

High class and homegrown

Michel, Lyon, Szabo have the time of their lives and prove they belong on a big stage — even if it was a little backwards

BY ROBERT REID
RECORD STAFF

They were fierce competitors as exuberant teenagers in fledgling bands out to set the music world on fire.

Now, as veteran singer-songwriters more than a decade later, they are comfortable enough in their skins and confident enough in their abilities to openly express mutual respect for one another.

The competitors-turned-admirers are Danny Michel, Shannon Lyon and Rob Szabo, three artists who have beat the odds and carved out viable recording careers.

And however much success they enjoy, or wherever they live, they remain dyed-in-the-denim Kitchener boys.

The trio made history this week when they debuted at Centre in the Square.

They not only sold out last night's originally scheduled Songwriters' Circle, they sold Wednesday's night's show that had to be added on to meet the many requests.

Demand continued after the two sellouts, so the Centre sold a limited number of obstructed-view seats for both concerts, bringing the curtain down on the annual On Stage series in fine fashion.

This marked the first time the Songwriters' Circle featured a full slate of local talent, encouraging the Centre to book another trio of homegrown singer-songwriters for next year's event — Mike Todd, Ben Rollo and Allister Bradley.

It was abundantly clear Wednesday that Michel, Lyon and Szabo were not only enjoying themselves, but were grateful and intent on making the best of the opportunity.

"It's an honour to be here," Michel gushed. "It's a real treat, even to be facing the wrong direction."

His next quip — one with which every singer-songwriter can identify —



Danny Michel (left), Rob Szabo (centre) and Shannon Lyon have travelled to the far corners of the world with their music, but have never come together in a more friendly circle than they did this week to close Centre in the Square's On Stage series.

was the funniest ever uttered in the Songwriters' Circle's eight-year history.

"Now you know what it's like to be on stage playing to an empty room" — a reference to the fact that the performers have their backs to the auditorium while the on stage audience faces the auditorium.

Michel and Szabo both talked about going to concerts at the Centre when they were teenagers dreaming of becoming musicians.

In contrast to yesterday's audience, which consisted primarily of series subscribers, Wednesday's audience represented a different demographic — younger, unabashed fans who were there to cheer on local heroes.

Michel, Lyon and Szabo didn't disappoint. All are incredibly gifted.

Lyon is more easily classified, not because he's less talented, but because he performs within a defined genre — alt-country.

While he has enjoyed success both in Canada and in Europe, especially the Netherlands where he has lived off and on, he would be even better known were he to hang his hat in the Texas alt-country hotbed of Austin.

Michel and Szabo are more difficult to classify. Both are witty and intelligent wordsmiths.

It remains inexplicable why Michel isn't a household name.

His sophisticated, yet accessible,

pop music should be a radio staple — were radio still esthetically relevant. He's also a superb guitarist and a bit of an electronic gizmo wizard.

Szabo has a crystal clear voice of tremendous range. His songs have a refreshing whimsical quality.

The trio exchanged songs about here and there, home and abroad, growing up, life on the road, love and loss.

The two 50-minute sets had a loose, comfortable feel that was charming, even if it meant Szabo being inadvertently passed over in the second set.

More than any previous Songwriters' Circle, the trio jammed, with Michel on slide guitar, Szabo on electric baritone guitar and Lyon on har-

monica and shaker. Michel sat down a couple of times in front of the Centre's new Steinway grand piano.

"I love this gig," Michel enthused.

"It's just like rehearsing in front of 250 people," Szabo added with a wide grin that seldom left his face all night.

Hats off to the Centre for gambling on a lineup of homegrown talent, which reflects the depth of the local songwriting talent pool.

However, it has set the bar extremely high for next year's Circle.

A risk, perhaps.

A challenge, you bet.

A celebration whose time has come, most definitely.

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IT'S A GEE-WHIZ OPENING WEEKEND WITH FANTASTIC FOUR AND NANCY DREW



The Silver Surfer (Doug Jones lacquered in CGI quicksilver) easily handles a U.S. military missile attack.

Fantastic but not too hip

BY KENNETH TURAN

Strange things are happening on planet Earth. A bay in Japan freezes solid. It snows on the Sphinx. All the electricity in Los Angeles turns off just like a light. Some are starting to wonder, a breathless TV journalist intones, if the hand of God is involved.

Not quite. Place the blame on the hand of Hollywood, always eager to put the planet in peril in the service of yet another superhero sequel, in this case Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer.

Almost alone among comic-book adaptations, the Fantastic Four films, both the eponymous original and this one, manage to be less sophisticated than their original source material. While the comic was hip enough to last for more than 500 issues and nearly 44 years of continuous publication, the movie treatments, both directed by Tim Story, are no one's idea of must-see cinema.

Yet it must be said that it's something of a relief to confront a comic-book movie that is neither hip nor wised up. Earnest, gee-whiz and foursquare, this simple and intentionally inoffensive sequel receives points for being easy to take and scrupulously avoiding obvious sources of irritation.

The new Fantastic Four also features the screen debut of one of the great comic-book figures, an entity iconic enough to rate his name in the title. Yes, it's the Silver Surfer, someone so cool and elegant that he takes the

REVIEW

**Fantastic Four:
Rise of the Silver Surfer**

■ **Starring:** Ioan Gruffudd, Jessica Alba, Chris Evans, Michael Chiklis, Julian McMahon
■ **Director:** Tim Story
■ **PG:** Opens today at Cambridge Centre, Conestoga Mall, Fairway, Gateway Park, Imperial Road.

