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Music Review: Small band makes big sound in the Sierra Nevada Big Room

By CHRIS GULLICK - The Buzz
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The Big Room at Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. didn't seem quite big enough for the sound of the Cathy Richardson Band, a small band with a big sound that played there Sunday evening.

It certainly wasn't big enough for the number of people wanting to see the show, judging from the early sold-out date. Judging from the swaying, foot-tapping, clapping and nodding throughout the crowd, the sound was appreciated in a big way.

Richardson filled the house with people and filled the room with rock 'n' roll -- new, old and in-between.

Starting off with two fast, hard-rocking songs, she showed the intense vocal power that earned her two years in off-Broadway performances of "Love, Janis," playing the part of '60s rocker Janis Joplin.

The performance rarely slowed during the next two hours, as Richardson belted and stomped her way through selections from her albums and a couple of yet-to-be released numbers.

Pausing briefly between songs to chat with the audience, she belittled herself in a cheerful, joking manner.

The album "Road to Bliss" was nominated in 2003 for a best recording package Grammy Award, she explained.

"However, we did not win," she dead-panned, then joked that the CD's cover really had looked good.

Richardson is well-known in the Chicago area, where she was voted best local band in polls by the Chicago Tribune and Fox News Chicago, but she assumed that Chico audiences were not as familiar with her seven albums.

"I'm guessing a lot of these

songs will be new to you anyway," she said, "but these next couple are new."

At times the band's sound reminded listeners of '60s acid rock as Richardson augmented the full electric mix with intentional feedback screeches. As the heavy-weighted beat continued, Richardson's voice melted into the guitars' wail, melding and mixing perfectly.

Richardson, who played guitar and keyboard, was accompanied by a lead guitar, bass guitar and drums. Lead guitarist Joel Hoekstra provided vocal harmony and performed impressive solos.

Repeatedly, the baby boomer audience was carried to the past, as Richardson made references to tie-dye, patchouli and indoor marijuana gardening.

She wore tie-dye shirt, sandals and jeans, with sunglasses pushed back on her head, looking like a native of San Francisco, rather than a recent transplant from Chicago, via New York.

The end of one piece first morphed smoothly into a refrain from "The Age of Aquarius," then into an electric storm, Jimi Hendrix-style. About an hour into the show, people suddenly treaded to the dance floor when the band

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launched into a funky Latin beat.

Richardson performed a set from her latest album, "Delusions of Grandeur," released in 2006. Calling it her genius album, she teasingly introduced one selection with, "Here's another song about how sexy I am."

Most song lyrics were lost behind the driving instrumentation of the performance, but a few of Richardson's witty words came through, such as "I've got g-o-o-d in my d-n-a," in "I Am God."

Returning for an encore, she gave the audience the Beatles' "Oh! Darling," and Joplin's "Get It While You Can."

"I don't think it will be proper to leave you without at least one Janis Joplin song," she admitted.

Leaving the Big Room, one person was heard remarking that he could listen to her singing covers like those all night long and she could make a lot of money doing it, too, but he admired her for performing her own music instead.

After the show, guitarist Hoekstra told The Buzz reporter that he was pleased with the band's performance, since it was only the third time the drummer played with them.

The Big Room and the reception he and the band received impressed him, too, he said.

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