



Watkins Family Hour | Berkeley | Review

By Dylan Muhlberg
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Sometimes a pet-project grows into a full concept far surpassing the inventor's original prospects. For veteran bluegrass siblings Sara and Sean Watkins, they likely began their musical Family Hour as a way to ease the strains of rigorous touring in their native Southern California. In their natural habitat of Americana, exploring favorite originals and classic canonical country brought them enough pleasure to make a regular occasion out of it. After a decade of building the Watkins Family Hour, sensational fiddler Sara and passionate flat-picker Sean understood the particularly amazing musical venue they had birthed. Like something from the past, indeed reminiscent of the Carter Family or even Pete Seeger's folk musical variety television program, the Watkins have redefined their careers far broader than their wild success with Nickel Creek as youngsters. Joining Sara and Sean are a gaggle of old friends including drummer Don Heffington, bassist Sebastian Steinberg, keyboardist David Garza, and singer/songwriting icon Fiona Apple. These remarkable players have been the core of the Family Hour project since its beginnings.

The most enjoyable qualities of Watkins Family Hour are the non-folky surprises inherited into their sound. Apple's drowned grunge, Garza's melancholy, Steinberg's tasteful sass. It's a new outlook on Americana that includes stylistic qualities of everything from nineties alternative to singer-centric jazz. This August they released their self-titled album debut and began a highly anticipated tour hitting intimate theatres all over the United States. It's beautiful to have the prospect on all the history that built this project as each performance finds Sara and Sean nostalgically exploring. Grateful Web was honored to be included for the first night of two at Berkeley's famous Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse. An acoustic institution of this caliber brought the hardcore fans to sit intimately with Watkins Family Hour.

The evening was augmented and exceeded by ace storyteller/guitarist Tom Brosseau. As dry as his native rural plains of North Dakota, he introduced the Family Hour with the humor and ease of an old friend. His reflexive quirkiness settled the Berkeley crowd with a crucial openness for what was to come. The Watkins Family Hour's blissful two-hour performance diversely highlighted each player's eccentricity. Bandleader Sara has presence like few others. Her fiddling resonates familiarity of every folksy twist and turn. She unintentionally stole the show, especially on a striking rendition of Lindsey Buckingham's "Steel Your Heart Away." Not to undermine her sibling Sean whose habitat is onstage picking away and singing from the heart. He introduced a oddity cover of Roger Miller's "Not In Nottingham" originally featured in the 1973 Disney animated feature Robin Hood. Even newcomers felt like a boyhood friend after all.

Equally remarkable is Fiona Apple's relationship with the Watkins, which goes decades back. Apple originals like "A Mistake" and covers of Skeeter Davis' "Where I Ought To Be" and Bob Dylan's "Tombstone Blues" elevated the performance. Her pseudo-brat was the gritty grunge to counter balance the directly warm and relatable Sara Watkins. Right in the middle of it all was Tom Brosseau's remarkably strange tweener set featuring peculiarly soft bluesy originals like "49 Women." His vocal range was simultaneously rough and refined. He had a hilarious impromptu moment with pianist Benmont who he tactfully demanded join him onstage for cockamamie parody of old-timey blues.

Watkins Family Hour will continue to reveal its depthful cleverness on the road during this tour. Casual fans of Nickel Creek have no idea the range they are in for. Just wait. It's truly an all-encompassing tour-de-americana. This unlikely package of talents is sure to please any open-minded fans of folk, bluegrass, rock, soul, grunge, and punk.