



THE RECORD

WITH ANN POWERS

Widespread Panic In Tuscaloosa, Ala.: An Experiment In Listening

by ANN POWERS



Friday night I went dancing. The occasion was a [Widespread Panic](#) show at my local amphitheater. My plan was to inch into a scene, throw some wit at it, observe those occupying it and see if I could relate. I meant to conduct an abbreviated version of [an experiment Carrie Brownstein pursued on her NPR Music blog Monitor Mix when she spent a week trying to appreciate Vermont's wacky warriors, Phish](#).

Instead, I found myself just giving over to the physical experience and having fun. My instinct, once the music started, was to move.

I feel a little weird about that. It's de rigeur for journalists to approach jam bands and their followers as exotic herds (or [H.O.R.D.E.S.](#), I guess) of ungroomed creatures who might be appreciated from afar, but should never be embraced with abandon. I've written plenty of articles myself taking that "participant observer" approach to the milieu.

I dutifully came early, chatted with Widespread's singer and lyricist John "JB" Bell about his take on Southern improvisational rock and talked to a fan or two about what had drawn them there. In the end, though, I realized that none of this intellectualizing really mattered. As a critic, in this space, I was irrelevant.

"I think a lot of folks do want to go out and have their expectations met," Bell had said to me before the show. "That really isn't the way we operate."

Maybe my anthropological schtick was doomed from the start. I'd [already seen](#) Widespread Panic (as well as most other leading jam bands, from the [String Cheese Incident](#) to the Disco Biscuits) so this wasn't really foreign territory. But a show in Alabama instead of New York would be different, I thought. This is practically home for these Georgia boys. And one thing I know is that many of the kids in my town love Widespread Panic more intensely than they love anything other than the [Crimson Tide](#).

I wondered what would be different about seeing this band in its native environment. Would I survive plunging into a sea of frat boys wasted out of their minds and seeking the immediate fulfillment of their baser desires (which is pretty much how Widespread Panic haters down here talk about Widespread Panic fans)? Would it be as scary as the rum-fueled [Kenny Chesney show](#) I attended (in L.A., of all places) in 2006?

Well, I'm sorry to disappoint. I did not experience mayhem or even a serious bacchanal. Instead, I enjoyed being with a few thousand people being happily directed into a peaceful, loving place by a consistent groove.

"When folks see us for the first time it's like, 'I didn't know it was like that,'" Bell had told me. "They expect a bunch of noodlin' around, folks learning how to play their instruments. Which, we were, when we were 20 years old. But, no, it's a rock and roll band!"

I understand that my descriptives are more hippie-ish than Bell's. Peaceful? Loving? The sound of Widespread Panic actually deserves harder language than that. Over 25 years, the group has developed a fairly heavy approach to the improvisational rock it's made its métier. I heard traces of [Led Zeppelin](#) and King Crimson in its mix, along with plenty of New Orleans influences like the Neville Brothers and [Dr. John](#) and, of course, some deep-fried [Duane, Dickey and Greg](#).

Bell readily acknowledges the Allman Brothers influence, along with that of jazz greats like [Miles Davis](#) and [John Coltrane](#). In such music, he says, "You see that there's a departure from the expected. You had to go into Adventureland to feed your soul. There were a lot of other bands back in the day, even that were more country influenced, like Marshall Tucker and the Outlaws. Even Lynyrd Skynyrd. A lot of the stuff that was going down in the South was incorporating improvisation."

His words reflect an insight I did glean from catching Widespread Panic at a Southern venue: pretty much anything that touches down here grounds itself in rhythm — whether it's Atlanta hip-hop or New Orleans bounce, Fat Possum-style Mississippi blues or even the indie scene that rose up parallel to Widespread Panic, led by a band with a jumpy frontman named Michael Stipe.

Bell remembers crossing paths with [R.E.M.](#) in the early 1980s Athens, Ga., scene. "We were a more traditional rock and roll set-up," he says. "We didn't really have a mystique. The clothes that we went to paint houses in were the clothes we played music in. So we were kind of like the black sheep of the Athens music scene. Alternative rock was really taking root as the way to approach things, and we were doing what we did. But behind closed doors, at parties, we were all normal guys with each other."

Bell also mentioned [The B-52's](#) and [Pylon](#) as early Athens compatriots — both great bands for dancing. But it was the jam scene that really evolved to stress a body connection to the music. And Widespread Panic, because of the Southern connection, might be the grooviest of all.

I know all jam band music is supposed to be danceable. I've spun around at Phish shows and hopped up and down to Yonder Mountain String Band (who opened Friday's show). It's not the same thing. With an ace Latin-style percussionist in Domingo "Sunny" Ortiz and a [Meters](#)-loving keyboardist in John Hermann, Widespread Panic goes for the hips, even when its song structures

veer toward progressive rock.

Staying greasy that way has an effect on a crowd. There were definitely tons of clean-cut young guys, Greek or otherwise, in the Widespread Panic pit. I'd expected more tie dye and fewer polo shirts. But this was one of the most courteous, least aggressive rock audiences I've joined. The mandate to dance (and maybe whatever the revelers had consumed besides the tallboys they held aloft) diffused the considerable testosterone in the amphitheater. Big dudes shook their bellies and hugged each other. If someone bumped into me, he apologized. These party animals were almost as nice to each other — not quite, though — as [Prince's](#) fans.

Maybe all the women down front had a certain calming effect. In many years of hearing jam bands and their devotees be vilified, I've rarely heard their female fans discussed. In fact, women make up a large part of this subculture. Around me they hugged their dates and flirted with strangers; but they also danced together in happy little circles, unconcerned about what all those dudes around them were thinking. "Aren't they beautiful?" one blissed-out 20-something in a leather vest and black jeans said to me about the 50-ish guys onstage. She wasn't talking about their boy-band appeal.

I didn't love every minute of my dip into the Widespread Panic stream. Somewhere in the middle, [Jimmy Herring's](#) guitar took over, and while I admire his chops I just don't go for 20-minute solos. And I doubt that what I witnessed would convince my friends who love tighter, more focused fare. "No songs," wrote one of those, an indie rock guitarist, on my Twitter feed. I have to agree, hooks are not a priority here. Three hours of music from this band left me humming nothing.

But my body remembers. When I quizzed one follower who was catching four shows in a row about why he loved Widespread Panic so much, he kept his answer simple: "I love to dance." The friend I brought with me, a professor of Russian history who's often up front at local indie rock shows but also once drove 18 hours to see Widespread Panic, used a fancier word. "It's the mantra," she said of the unnamed, consistent element that runs through the band's meandering shows. She might have been invoking [George Clinton](#), funk's father of all jam music: free your mind. You [know what follows](#) that.