

Voices Carry

The Bobs

CAFFE LENA, MARCH 23

TO UNDERSTAND THE APPEAL OF the Bobs, start with some of the well-known songs covered by this a cappella quartet. "White Room," for example. You treasure Jack Bruce's angst-ridden vocal; you air-guitar along with Clapton.

The Bobs make little effort to reproduce these effects. They re-create them, in the sense that they've come up with something slightly new. Dan Schumacher, new to the Bobs lineup, puts his own manic energy into the vocal solo, and Amy Engelhardt makes with the air guitar licks to accompany her Gibson Firebird-worthy mouth music (saluting Clapton with a nod to "While My Guitar Gently Weeps")—and all this while the others provide rhythm and percussion effects. And not a musical instrument in sight.

Just as there are fervent admirers of such things as polka and Dixieland, so too does a cappella singing have its adherents. But the range of close-harmony singing is vast, running from Motown to Monteverdi and including gospel singing and barbershop-quartet harmonies, both of which were celebrated in the Bobs' original song "A Cappella Choir in the Sky." Therein you learn that heaven itself is an a cappella festival, overseen by He who "blows the pitch/In our narrow market niche."

But back to covers. A song like the Coasters' "Searchin'" is an obvious match for the Bobs, with Richard Greene wrapping his creamy basso around the playful lyric while his confreres again combine to produce both a vocal backing (a sort of new-school doo-wop) and percussive effects,

STYLING BY JACQUELINE S. HIGHLY USEFUL.

Some old songs we revere. Some now provoke wisps of embarrassment. Leonard Cohen's "Bird on a Wire," like "Unchained Melody" and any Thomas Wolfe novel, is something you're supposed to outgrow. When Matthew Stull gives it his manic metalhead rendition, revving the song way beyond what Cohen intended, the opaque lyric no longer matters. It becomes a feat of vocal acrobatics, ending with some startling physical acrobatics.

None of which would work so well if the group itself didn't adore these numbers. And it's not just the songs—it's the stylings. During the 20-plus years that the Bobs have been in existence, they've amassed a portfolio of original material the merest glimpse of which we got during their recent Caffe Lena performance. It was their first appearance at the venerable venue, and they kept the Caffe's folk heritage in mind by singing such numbers as "A Change of Heart," a tale of a heart transplant with salubrious social side effects that featured a lead vocal from the ever-expressive Amy.

They can sing classical music, too, as proven by Richard and Amy's virtuoso duet on the Prelude from Bach's "Cello Suite No. 1," with Richard's lyric painting an amusingly credible picture of love in the Bach household. "All of our songs are about love," Richard explained earlier, and that's easy to believe if your view of love is maniacally skewed. "Late-Model Love," another original, kicks in with a Muzak-Latin groove, against which Amy likens her lovers to rust-bucket cars; "From the supermarket to the stars above," sang Dan, "nothing is 'Stranger Than Love,'" and Matthew pleaded his own case in "Be Bop I Love You" ("When I'm dreaming about a future time/I'm just scheming how to make you mine").

Hearing the group's recordings gives a taste of their talent, but their onstage antics add an even more enjoyable dimension. The song "Slow Down Krishna" defies explanation, yet it's one of the funniest numbers I know. Seeing it performed is even more hilarious.

Opening for the Bobs was another Bob, singer-songwriter Bob Malone, who tackled the Caffe's upright piano and never let go during his short but dynamic set. He has monster chops, going from a breathtaking stride into a devastating blues with equal aplomb, and his songs have an impressively high degree of wit and accomplishment. "I know he's your husband," Malone belted in a raspy voice, "but he don't know I'm your man," which set the tone for the blues-inflected country lyrics that characterize his songs. Among the highlights: A new song, "Age of Steam," was an affecting lament for an idea of the past, while "Valentine's Day" was a well-crafted, cliché-free love ballad.

Malone returned for the evening's encore, joining the Bobs in that manic "Bird on a Wire." It's probably the only time you'll hear Leonard Cohen by way

of Jerry Lee Lewis.