

Weighing Options

Of course, Slick is no longer with the Starship. While she weighs various possible futures, including a reunion with some of her old Jefferson Airplane colleagues, she agreed to appear in the fund-raiser for a Central American relief agency arranged by her former beau and musical collaborator, Paul Kantner.

The program included popular nouveau folksters Billy Bragg from England and Michelle Shocked from east Texas. Also on the bill was Mancotal, a seven-piece folk-derived salsa band from Nicaragua that Kantner ran across during a Central American trip last year. But the fans made it clear that the pairing of Kantner and Slick was the act they came to see.

The duo opened the almost four-hour show with a brief set of Airplane oldies "Volunteers" and "Wooden Ships," along with Kantner's song, "America," before turning the stage over to Mancotal.

Slick had performed acoustically with Kantner a couple of times since leaving the Starship earlier this year. But it was that solo debut on piano, one lousy tune, that made her nervous.

Kantner, who hosted the evening and introduced all the acts, returned for his second set with "Mar-iel" and then Slick took the keyboard for her dreaded moment. She sang a new original called "Common Market Madrigal," a flowing, melodic piece, lyrically tripping through Europe ("The castles on the Rhine don't mind the time") and only the most discerning eye could have detected her anxiety.

"That's the first time I've ever



Michelle Shocked sang whimsical lyrics: 'I'm going to be your sweet potato, yes I yam'

done that," she confessed to the crowd as soon as she finished. "And the last time."

Standing Ovation

With that, Kantner began strumming some familiar chords on guitar, and she lit into "White Rabbit," the Jefferson Airplane hit. For once the carefully drawn lyrics came out clean and clear, without a rock band booming behind her, and the audience exploded into a standing ovation as she finished with the lines "feed your head."

Michelle Shocked, who recently made her major record label debut, turned out to be a rare treasure. Stick skinny in black, a bean pole behind a big acoustic guitar, she beamed her way through a selection of witty, whimsical songs that read as offhandedly as a diary.

Billy Bragg is a British firebrand who opened his set with a moving and risky version of Sam Cooke's "A Change Gonna Come," pulling the arching gospel melody into a folk vein and making it come alive in his hands. Virtually every song he sang was introduced in a political context, be it an angry denunciation of his country's press laws or a sympathetic portrait of union miners.

The entire ensemble returned for a rip-roaring three-song jam session based around Nicaraguan songs that Mancotal fired up. Slick, relaxed and confident now with her crisis passed, leaned into the songs, curling a kind of Spanish yodel around on one song, shouting "banana . . . banana."

"It worked," Kantner exclaimed about the benefit. "Those things haven't worked in at least 10 years, but that was like the Fillmore in the '60s."