

Alvin Youngblood Hart & Muscle Theory • Chick Hall's Surf Club Bladensburg, Md • Jan. 19, 2006

THE INITIAL STOP on Alvin Youngblood Hart's 2006 tour promoting his latest recording, *Motivational Speaker*, was Chick Hall's Surf Club in a white, black, and Latino blue-collar Washington, D.C., suburb. This venerable nightclub with the surprising name (it's more than 100 miles away from the Atlantic Coast) enjoys a 50-year history, first as a showcase for jazz, then country music, rockabilly, and, since moving to its current location in the 1970s, American roots music. What better venue for a man whose publicity specialists call him the Cosmic American Love Child of Howlin' Wolf and Link Wray?

Just about on time, Hart took the elevated stage with an armload of guitars and the two sidemen ("Hook" Herrera on bass and harp; Rick Shelton on drums) who, together, make up the power trio Hart calls Muscle Theory. The audience, dotted with curious local musicians (the Nighthawks' Mark Wenner among them), took stock of this imposing figure with rope-like dreadlocks and a leather cap pulled low on his forehead. When he tore into his first number, "Big Mama's Door (Might Return)" — a roaring electrified makeover of the title track to his eponymous first release — he unleashed what they'd come to experience: a blend of recast country and cowboy tunes, rock, soul, and original blues that look back while forging ahead.

After a ska-rhythmed original, "Just About To Go," Hart began sampling heavily from *Motivational Speaker* and 2000's *Start With the Soul*. Covers of Doug Sahm's "Lawd, I'm Just a Country Boy in This Great Big Freaky

City" and Buffalo Springfield's "Mr. Soul" were testament to his tastes. Hart's pacing was good, taking the audience from traditional Delta blues ("How Long Before I Change My Clothes") to

from *Motivational Speaker*. He let the song convey his respect for the iconic performer and the pain of his loss.

One might quibble that Hart performs too many covers at the expense



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not-so-traditional rumba ("Manos Arriba") to the hopeful assessment at the heart of the self-penned "My World Is Round."

A memorable moment came deep in the second (and last) set, when Hart spoke to his audience: "I heard the news earlier but didn't want to say anything about him until we were sure. Now we are." Over the crowd's murmurs, he said this next song would be dedicated to Wilson Pickett, who'd passed earlier in the day. That introduced "In My Time of Dying," an inspirational composition

of the impressive body of work he's created. (Why Free's "The Worm"?) The obvious answer is that these songs are important to Hart. If not a human jukebox (Sleepy LaBeef already grabbed that handle), Hart is a free-ranging spirit, guiding listeners through a living museum that mixes extreme authenticity with fresh constructs. The cumulative effect is what stands before us — a vigorous, adventurous, confident, and supremely talented rocking bluesman who has hit his stride.

— M.E. Travaglini