

Ted Lucas

Detroit musician

Karen Knorp

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Ted Lucas knows exactly where he wants to be in relation to his art: “You can’t b.s. on an instrument—it’s impossible! Everything that’s there just comes out. What I got to do is just get my head together enough so that when I play I can just be what I am—Hey! What a groovy title for a song! ‘I Wanna Be What I Am!’ Where’s a pencil?”

Of course, knowing where it’s at, and getting there, are two different things, but I’d say Ted has a good head start.

First of all, he is surely this city’s most accomplished musician. Appearing at the Chessmate “at Morey’s whim,” Ted demonstrates in his one-man show enough versatility and ability for three musicians.

He plays, expertly, the guitar, mouth harp, auto harp, guitar-zither, “or mandolin-harp, depending on which manual you get,” the dobro (steel body guitar) and sitar.

Add to this Ted’s grotesquely soft and well-trained voice, and you’ve got an evening’s entertainment worth even the Chessmate’s outrageous prices.

Those of you familiar with Detroit’s music scene will remember Ted as the best part of the original Spikedrivers, and later in duet with Dick Keelan as the Misty Wizards. On his own now, his musical sophistication is unsurpassed.

His music, almost entirely of his own composition, is completely improvisational, and spans several forms, from American Blues to the classical Indian raga.

It is this very sophistication, however, which tends sometimes to carry him above his audience into the realm of the purely esoteric. Even then, all is not lost, for his love of music and command of his instruments is so obvious that he is able to reach out through sheer force of this fascination with his art.

Lucas is not a man to be hurried or swayed by the tastes of his audience. It takes him the better part of an hour to tune all his instruments, and when he’s finally through pattering and arranging his boxes, mats, oils, incense and other paraphernalia, the stage looks like a Woodward Avenue pawn shop. Even then, he tunes, fiddles and adjusts through several false starts each time he begins a new number.

If he expects tolerance from his audience, he is not as ready to forgive them their idiosyncrasies. During a performance, he is apt to ask them to refrain from lighting cigarettes during a number. “Zippo lighters remind me of switchblades, you know, in those old movies—zap! Right in the middle of a chord progression, I get associations and images of gang wars and weapons,” he says.

His style is gentle and extremely subtle. His theme is love.

Ted has not been a single act for a long enough time to be completely settled in the role. There are times when he seems to be demonstrating rather than interpreting his music. There are times when one wishes for more volume and welcomes the switch to the steel-body dobro, “the loudest guitar ever made.” Strangely, he seems less at home now with his guitar than with any of the other instruments.

But, just when you’re likely to shrug your shoulders and admit that it’s all just too much, he turns his back, lights a new stick of incense, removes both shoes and one sock, arranges himself upon an Indian mat and takes up his sitar.

Someone has to wake up Morey to turn on the yellow light, and Ted has to tune a little finer, but when he starts to play, it's finally worth it. Then, the strange gaps in his music begin to fill in.

The not-Indian, not-classical, not-blues, not-pop music falls into the appropriate form and begins to reach the audience. As you watch, there are times when his hands move so quickly, when his head and body vibrate in such quick sympathy that he appears as if under a strobe light, or like a cut from an old-time movie.

Perhaps it is the raga itself which closes the gap. Its strict form in three movements provides within its structure something which Lucas himself often neglects to give the listener—a touchstone, a statement of the mood and theme about to be explored.

I am well aware that Ted could find the same faults with this review that the reviewer finds with his act. Nevertheless, I see a lot of Ted Lucas in his music, where sometimes I wish I could see more of myself in it.

Then again, and all picayune criticism aside, when he ever gets his head entirely together, he'll be one hell of a musician.

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