Four's collective breath away. "Aw," says the Torch, impressed against his will, "That is cool."

Before we learn the Surfer's story, however, we get to reacquire ourselves with the Four: aside from Torch, a.k.a. Johnny Storm (Chris Evans), who can fire up at will, there's his sister Sue (Jessica Alba), able to create force fields and turn herself into Invisible Woman. Her beau Reed Richards (Ioan Gruffudd) can stretch himself into any direction as Mr. Fantastic, and his rock-like pal Ben Grimm (Michael Chiklis) isn't called the Thing for nothing. As those who saw the first film will remember, Sue and Reed are in line to get married. The new Fantastic Four, written by Don Payne and Mark Frost, goes in for some gentle skewering of our celebrity culture as the potential ceremony is turned into the wedding of the century by a shameless (is there any other kind?) media.

It is just about now that the Silver Surfer, he of the buff body and the ability to wreak havoc with "the universe's ambient cosmic energies," appears on the scene. A Zen-like entity of few but always enigmatic words — "All that you know is at an end" is a big sentence for him — the Surfer has the kind of movie-star presence even movie stars dream about.

Gifted with powers other beings can barely imagine, the Surfer seems to want to do nothing on Earth except dig a series of enormous craters. This activity soon attracts the attention of the U.S. army, personified by gruff Gen. Hager (Andre Braugher) and the Four's old nemesis, the ever-resilient Victor Von Doom (Julian McMahon).

The Surfer, his few words voiced by Laurence Fishburne, has the further good fortune to be played, with the aid of a motion-capture suit, by Doug Jones, a marvellous physical actor who was unforgettable as both Pan and the Pale Man in Pan's Labyrinth.

One of the few superhero movies to be legitimately rated PG (for sequences of action violence, some mild language and innuendo,) Fantastic Four: The Rise of the Silver Surfer hinges on whether the Four can dissuade the Surfer from his service to the dread Galactus, a particularly malevolent interstellar force. The outcome is not exactly in doubt, but that's the whole idea, isn't it?

• Los Angeles Times

Retro role fits Roberts like shiny penny loafers

BY CHRISTY LEMIRE

Lindsay's in rehab and Paris is in jail and Britney is posting rambling letters to fans on her website. But teen and 'tween girls still have a wholesome role model to look up to — or rather, see eye-to-eye with — in Nancy Drew.

There's something refreshingly quaint and unexpectedly necessary about the idea of this decades-old girl detective today, and rising actress Emma Roberts makes Nancy an easy character to root for.

And that's a good thing because the immensely likable Roberts (daughter of Eric, niece of Julia) also happens to be the best part of the film, which offers a few laughs here and there but is otherwise contrived, clichéd and stiff.

(Oscar-nominated costume designer Jeffrey Kurland deserves praise for dressing the petite star in an adorably retro array of plaid skirts and sweaters, headbands and penny loafers.)

The target audience for Nancy Drew will probably enjoy it, though, which theoretically is what matters most. Overt references to classics ranging from Rebel Without a Cause to Sunset Boulevard to Chinatown will surely go over their heads, and are likely to draw only the faintest smile of recognition from grown-ups who may have been dragged along to the multiplex. (Bruce Willis and Adam Goldberg make cameos that register a bit more effectively.)

Through it all, Roberts flits and buzzes and shines like a trouper — or, like the Nickelodeon TV star that she is, a seasoned pro at 16 — even when things get more complicated than they should.

While on an extended business trip to Los Angeles with her lawyer father (Tate Donovan), Nancy stumbles upon a mystery in the abandoned Hollywood Hills mansion the two are renting. Even though she promised Dad back in small-town River Heights that she'd stop sleuthing, she can't keep herself from investigating the death of movie star Dehlia Draycott (Laura Harring in flashbacks, harkening to Mulholland Dr.).

Meanwhile, Nancy's prim, perky demeanour makes it difficult for her to fit in at a sanitized version of Hollywood High School, where mean girls Inga and Trish (Daniella Monet and Kelly Vitz) alternately torment her and want to give her a makeover but do nothing to suggest that they're real people. Inga's little brother, Corky (the precocious Josh Flitter), develops a crush on Nancy, though, and becomes her eager partner in crime-solving. (Max Theriot



Emma Roberts is the star of the family-friendly, mystery-adventure Nancy Drew.

REVIEW

Nancy Drew
■ **Starring:** Emma Roberts, Tate Donovan, Barry Bostwick, Laura Elena Harring, Josh Flitter
■ **Director:** Andrew Fleming
■ **PG:** Opens today at Cambridge Centre, Fairview, Frederick, Gateway Park, Imperial Road.

plays the freshly scrubbed would-be boyfriend from her hometown who conveniently shows up in L.A.)

Somewhere in the middle of all this, Nancy finds time to make a million phone calls and knock on a million doors to find the daughter (Rachael Leigh Cook) Dehlia gave up for adoption before her death decades ago, a young mother herself now who's the rightful heir to Dehlia's estate. This rouses the suspicions of a powerful lawyer (Barry Bostwick) who also may be crucial to helping her father's career, as well as the mansion's creepy caretaker (Marshall Bell).

The real mystery: When and where did Nancy Drew learn stunt driving?

• Associated Press